

RISESEA

Review of Islam in Southeast Asia

Millenarianism and Islamic Resurgence
Exploring the Intertwining of Religious Belief and Politics in Contemporary Indonesia
Luthfi Makhasin

The Rise of Female Ulama in Indonesia:
A Gender Perspective
Yanuardi Syukur

The Rise of Radicalism and Terrorism
in Indonesia and Malaysia
Zaki Mubarok & Ahmad Fauzi

Ṣūrat Al-Adab Al-Tarbawiy Al-Insāniy Fi Al-Makḥṭūṭat: Murāja'at 'Ilmiyyat Li A'māl
Al-'Alim Al-Indunisiy
Iin Suryaningsih

Conflict Resolution in Southeast Asia:
Peace and Development in Myanmar and Indonesia
Badrus Sholeh

Seeds of Conflict and Religious Intolerance in Papua:
A Preliminary Study on Tolikara Incident 2015
Ridwan

Pesantren and Theory of Social Change in South-East Asia
M. Suparta

Pesantren dan Spirit Kebangsaan
Ma'as Shobirin

The History and Dynamics of Ethno-politic Conflict in Patani, Thailand
Faisol Mamang

Islam, Indonesia and Human Rights in ASEAN
Ahmad Fanani

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**The Rise of Female Ulama in Indonesia:
A Gender Perspective**

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Abstract : *This article tries to see the contestation and affirmation of female ulama (muslim scholars) in contemporary Indonesia. The common patriarchal system in Indonesia has made the role of female clergy not so visible which is very different from the role of ulama which is generally attributed to men. With a gender perspective, this paper tries to see the affirmation process of female ulama in Indonesia conducted by muslim women organizations and NGOs in the discourse on the roles of men and women. Among interesting discourse was raised by the Indonesian Women Ulema Congress (KUPI) conducted in April 2017 in Cirebon, West Java. Women activists and ulema discussed strategic issues on Islamic studies, women movement, economic empowerment and national politics of how women have to get more access and to take a stronger leadership role in national and regional level.*

Keywords: Female Ulama, Gender, KUPI

Introduction

*Take a look
beautiful calligraphy and books
telling about space
gallant muslim women*

*Baghdad
is the home of smart women
the home of beautiful women
who recite the letters and write literature*

*Damascus of the Umayyads
is the mother of the intellectual girls
the meeting place of a thousand expert women*

*The gardens of Andalusia
broke colorful flowers*

Yanuardi Syukur

*pretty women singing merrily
and the girls graciously read poetry*

Ahmad Syauqi (1868-1932), an Arab poet

The poetry quoted by K.H. Husein Muhammad in his essay “The Women of Ulama in the Stage of History” from *Rahima* (September 26, 2014) above illustrates briefly the tradition of Islamic female clergy in the early Muslim history which was at least seen in three places: Damascus, Baghdad and Andalusia. During this time, the predicate of ulama is more attached to men rather than women. However, Islamic history records that the roles of many female ulama are also written in the domestic sphere and public sphere. To begin this essay, it seems important to raise a rhetorical question from Riri: “Is the world of ulama indeed reserved for men only?”

The study of female ulama both published in the form of books and papers does not widely spread in Indonesia because of several factors: *first*, the understanding that the area of clergy is the public domain which is the responsibility of men, while the domestic area is an area of women’s activity as evidenced by the reference (*textbooks*) of the ulama (especially in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools)) which, according to Masdar F. Mas’udi, “the benchmark is men “; *second*, the culture of the dominant patriarchal in Indonesia which makes various public sectors such as politics, leadership, and decision making are dominated by men rather than women making the position of women in various culture (including Indonesia) become subordinate to men (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974, p. 5); *thirdly*, there are not many female ulama who present themselves to the public and then gain recognition from institutions or society that they deserve to be called female ulama.

Although not widespread, the study of female ulama is quite a lot of which some of them are thesis/ books by Farhatullaili Zahrah, Sophia Al-Muyassara, Aditiana Dewi Eridani, Jajat Burhanudin, and Dwi Agung Subekti (Subekti, 2015, p. 38). Azyumardi Azra wrote that among so many biographical dictionaries are special volumes about women figures well-known and expert in various fields of life. In the early period of Islamic history there are some works written about female ulama like *Kitab Al-Thabaqat* by Ibn Sa’ad (biography), *Tarikh Madinat Dimasyqi* by Ibn Asakir, *Tarikh Baghdad* by Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi and *al Daw Al-Lami’* by Al-Sakhawi who wrote 1,075 Muslim women.

In this essay, the writer wants to raise the issue of the affirmation of female ulama in Indonesia seen from a gender perspective, especially in term of dichotomy between domestic and public domain, in which the domestic domain is interpreted not far from the activities between mothers and children, while the public domain is defined as the activities outside the home related to networks, levels, or organizations outside the home (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974, p. 23).

History of Female Clergy

Islam acknowledges that the noblest human being in the sight of God is not a gender factor (male or female) but piety (Quran, al-Hujurat: 13). In this context, Islam provides “space” for men and women to express their best potentials for the good of the society. One form of expression of this potential is in the realm of clergy which generally serves as a giver of advice (consultant), fatwas (non-binding legal opinion), and guidance to the Muslims in performing their religion in the midst of society.

According to M. Quraish Shihab, the term «ulama» in Islam is derived from the word *‘alim* drawn from the word *‘alima* (meaning “knowing clearly”). While the ulama is interpreted as a person who knows about the social and natural phenomena contained in the holy book and his knowledge makes him has a distinctive (*khasysyah*) sense, that is fear and awe to Allah (Subekti, 2015, p. 16). In this perspective, there is no limitation of a specific science that causes a person to be called *‘alim*. Another word that is used by the Qur’an and has the same meaning as the word “ulama” is *ulul ‘ilm* (the owners of science), *ulul albab* (the owners of the sharpness of the mind), and *ulul abshar* (the owners of far-sighted views). In the early days of Islam, the title of ulama is not only for those who master the science of religion (*diniyyah*), but also intended for those who master general sciences such as physics, medicine, astronomy, and humanity sciences. That is, the predicate of ulama is not only addressed to those who have knowledge about *sharia* (Islamic law) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence).

In Indonesia, it is acknowledged that the term “female ulama” still sounds foreign and invites reactions from various circles who generally disagree adding the word “female” considering the title of ulama can be attached to male or female. Azyumardi Azra for example criticized that the use of the term “female ulama” contained a gender bias. According to Azra, the term “female ulama” when viewed from a gender perspective is an irony, since the term “ulama” from the beginning of the use of the word is essentially a term that is “gender neutral”. In Arabic there is no equivalence for its *muannats* (women) form. That is, the term “ulama” can

refer to men or women without having to add the word “male” or “female” behind it (Ulfa, 2012).

History notes that in addition to male ulama there were also female ulama having capacity and influence in their society. However, the existence of their presence did not develop further as the existence of male ulama. The effect then is, that the spread of Islam to various places in the world including in Indonesia was done by male ulama. Then, when Indonesia became independent, the clergy became a kind of authority inherent in men only. Meanwhile, the clergy of women did not get sufficient proportion in the public area that can affect the society a lot. In contrast, the position and role of male ulama since independence to date (2016) is more dominantly in the hands of men.

Appreciation toward female ulama is seen from the text of the Hadith (Prophet’s tradition) which says that the Prophet Muhammad once said, «take half of your religious affairs from Humairah» (told by Tirmidzi) which means that the capacity of the clergy of Humairah or better known as Aisyah was recognized by the Prophet and deserved to be a place to study religion. Besides Aisyah, there are also names of female ulama such as Sukaynah bint Husein, Amrah bint Abdulrahman, Hafsa bint Sirin, Zainab bint Asy-Syar’i and Sayyida Nafisa who were ulama of their era. Quoting from Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, Yulia Muthmainnah (2016) writes the number of disciples from several female ulama as follows: Aisyah bint Abi Bakar (299 disciples); Ummu Salamah bint Abi Umayyah (101 disciples); Hafsa bint Umar (20 disciples); Hajimah Al-Wassabiyyah (22 disciples); Asma bint Umais (13 disciples); Ramlah bint Abi Sufyan (21 disciples); and Fathimah bint Qays (11 disciples). The majority of their disciples were male.

Meanwhile, Jajat Burhanudin et al. (2002) in the book *Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* recorded thirteen female ulama engaged in education, *dakwah* (propagation), politics, social, *tasawuf* (sufism), and other fields. Some categories are given to group the expertise of each of these female ulama, but the categorization is overlapping. The first category is “ulama of campus” which includes Rahmah El-Yunusiyah, Zakiah Darajat, dan Tutty Alawiyah (Subekti, 2015, pp. 26–36). The second category is the “ulama of *pesantren*”, which includes Sholihah A. Wahid Hasyim, Hajah Chamnah, Hajah Nonoh Hasanah, and Suryani Thahir. The third category is “ulama of social-religious organizations” which includes Nyai Ahmad Dahlan, Sholihah A. Wahid Hasyim, Tutty Alawiyah, Hadiyah Salim dan Suryani Thahir. The fourth category is “ulama of socio-political activists” which includes Hajjah Rangkayo Rasuna Said, Nyai Ahmad Dahlan, dan Aisyah

Amini. The fifth category is “ulama of *tabligh* (preaching)” including Lutfiah Sungkar and Rafiqah Darto Wahab. These Indonesian female ulama with different qualities and expertise have encouraged further reproductive processes for the emergence of female ulama, social-religious activists and even political activists. Moreover, in addition to the above names there are also some other *ustadzah* (clerics) who actively become a consultation place for many women in Jakarta, such as Yoyoh Yusroh (Lecturer and Dakwah Activist), Nani Handayani (Preacher and Sharia Consultant), Herlini Amran (Writer and Sharia Consultant), or Wirianingsih (Lecturer and Da’wah Activist).

If traced, in Indonesia there are female ulama who are widely known. Rahmah El Yunusiyah (as mentioned above), for example, is one of the Indonesian movement figures who concentrates on education and obtained the title of “Shaykhah” from Al-Azhar University, Egypt. Later, Tutty Alawiyah, a professor at the Islamic University of Asy-Syafi’iyah, is very active in guiding Muslims and being recognized as a female ulama (Zuraya, 2016). Not less than that, in the last 10 years on television there has been an Islamic dialogue (in the form of “sharing” and *dakwahtainment*) presented by Mama Dedeh which when viewed from the content, it has weight contents but packed in a light explanation, and according to Sofjan (2013) the event is interspersed with *comedies of error* (joking, *jokes*) by a comedian named Abdel (Sulistia Wati, 2014, p. 56).

Riri Khariroh’s article on *Rahima’s website* tells about some of Indonesian female ulama who are not very much promoted by *mainstream* media but their contribution to women is so real. The concept of female ulama according to NGO *Rahima* which focuses on the cadre of female ulama (Subekti, 2015) is based on not only the mastery of knowledge, expertise, and wisdom, but also strong passion to find solutions together to various problems that exist in the community. There are three women ulama written by Khariroh, namely Nyai Afwah Mumtazah, Ustadzah Kokom, and Nyai Ida Mahmudah. The three female ulama have the same belief that female ulama play a role in supporting the movement of stop-violence against women, being critical to women’s biased issues, caring for migrant workers, and generally solving social problems as they can. In more detail, Khariroh wrote the gait of three female ulama whose door was open to accept various public complaints of both personal and social issues. They also socialize various issues surrounding reproductive health, female circumcision and human trafficking to the *pesantren* community and their congregation in *Majlis Taklim* (study club). Their gait is not forgetting

mandatory activities such as preaching at *pesantren* and forums of study.

However, looking for female ulama in Indonesia is indeed still difficult in nature. The difficulty of finding female ulama in the third world (including Indonesia) seems to be due to the male domination over women as *the second-class* which is applied universally (Ortner, 2006, p. 73). The study of feminists assumes that Muslim women in the third world are caught up in male dominance that is closely related to acts of violence (Mohanty, 1984). “Imperialism,” Mohanty writes, “resulted in the hegemony of thought and heart which in this case is reflected from the feminists’ assumption that Muslim women in third world countries are in oppression. Furthermore, feminists see that women in the third world are homogeneous groups who become victims because they have no social and economic power (Mohanty, 1984).

The presence of various Islamic movements in Indonesia (either from within the country or “imported” from the outside) also contributed to the existence of female ulama. In this case, women are inevitably shaped by the existing system within the Islamic movement to follow a platform of patriarchal-tendency movement. Saba Mahmood sees that the rise of Islamic movements in third world countries cannot be separated from liberal-secular ideologies and feminists (Mahmood, 2005). Mahmood sees how the participation of women in the Islamic movement that is considered a “piece in the game of chess”. That is, women are regarded as nothing more than a subordination of a local social-cultural system labeled Islam.

Efforts to Affirm the Existence of Female Ulama

The lack of female ulama in Indonesia has made some organizations interested in raising the issue of female ulama. For example, Rahima, a women’s empowerment NGO, once made the Indonesian Women Ulama Congress (KUPI/ *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia*) that discussed about the female clergy. To get many responses from the public, KUPI also made a Writing Competition on “Ulama and the Clergy of Women” with total prize of IDR 21 million rupiah (Pamphlet KUPI, 2016). Nevertheless, the “campaign” of the female ulama is not a massive issue in the midst of society, at least to be discussed in a seminar or even debated in various campuses in Indonesia.

There is not a massive movement and it can at least be seen in several aspects. *First*, still there is a dominant view that the clergy is the “rights” of men and although a woman has a brilliant capacity she is not automatically

regarded as an ulama. A woman's position is no more than in a domestic area ("mattress, well, and kitchen") which makes it impossible for her to take part outside. *Secondly*, the affirmative movement of female ulama tends to choose "playmates" in the sense by only involving organizations having the same mission, and not involving other Islamic movements such as Jama'ah Tarbiyah, Jama'ah Hizbut Tahrir, and Wahdah Islamiyah. The effect then is, this issue becomes elitist only on feminist Muslim movements especially those living on the island of Java. NGO *Rahima*, as an example, in the last five years has conducted a series of education and cadre of female ulama but still in the region of Java. *Third*, the lack of response from state institutions such as the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) in supporting this movement with more serious and sustainable support. Although the Minister of Religion Lukman Hakim Saifuddin said that the scholarship program for master program in the field of Qur'an at the Institute of Al-Qur'an Sciences (IIQ) is part of how to increase female ulama cadres, but the effort has not shown significant results in terms of producing widespread female ulama in Indonesia.

Position of Female Ulama in Domestic / Public area in Indonesia

When discussing the domestic/ public side of female ulama in Indonesia, it is a good idea to refer to Reiter's study (1975). Reiter in his research experience at Colpied Village in the Haute Province, southeastern France saw the social structure of the Colpied people splitting public jobs for men and domestic for women. Women, for example, were very rarely seen in the public sphere, and would still choose to settle in their homes. When discussing how the influence of kinship practiced in a complex society, Reiter saw that Colpied people had belief that obeying the rules of kinship made their communities were in order. In addition, Reiter also noticed that more trips were made by men which later resulted in the ability of driving which was majority in the hands of men (Reiter, 1975, p. 255), whereas women were only related to their homes and village alone. Meanwhile, Lamphere (2001) in his study saw that men tend to be considered by public because of the authority factor, regarded as an important figure (in the search for food and war), a figure having achievement, and influence politically. While women are regarded as domestic because the circle of their life is not far from mother, her children, and home like preparing food, cooking, parenting and cleaning clothes. Women are also a place to ask even to criticize from children to their mothers, while men are

relatively distant from children but have political influence. Women in this context are still considered universally subordinated.

Domestic and public dichotomies still exist in the society until now. However, as the times progress, what is called as “public” can also be “domestic”, and vice versa. For example, cooking that was once considered domestic territory or women’s affairs has now shifted to male’s job seen from the phenomenon of male chefs. Then, in the matter of earning a living, if the driver was considered a male public job, now Trans Jakarta has a female driver. The society also do not consider the shift of the role as something wrong because at this time public and domestic become increasingly involuted to be something hard to distinguish. Up to this point, the opinion of Ortner (2006) that the status of women as ‘second-class beings’ (*secondary status*) is a fact universally applicable in a variety of world cultures there is true, including in Indonesia.

Why are female ulama becoming *the second-class* in the position of clergy in Indonesia? Or, to continue the question of Ortner (2006) about the subordination: whether the *second-class* position is natural or cultural? For Ortner, women’s position as *second-class* occurs because of biological determinism which is different from men. In the field of sex for example, men are dominantly more important than women, because men are closer to *culture*, very different from women who are close to *nature*. As for the women’s closeness with nature, Ortner explained it was because of physiological factors (physical), social structure, and psychic.

Both Ortner and Rosaldo’s explanation above discuss about the physics, culture, and psychology that more focus on the tribe society, not the urban. In a simple society, socio-cultural change takes place relatively long. Thus, the much-needed paternalistic values in the ‘vicious’ living conditions require men to be the main source of strength for their families. Physically, men have different powers with women. In a simple society, it is very necessary. Meanwhile, if it is contracted to industrial society, there has been a lot of shifts where women’s current position continues to increase in the society both in the domestic and public sectors. In the political field as an example, in Indonesia the electability of women has increased. The Constitution in this regard is a crucial factor that determines how such change can take place, coupled with public awareness of the importance of women in the public world.

Continuing Sherry B. Ortner, there are three levels in the discussion about the subordination of women, namely: *first*, the universal view that women are inferior to men, *secondly* certain cultural *settings* saying that men are related to culture while women are determined by nature and *three*

facts in the field that subordination really exists (Ortner, 2006, p. 73). In terms of physiology, said Ortner, women having breast, ovarium, menstruation and childbirth are considered as a pollutant (Ortner, 2006, pp. 74–75). That is why in some cultures, when a woman gets her menstruation, she has to alienate herself. In contrast to men who are regarded as an important force in hunting and battles that are associated with prestige. At this point, women as “producers of life” (when pregnant and childbirth) are considered having very natural processes, whereas men as “destroyers of life” (in war) are considered to require skills.

In fact, the status distinction between men and women cannot be separated from the domestic orientation constructed by the culture. While men are in the public sphere associated with politics. In general, women’s duties are described in preparing food, cooking, childcare, and washing clothes, while men have public works such as hunting, wars, and politics, military, boat making, fishing, wood making and honey seeking. Subordination also occurs because of the attitude of women who put themselves as being “second class.” In the study Rayna R. Reiter in the province of Haute France, she once asked women there about land and they replied, “ask to my husband” which means that the affairs of the land are not the territory of women (Reiter, 1975, p. 266).

If it is associated with the position of female ulama in Indonesia, it appears that their role is mostly limited in areas such as *majelis taklim* (study club), recitation, *pesantren*, or television channel whose segment of audience is women. This position is favorable for the affirmation of the existence of female ulama in the middle of patriarchal culture of male ulama. Muslim women have a consultation place to women ulama primarily concerning with womanhood matters related to the body and feeling rather than to male ulama, which is different naturally/ biologically. However, the role of female ulama as Islamic dakwah agencies is favored by fellow women because they are considered able to understand women’s desires.

However, the current position of female ulama has certain obstacles, especially on the assumption that the duty of Muslim women, although very clever, tends to return to their nature in the domestic domain rather than in the public domain. This belief is also understood from religious texts which view that public tasks such as politics, leadership, and decision making are in the hands of men. In fact, in the Hadith text there is a narration which says that Prophet Muhammad “will not prosper a community who gives their affairs to a woman” (Narrated by Bukhari, Tirmidhi, Ahmad, and Nasai). Although the Hadith is more likely to be in political

territory (state leadership), it still implies to the leadership at other levels. That is, the opinion of Rosaldo is true that everywhere men are more likely to get the authority over women who make men have the right of cultural legitimacy to act (Ortner, 2006, p. 73).

It seems that what has been done by some Islamic organizations to reinforce female ulama does not influence a lot on Islamic leadership in Indonesia. In fact, according to Jonathan Berkey as quoted by Azyumardi Azra, to this day (at least in the Middle East), the position of women as ulama is still difficult because of *private/ domestic* thought in the community (Ulfa, 2012). The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), for example, has never been led by a woman, as well as other long-established Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama. In order to accommodate the aspirations of women, both Islamic-mass organizations form a division of women, and even at the level of political parties and student organizations also there are also a division of women. Fatayat NU in the 15th Congress and the 13th Mukhtamar (Congress) of Nasyiatul Aisyiyah (NA) also said the importance of producing female ulama cadres who provide solutions to national problems and humanity such as poverty, stupidity and backwardness (Muthmainnah, 2016; Okezone, 2015). No less than that, the State Ministry for Women's Empowerment (in the time of President Soeharto) was also formed with the aim to raise the dignity of women considered left behind rather than men. At this point, indeed the struggle of Muslim women to present the existence of female ulama cannot run fast due to socio-cultural factors that still tend to be patriarchal.

Conclusion

The journey to get recognition as female ulama in Indonesia is also not separated from print and electronic mass media. As a means, the media becomes very effective for the formation of public opinion. Thus, a female ulama who will become a figure needs to consider the mastery of knowledge and has a mass base (such as *pesantren*, *majlis taklim*, Islamic organizations) that make her has roots in the community. The recognition of the community is easily formed if intensely done by the media, especially television. At this point, female ulama will inevitably have to be "sold" in the mass media to gain recognition from the public.

In the perspective of social construction, the writer believes that the movement of the female ulama affirmation has constraints on the debate over whether women's roles are more dominant in the *private* rather than *public* or the same between *private* and *public*? If the *private* factor is

more dominant, then the female clergy movement will not be equivalent to male clergy. Quoting Konrad Phillip Kottak, this gender status can be balanced when these *private* and *public* affairs are not sharply separated (Kottak, 2015, p. 180). According to the writer, importantly the presence of female ulama is not in the context of position contestation between male and female ulama, but how male and female ulama fill the empty spaces of public problems whose religious solutions are difficult to find, such as cases of migrant workers, trafficking of women and children, and domestic violence. These specific matters will be a good culmination in the *private / public* role of female ulama.

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Yanuardi Syukur

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