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MAINTAINING LIFE UNDER NEOLIBERAL CAPITALISM: A CASE STUDY OF MUSLIMAH LABORERS IN SOLO RAYA, INDONESIA

Diatyka Widya Permata Yasih & Inaya Rakhmani

MOVING OUT OF ISLAM ON YouTube: ACEHNESE CHRISTIAN NARRATIVES, THE PUBLIC SPHERE, AND COUNTERPUBLICS IN INDONESIA

Muhammad Ansor

اءءاباءء ءماهيرية فيء الءركاءء الاءءماعية:
ءراساء مءارئة بين أءاءء ءءيقة ءمیزیء الأركية
وءركءة الءفانء عن الإسلام الإنءونيسية

أنيقة الأمة و أءءيا فرءانا و فرمان نور

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Muhammad Ansor

Moving Out of Islam on YouTube: Acehnese Christian Narratives, the Public Sphere, and Counterpublics in Indonesia

Abstract: *This study examines the public sphere and the formation of counterpublics based on the narratives of former Muslims from Aceh who converted to Christianity on YouTube. This study argues that in addition to strengthening the distinct attributes of Islamic identity in the public sphere, YouTube enables Acehnese former Muslims, as a subaltern community, to negotiate new social identities and share religious experiences after conversion. It also explores how Acehnese former Muslims challenge the dominant culture and restrictive regulations in Aceh, which perceive religious conversions as heresy and unlawful conduct. Data were collected using the digital ethnographic technique from four of the YouTube narratives of twelve Acehnese former Muslims who had converted to Christianity. The findings indicate that the online public sphere enhances the autonomy and their capacity to negotiate their Acehnese social identity, which is closely constructed with Islam. The presence of YouTube content thus contributes to strengthening the development of democracy and freedom of religious practice in Indonesia.*

Keywords: Acehnese Christian, Online Public Sphere, Counterpublics.

Abstrak: *Tulisan ini membahas ruang publik dan pembentukan publik tandingan berdasarkan narasi mantan muslim asal Aceh yang berkonversi ke Kristen di YouTube. Tulisan berargumen bahwa seiring dengan penguatan singularisasi identitas Islam di ruang publik, YouTube memungkinkan mantan muslim asal Aceh sebagai komunitas subaltern untuk menegosiasikan identitas sosial yang baru dan berbagi pengalaman konversi agama. Selain itu tulisan juga menyelidiki cara dimana mantan muslim Aceh mengekspresikan resistensi atas kultur yang dominatif dan regulasi yang restriktif di Aceh yang mengkonstruksi konversi agama sebagai kesesatan dan penyimpangan. Data dikumpulkan melalui teknik etnografi digital terhadap narasi pada empat kanal YouTube tentang dua belas mantan muslim asal Aceh yang berkonversi ke Kristen. Tulisan ini menemukan bahwa ruang publik daring berkontribusi meningkatkan otonomi dan kapasitas mantan muslim dalam menegosiasikan identitas sosial keacehan yang selama ini dikonstruksi identik dengan Islam. Kehadiran kanal YouTube berkontribusi terhadap penguatan performa demokrasi dan kebebasan beragama di Indonesia.*

Kata kunci: Kristen Aceh, Ruang Publik Daring, Publik Tandingan.

ملخص: تناول هذا المقال الفضاء العام وتشكيل الجماهير المضادة استنادًا إلى روايات مسلمي آتشيه المتحولين إلى المسيحية على موقع يوتيوب. بالإضافة إلى تعزيز السمات المميزة للهوية الإسلامية في المجال العام، ترى هذه الدراسة أن يوتيوب يمكن مسلمي آتشيه المتحولين إلى المسيحية كمجتمع تابع من التفاوض على هويات اجتماعية جديدة، ومشاركة تجارب التحول الديني، وزيادة التماسك الاجتماعي في بيئة جديدة. ويستكشف هذا المقال أيضًا كيف تحدى مسلمو آتشيه المتحولون إلى المسيحية الأنظمة السائدة والهياكل المهيمنة في آتشيه والتي اعتبرت التحولات الدينية بمثابة بدعة و انحراف وسلوك غير قانوني. فتم جمع البيانات باستخدام تقنية الإثنوغرافيا الرقمية أو تقنية النيتوغرافيا من روايات يوتيوب لاثني عشر مسلمي آتشيه المتحولين إلى المسيحية. وتشير هذه الدراسة إلى أن الفضاء العام عبر الإنترنت يعزز حرية وقدرة مسلمي آتشيه المتحولين إلى المسيحية على التفاوض بشأن هويتهم الاجتماعية، والتي تم بناؤها كمرادف للإسلام. فتساهم قنوات يوتيوب في تعزيز تنمية الديمقراطية وحرية الممارسة الدينية في إندونيسيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: مسيحيو آتشيه، الفضاء العام على الإنترنت، الجماهير المضادة.

Much scholarly attention has been paid to adherents of a majority religion undergoing a transition of faith to a minority religion and vice versa. In general, the research has focused on the everyday practices of converted persons in the social-empirical public sphere (Burhani 2020a; Pentilla 2016; Stromberg 1993). However, little attention has been paid to the use of the digital public sphere amidst the dynamics of religious conversion (Wright et al. 2011). Examining a case study on the articulation of the experience of deconversion in Christian embrace written through online media, Wright et al. identified at least three motivations for deconversion, namely, “intellectual and theological concerns, God’s shortcomings, and interactions with Christians” (Wright et al. 2011). Notably, the digital public sphere significantly contributes to both religious performance and the environment (Ahyar and Alfitri 2019; Al-Rawi 2016; Crowe and Watts 2014; Mishra Tarc 2013; van Zoonen, Vis, and Mihelj 2010). In the context of non-democratic Muslim-majority nations, individuals are more open to articulating sensitive religious experiences when using online media, whereby revealing these experiences in the empirical social sphere (offline) through face-to-face interactions would be impossible (Bryson 2004; Nieuwkerk 2006).

Indeed, numerous studies have proven that former Muslim conversions cannot readily communicate their conversion experiences in the empirical social public sphere (offline) in societies with a predominately Islamic culture. Pressures on converts include discrimination, persecution or intolerant regulations. Some countries such as Egypt (Berger 2003; O’Sullivan 2003), Malaysia (Ismail and Awang Mat 2016; Kershaw 2008; Samuri and Quraishi 2014), Iran (Darwish 2018), and Indonesia (Seo 2013) impose social sanctions and criminal penalties against Muslims who convert to other religions. According to Faisal Kutty, approximately 70 percent of Muslim countries in the Middle East and Africa impose criminal sanctions on apostates (Kutty 2018).

Similarly, Aceh has regulations governing the social and criminal consequences for Muslims who quit Islam (Ansor and Amri 2016; Febriandi, Ansor, and Nursiti 2021). The Qanun Aceh No. 8/2015 Article 18 states that every Muslim who deliberately leaves of Islam is subjected to *‘uqubāt al-ta’zīr* in the form of a public beating no more than 60 (sixty) lashes and no less than 30 (thirty) lashes, or a penalty of

imprisonment for a maximum of 60 (sixty) months and a minimum of 30 (thirty) months, or a fine of not more than 600 (six hundred) and not less than 300 (three hundred) grams of pure gold. In addition, they are also urged to repent and return to Islam. Therefore, an Acehnese quitting Islam frequently experiences the desire to leave Aceh's territory (Usman and Handayani 2022).

An example is Cut Putri Handayani (30 years old), a woman from Aceh who converted to Christianity through marriage (Cut Fitri Handayani 2021). It was the most controversial religious conversion in Aceh, both in the digital and non-digital public spaces, after the introduction of Islamic Sharia. Handayani's decision to change her religion not only caused regret for her large family but also provoked anger among the Aceh population in her city. The unsuccessful attempt to restore Handayani to Islam involved the participation of governments, religious authorities, and local officials. Handayani was able to defend her decision because she migrated to the province of North Sumatra, avoiding regional regulations in Aceh that imposed sanctions on transgressors.

According to Mujani, Liddle, and Ambardi (2018, 3), Indonesia – the largest Muslim country – has long implemented democracy, yet has repeatedly failed to protect religious minority groups from violence and discrimination, and has even participated in persecution. Jeremy Menchik (2014, 2016) explored the failure of Indonesian democracy to facilitate religious freedom, ultimately proposing the concept of godly nationalism. Godly nationalism may be formally established by the state and coercively enforced by the police, bureaucracy, and courts. It uses personal status laws based on religious principles to limit individual freedom (Menchik 2014, 600). The restrictions on Ahmadiyah and Shia activities and the enactment of controversial laws on religious blasphemy are increasingly highlighting Indonesia's failure to uphold religious freedom (Akmaliah 2020; Buehler 2023; Burhani 2020b; Formichi 2015; Makin 2017; Ropi 2010). Religious intolerance in Aceh occurs, among other ways, through the issuance of several regional regulations (Qanun) that legitimize discrimination and persecution in the name of Islamic law against citizens who leave Islam (Permana 2021). Aceh's experience as a subnational region in Indonesia is increasingly unique because these intolerant regulations were enacted with the support of the majority of legislative members elected through

a democratic and regular electoral process (Feener 2021; Jauhola 2020; Roviana, Udasmoro, and Nurlaelawati 2021).

In accordance with this political structure and the cultural characteristics, the use of YouTube as a platform for the unrestricted sharing of the experience of religious conversion with audiences and the online social sphere is considered a techno-cultural instrument (Mayes 2009). This study examines how Acehese former Muslims utilize YouTube for self-presentation in the public sphere and to perpetuate counter-narratives against the dominant culture. The article argues that the digital public space is not only an alternative channel for ex-Muslims to articulate new post-conversion identities but also acts as a channel for sharing spiritual experiences and forming religious solidarity in a new community environment. It also reveals that the use of the digital public space among Acehese former Muslims implies an opening up of democratic practices in societies dominated by Islamic values and identity. Therefore, although the narrative of conversion among Acehese former Muslims in the digital space may arouse religious tension between Muslims and non-Muslims, it contributes to strengthening the practice of democracy and religious freedom both in Indonesia and in Aceh itself.

This analysis of the performance of religious conversion in the digital public sphere is based on digital ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the narratives of Acehese former Muslims on YouTube. As shown by Merlyna Lim (2002, 2013, 2017), the digital public sphere plays an important role in explaining the intersectionality between democracy, minority rights, and the discourse on religious freedom in contemporary Indonesia. The articles by Sarah Pink (2001, 2015; 2022) and several other researchers specializing in digital ethnography (Barratt and Maddox 2016; Bonilla and Rosa 2015; Fuhrmann and Pfeifer 2020; Jurkiewicz 2018) have been helpful in gathering YouTube-based ethnographic data related to the articulation of Acehese former Muslims converting to Christianity. I scrutinized twenty-seven YouTube videos describing the experiences of twelve Acehese former Muslims (four men and eight women). These videos came from four YouTube channels managed by Acehese former Muslims, referred to as @Tersadarkan> (founded with name @InjilHabaJroh>), @alyudinok>, @InjilHabaGet>, and @TidakBiasa>. These respectively published 122, 277, 2,061, and 408 videos related to religious conversions in

December 5, 2024. As stated by several critical social theorists, a digital narrative is examined by situating it within the public sphere and the counterpublic discourse (Asen 2000; Eickelman and Salvatore 2006; Fraser 1990; Habermas 1991; Riaz 2013; Salvatore 2004; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Warner 2002, 2005). In the end, I reveal the contribution of this article concerning how YouTube, as a digital public space, has facilitated the performance of religious freedom and democracy in Indonesia.

Public Sphere, Counterpublics, and Religious Conversion

The notion of public space was proposed by Jurgen Habermas, who defined it as a discursive arena where individuals and groups from a variety of backgrounds have equal access to the rational and deliberate articulation of ideas (Habermas 1991). Moreover, Charles Taylor asserted that public space is a shared arena in which members of the public gather via different media, including print, electronic, and face-to-face interactions, to debate topics of common concern, thereby developing a shared awareness of these issues (Taylor 1993).

Notably, there are numerous criticisms of the liminality of Habermas' public sphere concept. According to Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, his conception of the public sphere is too European-centric and leaves little room for gender, class, and ethnicity discourses (Benhabib 1992; Fraser 1992). Religious minorities are excluded (Asad 2003, 183), and the role of religious actors in the public space is negated (Casanova 1994). However, throughout the early stages of the development of modern society in Europe, religious groups played a key part in both the establishment and growth of the public sphere (Salvatore 2007). Dale F. Eickelman and Armando Salvatore (2002) show the significance of religious identity in framing public spaces in Muslim-majority countries. Subsequently, Habermas acknowledges the significance of tradition and religion in the process of producing norms as well as in how individuals internalize consensus (Eickelman and Salvatore 2002, 96).

Nevertheless, Habermas's theories have influenced the dynamics of democracy in several Muslim nations, albeit to varying degrees compared to Western and European countries (Willemse and Bergh 2016, 299). In contrast to the apolitical tendency of public space in the West and Europe, the notion of public space in the context of Muslim

countries is not completely separate from political activism; rather, it is an important and inseparable arena for the reproduction of political action at the grassroots level (Ayish 2008, 25). For Muslims, the state influences the appearance of the public sphere. Thus, in Muslim society, the relationship between the public sphere and politics is one of mutual consideration (Riaz 2013, 301).

In Muslim-majority nations, the performance of the public sphere demonstrates the intersection of the state and religious communities. In terms of public space and political discourse, according to Miriam Hoexter, the fundamental difference between Muslim societies and Western societies lies in the relationship between society, the state, and the religious institutions (Hoexter 2002, 120). In addition, Cecelia Lynch contends that any public space analysis in Muslim societies cannot ignore the role of religion in politics (Lynch 2005, 231–32). According to Muhammad Khalid Masud (2005), removing religion from the public sphere in a Muslim-majority country not only restricts the elite of the religious community but also excludes the largest segment of the country's population from the public sphere. Following this, Michael Feener concludes that the implementation of Islamic law is essentially a form of social construction by the state to control public spaces that emphasize the local identity and values of its citizens (Feener 2013).

Nancy Fraser criticized Habermas for not paying attention to the emergence of a counterpublic, while Michael Warner notes that subordinate groups often create counterpublics to articulate and fight for their aspirations (2002, 2005). Counterpublics clearly do not comply with the rules of the bourgeois public space: they are illiberal, less rational, and also do not represent the majority group. Even Fraser asserts that various counterpublics are often separate entities. They are always different from the mainstream public space and have an antagonistic relationship with the bourgeois public sphere (Fraser 1992). Apart from appearing as an effort by subaltern groups to fight for their voices to be heard, the counterpublic also presents a model of public participation (Fraser 1989, 2014).

According to Fraser, a counterpublic is formed and maintained through various media, such as journals, books, publications, film and video distribution networks, lecture series, research centers, academic programs, conferences, seminars, festivals, and meetings at

the local level (Fraser 1992, 117–24). Through this arena, subaltern communities can voice their opinions, articulate demands, negotiate identities and, if the situation allows, struggle for their aspirations in the larger public sphere (Fraser 2014, 16). Meanwhile, Craig Calhoun contends that a counterpublic is fundamentally concerned with re-creating configurations, discourses, and models of public participation that are not restricted to particular social classes. He argues that the public sphere is not necessarily cohesionless and instead comprises discursive, interconnected arenas (Calhoun 1992, 37–38).

Thus, a counterpublic is a forum for consolidating subaltern communities, although their presence does not always substantially impact the transformation of the hegemonic social structure. According to James C. Scott, a counterpublic space is an expression of concealed transcripts or an act of resistance by the losers against the dominant narrative controlled by the superordinate group (Ansor 2014; Scott 1985, 1990). Hidden transcripts are often contrasted with what Scott calls public transcripts (Mpofu, Asak, and Salawu 2022). While public transcripts are open resistance, hidden transcripts are concealed, disorganized, personally oriented resistance, done without any expectation of structural change (Scott 1985).

The concept of the public and counterpublic spheres is a crucial conceptual instrument for analyzing the digital narratives of Acehese former Muslims who converted to Christianity. Christians in Aceh are one of the subaltern groups; indeed, this group is a minority within a minority (Madibbo 2006; Scharbrodt 2019; Tahiev 2021). The implementation of Islamic law in Aceh has had significant impacts on former Muslims who converted to Christianity. The performance of Aceh's public sphere thus highlights the dominance of Islamic identity while marginalizing subaltern religious identities. Muhammad Ansor and Yaser Amri demonstrate that non-Muslims have limited access to presenting a social identity based on the religion to which they adhere (Ansor and Amri 2020; Zulkarnaini, Ansor, and Masyhur 2022). Yogi Febriandi finds the same in his research on deadlocked access to the public sphere for non-Muslim students in Langsa Aceh (Febriandi and Amri 2021). Moch. Nur Ichwan concludes that the domination of the Sharia space has a positive correlation with the restriction of queer identity in Aceh (2021). In short, former Muslims who converted to Christianity in Acehese society are excluded from the social sphere due

to the dominance of identity power and the burden of the prevalent Islamic culture.

The scholarly study of religious conversion demonstrates the importance of articulating identity in public spaces, both online and offline, for converts. When a convert comes out, they are affirming a rupture with old religious social practices while declaring themselves as part of a new religious community (Gross 2012). However, in the context of Aceh society and its recognition of a unique identity based on Islamic values and culture, the conversion decision cannot be expressed directly to the public. This is because the act of exiting from Islam inevitably invites the anger of the Muslim community in Aceh. Moreover, the Aceh government and its apparatus also limit the freedom of its citizens by interfering with the process of exiting the religion of Islam.

Hence, for Acehese former Muslims who converted to Christianity, the online public sphere offers an alternative medium for self-articulation and the consolidation of subaltern aspirations, as demonstrated in the following discussion. While they are restricted in contributing to the performance of the empirical social-public sphere in the name of hegemonic identity and culture, social media platforms such as YouTube allow them to construct their own formation in a new post-conversion culture. In the following explanation, I present empirical evidence that digital culture not only empowers individuals but also enhances the appearance of democracy and the freedom of religion.

The Narratives of Acehese Former Muslims on YouTube

Acehese former Muslims have increased their YouTube usage since the beginning of 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic compelled a social transition to cyberspace (Hilmy and Niam 2020), including the sharing of spiritual experiences. The author found twelve Acehese former Muslims who shared their experiences of religious conversion on YouTube. It should be noted that this is not the precise number as the Acehese who left Islam are certainly more numerous than those identified on YouTube (Remedial Script 2023). Nonetheless, the use of digital public space represents a new tendency for converts to adopt a technology culture as a medium for self-presentation (Boutros 2015; Postill and Epafra 2018; Schulz 2015; Setianto 2015).

The twelve former Muslims who are the subject of the investigation are ethnically Acehese, through either one or both of their parents. They assert that they were born and raised in Aceh, and they used Acehese as their daily language when they were still residing in Aceh. They were also formerly Muslims and received religious teaching. For instance, Dedi Saputra attended Madrasah Tsanawiyah and Madrasah Aliyah in Aceh for his Islamic junior and senior high school education, respectively. Effendi Usman spent six years as a pupil at an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) in Aceh, in both junior and senior high school. They converted to Christianity as adults through their own decisions and without coercion. Meanwhile, ten of the individuals examined in this study converted after the implementation of Islamic Sharia in Aceh, compared to two who did so prior to its implementation. Eight individuals were ethnic Acehese who resided outside of their province before their religious conversion, while four acknowledged having lived in Aceh before publicly leaving the province due to their conversion.

This section discusses the performance of the Indonesian digital public sphere through the YouTube content of Acehese former Muslims who actively shared their spiritual experiences. These individuals include Alyuddin bin Zainul Abidin, Avraham Effendi Usman, Dedi Saputra, and Elyas Zulkifli. They are classified as YouTubers who actively post content about their religious conversion experiences. They leverage their popularity to enhance the impact of their involvement in commercial, social, and other forms of communication. They also broaden and shape the attitudes of their audiences through their videos. As shown below, their views in the digital space also sparked reactions, dialectics, and even non-anarchist anger among some Acehese Muslims. I assert that such a phenomenon demonstrates YouTube's contribution to articulating diversity within the democratic sphere in contemporary Indonesia.

A Christian YouTuber from Aceh, a former Muslim, who was first identified using this digital platform to articulate his conversion experience is Alyuddin bin Zainul Abidin. Alyuddin from Pidie converted to Christianity roughly thirty years ago (1994), has been broadcasting his experiences of religious conversion on YouTube for the past four years (2020). Alyuddin is a pastor in a Pentecostal congregation with responsibilities in various areas of the archipelago.

He was first identified when he uploaded a video as a Acehese former Muslim who converted to Christianity on October 12, 2020, through his conversation with Avraham Effendi Usman in a video titled “Pertemuan Kami Dari Aceh Yang Percaya Yesus” [Our Meeting with One from Aceh Who Believes in Jesus] (Alyuddin 2020b). During the next few video posts, Alyuddin actively constructed his identity as an Acehese through storytelling about his hometown in Aceh, his religious experiences as a converter, and the use of the Acehese language.

Avraham Effendi Usman is a young pastor who is passionate about sharing his experience of religious conversion as well as constructing an identity as an Acehese Christian (Effendi Usman 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2023). Usman, who manages the YouTube channel @InjilHabaGet>, describes his devotional experience as a former Muslim on the channel. His video content also documents the religious services he conducts in different regions of Indonesia. He combines his Christian identity with his Acehese heritage. Some of Usman’s YouTube content focuses on his sermons in Aceh, in which he recounts his experiences negotiating his identity as a Christian from Aceh and exhorts the Acehese to follow the path of Jesus. Based on my investigation on December 5, 2024, there are at least 289 (14%) video uploads on the YouTube channel @InjilHabaGet> that use the title Aceh and are employed by Usman as a space to discuss the intersectionality of Christian identity and Acehese identity. Usman, like Alyuddin and Saputra, uses YouTube as a counterpublic space in the face of the dominance of narratives of Islam and Acehese integration.

Dedi Saputra states in a YouTube video posted by Miracle TV that he had never previously discussed his conversion to Christianity. He felt restricted from explicitly sharing this experience in the social public sphere. However, the digital world now enables him to disclose his conversion experiences with fewer detrimental consequences than direct disclosure. Inspired by uploads to the YouTube channel @Tersadarkan>, Saputra began publishing his conversion experience in early 2022 on multiple YouTube channels. Since then, his notoriety has exploded in cyberspace, with his videos receiving tens of thousands of views. Dedi Saputra’s account of his religious conversion can also be found on numerous other YouTube channels that interview him or use him as a resource in religious discussions.

No	Link	Followers	Videos	Views	Brief descriptions
1.	https://www.youtube.com/@InjilHabaGet	360,000	2.061	55,326,172	@InjilHabaGet founded by Avraham Effendi Usman on October 19, 2019.
2.	https://www.youtube.com/@Tersadarkan	15,600	122	469,389	@Tersadarkan founded by Dedi Saputra on March 20, 2022 with name @InjilHabaJroh.
3.	http://www.youtube.com/@alyuddinok	21,500	277	716,371	@alyuddinok founded by Alyuddin bin Zainal Abidin on March 31, 2017.
4.	https://www.youtube.com/@tidakbiasa	74,100	408	8,072,805	@tidakbiasa founded by Elyas Zulkifli on June 1, 2020.

Table 1. The YouTube Channel of Acehnese Christians who are Former Muslims. Sources: The author's observation on the YouTube channel on December 5, 2024.

Bradley R. E. Wright, Dina Giovanelli, Emily G. Dolan, and Mark Evan Edwards show the ways in which online media is used to share reasons for religious conversions, ranging from doubts concerning the validity of the old way of salvation, intellectual doubts, the creation of a new social environment, and even marriage-related reasons (Wright et al. 2011). Acehnese former Muslims have shared their reasons for converting to Christianity on their YouTube channels. For instance, Effendi Usman posts on YouTube that his decision to convert from Islam to Christianity was based on his belief that salvation is solely achievable through Jesus' way (Effendi Usman 2022a). Dedi Saputra describes in detail the process of his spiritual search, whereby he chose to convert to Christianity (Dedi Saputra 2022d, 2022c). Elyas Zulkifli, a Acehnese, says that his conversion from Islam to Christianity began with an intense study of the Holy Qur'an and the Bible from a comparative perspective. Unlike those who say they had a special spiritual momentum when they converted to Christianity, Elyas Zulkifli admits that he did not have a specific spiritual experience that motivated the conversion. Zulkifli explains that he converted to Christianity after conducting comparative studies between Islamic and Christian teachings.

In line with the expert's view that online public spaces strengthen individual performance (Ahyar and Alfitri 2019), this paper investigates the significance of YouTube in transcending the liminality of interaction in empirical public spaces. In other words, YouTube is able to surmount

the limitations of communication in geographic space and facilitate the desire of users to maintain news or communication connections with their hometowns and adherents of former religions. YouTube enables the establishment of virtual communities comprised of individuals who share the same religious beliefs or ideas (Mayes 2009). In the following discussion, the author explores the use of YouTube as an instrument of identity reproduction as well as for the sharing of post-conversion spiritual experiences.

The Making of a New Identities

The theme of religious conversion is a frequent subject of discussion in identity discourse. Some writings state that converts are trying to present a new identity in the social sphere (Connolly 2009; Miran-Guyon 2012; Nissimi 2004). According to Alexandros Sakellariou, the public sphere is a stage on which converts can exhibit a new identity while simultaneously confirming their breach of old culture (Sakellariou 2012). The online world enables converts to establish a new self-identity and break away from the dominance of their former religious cultures (Nieuwkerk 2006). According to Toomas Gross, letting go of the past completely is a 'temporalization strategy' that allows converts to juxtapose concepts such as 'us' and 'them', 'now' and 'then', 'modern' and 'traditional', or 'salvation' and 'deviation' (Gross 2012, 347).

This phenomenon can be found in the YouTube performance of Acehnese former Muslims. To exemplify, for Alyuddin, Effendi Usman, and Dedi Saputra, YouTube facilitates the dissemination of new identity expressions, constructs morality based on a new religion, and proclaims a break from the old religion. They can articulate their experience of religious conversion without the concerns that arise when communicating a similar message to an Acehnese audience in a direct social setting. Therefore, the uploading of clarification videos to YouTube can alleviate religious conversion-related horizontal conflict. For instance, YouTube was used to provide clarification when Cut Putri Handayani was publicly accused of converting under duress. Thus, YouTube's capacity for elucidation diminishes the potential for social tension.

Several converts have also commercialized the identity of Acehnese ethnicity through YouTube. The commodification of identity refers to the practice of using one's identity to advance economic or other

material interests (Colin 2013; Dlaske 2014; Hidayah 2021; Milne 2013; Noorhaidi 2009). Alyuddin, Effendi Usman, and Dedi Saputra have published a number of YouTube videos depicting a blending of Acehnese ethnicity and Christianity. Even though all three have embraced Christianity, they have always maintained their Acehnese identity. They have also resisted requests to cease using ethnic identities acquired after conversion. Instead of complying with the pressure to not use Acehnese, Effendi Usman publicized sermons in the Acehnese language on his YouTube channel. He called on the Acehnese to follow the path of Jesus like himself (Effendi Usman 2021b). Dedi Saputra also communicated a refusal to cease using the Acehnese language in his Christian sermons on YouTube. According to him, he has more right to use the Acehnese language as a means of daily communication than converts from a non-Acehnese ethnicity because he was born and raised in an Acehnese native language environment. In one of his videos, Saputra states the following:

“I myself decided to dare to learn things that are different from what has been passed down. Some say I am unfit to carry around the name of Aceh. I want to say that I am a person of Acehnese origin (my father and mother are originally of Pidie descent) who chained themselves to East Aceh. I want to say that I am still very worthy of carrying the name of Aceh rather than *mualaf* who, out of nowhere, suddenly become Acehnese”. (Dedi Saputra 2022a).

Thus, YouTube is one of the online public spaces that allow Acehnese former Muslims to alleviate social pressure from their past community, develop alternative relationships, manage emotional expressions of faith, and manifest new morality based on their new religious culture. In addition, YouTube permits the presentation of symbolic opposition to the dominant narrative regarding the integration of ethnic and Islamic identities in Aceh. In another section of this article, I discuss YouTube’s role as a medium for counterpublic construction and resistance.

Sharing Spiritual Experiences

Sharing religious experiences is a convert’s way of internalizing a new morality or strengthening their self-formation (Burhani 2020a; Darwish 2018; Khalil and Bilici 2007; Van Klinken 2012; Le Poidevin 2021). In an environment with a stable atmosphere of religious freedom, someone from a religious majority who converts to a religious minority

is readily able to share its experiences. Former Muslims who convert to majority religions in Europe or the West are eager to share their religious conversion experience in the public sphere (Van Nieuwkerk 2005). This contrasts with the performance of public spaces in Muslim societies, as exemplified by the Acehese former Muslims' frequent experiences of persecution and discrimination. This article highlights how YouTube has surmounted this limitation or barrier.

The motivations and techniques for sharing experiences via YouTube are diverse. In the first technique, some individuals are asked by others to share their conversion experiences (Alyuddin 2021a; Asmawati 2022; Dedi Saputra 2022b; Meutia 2022). Alyuddin is not only a YouTuber but also a Acehese ex-Muslims who is active in finding Acehese former Muslims who have converted to Christianity. On his YouTube channel, Alyuddin has uploaded his interview with Hilda (2021), Syafriani (2021), Rasyidah (2021), and Effendi Usman (2020) to share their experiences of religious conversion. Alyuddin notes that the YouTube videos of Acehese former Muslims are intended to show that they are not alone in following the path of Jesus. Dedi Saputra also revealed his conversion experience when he was interviewed by a pastor regarding the spiritual dynamics of religious conversion and the response of his Muslim community to his decision to change faith. In the second technique, a former Muslim recorded a monologue about his religious conversion experience and disclosed the video to his own YouTube channel. Videos are recorded in various contexts, although the convert primarily shares their personal stories about the motivations for or religious experiences following their religious conversion (Alyuddin 2021b).

YouTube facilitates ex-Muslims in discussing their sensitive conversion experiences. Mid-2021, Cut Putri Handayani, a Langsa woman, was placed in a precarious position due to her decision to convert to another religion, which is not a given in Acehese society. Handayani renounced Islam in order to marry a North Sumatra-born Christian man; consequently, she was persecuted. Some people, including religious leaders and local government staff, sought ways to return her to Islam, and she relocated to North Sumatra, avoiding Acehese public spaces in an effort to reduce social tensions. During the controversy, she utilized YouTube to clarify that her religious conversion was performed voluntarily and without force (Cut Fitri

Handayani 2021). This clarification succeeded in easing the social tensions in society.

Alyuddin, Effendi Usman, and Dedi Saputra regularly upload YouTube videos of their daily religious activities. Alyuddin documented the activities during his evangelist excursions to isolated areas of the archipelago. In a video filmed during an activity in Papua, he demonstrates his cooking skills and discusses the continuity and discontinuity of his culinary practices prior to and after his conversion to Christianity. On another occasion, Alyuddin shared personal stories and explained the process of discovering faith and a life partner as well as items that express his cultural connections to Aceh. Usman is a youthful pastor who makes extensive use of new technology to expand his missionary activities. When videos criticizing his decision to quit Islam went viral in the community, he uploaded a video in response. In accordance with this, Dedi Saputra uploaded his conversion experience to refute accusations that he deemed inappropriate regarding the motive for his conversion to Christianity.

The experience of religious conversion can be described in detail on YouTube. Before the emergence of internet technology, a convert could only discuss their conversion experience with an audience that shared their viewpoint. Now, they can reach a larger audience that includes both supporters and opponents. It is intriguing to note that none of the YouTubers investigated in this study restrict the comments section of their videos, allowing anyone to submit feedback on their content. The comments supporting the YouTube commentary serve to increase membership, community networking, and Christian unity in preparation for the conversion of new members.

An Embodied Counterpublic on YouTube

The digital narratives of Acehnese former Muslims are not isolated from the larger public sphere. This phenomenon can be interpreted in the context of the contemporary Indonesian public space, which is moving in a democratic and deliberative direction on the one hand. However, on the other hand, there is the presence of a public sphere in Acehnese society that is dominated by an exclusive Islamic identity. In reality, this phenomenon can also be interpreted in the context of the global public sphere. This study contends that Acehnese former Muslim YouTubers represent a symbolic form of resistance against the

power and authority of Islamic narratives, which refute the existence of ethnic Acehese who leave Islam.

The existence of YouTube contributes to the perpetuation of the public and counterpublic spaces. According to Fraser and several other scholars, the counterpublic is frequently positioned as an expression of resistance to the supremacy of power over the dominant view of the broader public sphere, whether in collaboration with the state or other parties that are part of the dominant culture (Fraser 1992; Hirschkind 2001; Salois 2014; Warner 2005; Weisser 2008). Aceh's public sphere, which is dominated by integration narratives between Islamic and Acehese identities, is challenged by non-Muslim Acehese communities. According to one of Dedi Saputra's YouTube videos:

"Some Acehese keep telling me, "Aceh is 100 percent Islamic, and the Acehese have never left Islam," and I believe that we have to address this. I want to make the point that people will never leave Islamic beliefs until they learn about other religions and religious teachings [...] This is the main reason why every person in Aceh is a Muslim. For the simple reason that they are never exposed to new information. My own personal decision to risk learning something new that is distinct from conventional wisdom." (Dedi Saputra 2022a)

For the Acehese former Muslim, YouTube is a space for counterpublics reproduction. Fraser (1992) defines a counterpublic as a parallel discursive sphere in which members of subordinated social groups discover and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs.

This study finds that the YouTube channels of Acehese former Muslims who converted to Christianity represent an arena of symbolic expression of resistance against the dominant narrative. They use YouTube to, for example, normalize the concept of apostasy (Dedi Saputra 2022b; Effendi Usman 2021a; Hilda 2021; Rasyidah 2021; Syafriani 2021), address criticism of the religious conversion narrative as a wrong decision (Alyuddin 2020a; Effendi Usman 2022a), critique the narrative supremacy of the integration between Acehese and Islamic identities (Dedi Saputra 2022a), and rationalize religious conversions (Elyas Zulkifli 2020). Their criticism of various dominant views in Acehese society regarding these topics is hereby communicated on YouTube as a form of disagreement and resistance.

The existence of the YouTube channels of Acehese former Muslims is predicated on the normalization of apostates as an intentional

objective. In Aceh's public sphere, as among Muslims in general, the concept of apostasy carries a derogatory meaning, i.e., referring to those who perpetrate religious deviation by converting away from Islam (Samuri and Quraishi 2014; Vlieg 2019). However, in the YouTube narrative of Acehnese former Muslims, the concept of apostasy is used to refer to Christians from other religions (primarily Islam) who change religions and discover a novel way to attain salvation through Jesus.

YouTube's existence as a subaltern counterpublic for Muslim apostates is a form of renegotiation of the concept of apostasy in fundamentalist teaching. By means of digital narratives in public spaces, the public receives counter-information with the presence of an apostate meaning that is completely different from the established and institutionalized meaning in Muslim society. The classical and traditional perspectives on the consequences of apostasy in Islamic law discourse have been challenged by the presence of several YouTube channels, including those discussed in the present study. This study also reveals that YouTubers former Muslim from Aceh are not the only ones mobilizing a counter-discourse toward the normalization of the apostasy concept. Furthermore, former Muslims who converted to Christianity in multiple areas of Indonesia also support the process of normalizing the apostasy concept in a sense other than its primary meaning (Ansor and Masyhur 2013; Mujiburrahman 2001; Seo 2013).

The Acehnese former Muslims are countering the argument that changing religions is immoral. The investigated YouTube videos exhibit the favorable response of outsiders to introducing new members with Muslim backgrounds. These videos present a counter-narrative with the objective of normalizing non-Islamic behavior. This is a common occurrence in Islamic culture, where new members from other faiths are welcomed with a lot of excitement and special ceremonies (Ariff 2012; Krings 2008; Roald 2012; Shanneik 2011). Hence, Acehnese former Muslim YouTubers are also trying to negotiate this narrative by taking part in compiling counter-narratives about the normalization of the concept of riddah (leaving Islam as apostate). Several studies have shown that Christian audiences respond to narratives of conversion to Christianity with a similarly positive and enthusiastic response (Akcapar 2006; Boulos 2010; Chua 2012; Hamer 2002; Klaver et al. 2017; Van Klinken 2012; Pérez 2012).

Another characteristic that accompanies the presence of Acehnese

former Muslim YouTubers is the normalization of the Acehese and Christian identities' integration. The YouTubers discuss the existence of Acehese who are Christians in a stereotypical manner since the non-Muslim Acehese ethnic population is statistically very small. However, YouTubers leverage narratives constructed in the digital public sphere to create the perception that the Acehese who embrace Christianity are not alone. This study reveals opposition to the prevailing narrative of Acehese and Islamic integration. This is also stated by Mina Elfira (2009) in her research into the conversion of ethnic Minangkabau Muslims who live outside Western Sumatra. The presence of digital public space provides an alternative that has previously not been available in the empirical social public sphere (Hirschkind 2006; Mullins 2017).

Despite its lack of integration, the story of religious conversion as a counterpublic is captivating. Even though Acehese former Muslims reproduce counter-narratives about religious conversions as an amalgamated entity, their outcome is not identical. This is in line with the perspectives of several academicians regarding the diversity of the public and counterpublic spheres (Anderson 1999; Asen 2000; Salvatore 2004). Individuals in an egalitarian and deliberative public sphere are essentially autonomous and contingent. They are individuals who can reproduce narratives in a way they perceive as appropriate, frequently without collaborating. The presence of digital culture allows the Acehese former Muslims to construct contestable and diverse narratives, even though they share similarities as subaltern communities.

This article also found that amidst the contribution of a digital public space to enhancing the quality of contemporary Indonesian democracy, social interactions between different interest groups also contribute to increasing friction in society. The commodification of religious identity, as shared by a Christian former Muslim from Aceh through digital space, sparked anger among the Acehese. The polemic between Effendi Usman, Dedi Saputra, and Alyuddin and several Acehese Muslims indicates that the social polarization in the digital space is a concerning phenomenon and has the potential to incite intolerance and religious conflict in the real world (Dedi Saputra dan Effendi Usman 2022; Usman 2022). The state needs to effectively manage the diversity of articulations in the digital space to strengthen Indonesian democracy. Because, as shown by several scholars (Ahyyar

and Alfritri 2019; Hadiz 2019; Lim 2017; Mujani, Liddle, and Ambardi 2018; Osman and Waikar 2018) amidst the contestation of the digital public sphere during the 2017 DKI Jakarta gubernatorial election, the contemporary digital public sphere in Indonesia not only contributes to supporting freedom of expression but also promotes divisive and hate-filled discourse in the name of religion.

Concluding Remarks

The study concludes that, in addition to facilitating the self-narration of converted individuals, the use of the digital public sphere also contributes to strengthening the implementation of democracy and freedom of religious expression. For Acehese former Muslims, the digital public sphere is a platform where individuals can express self-autonomy in determining religious beliefs through the dissemination of religious conversion justifications, the formation of social identities, the advancement of solidarity in novel environments, and the sharing of experiences relating to challenges or obstacles encountered when deciding to change religions. Converts can also build counter-narratives against the overwhelming control of conservative religions in the digital public sphere. As a result, through the use of the digital public sphere, Acehese former Muslims oppose the integration of Acehese and Islamic identities.

This article also shows that the digital public sphere contributes to strengthening democracy and religious freedom in Indonesia. YouTube is an alternative digital public sphere that can neutralize social conflict arising from differences in religious views and attitudes. The potential for vigilantism and social conflict in Acehese society as a result of religious conversion can thus be prevented by shifting the debate to the online public sphere. Consequently, social conflicts caused by religious conversions are channeled with a higher level of integrity and effectiveness. In light of this, this study concludes that narratives about the religious conversion of Acehese former Muslims expressed in the digital public sphere represent an improvement in the quality of democracy and freedom of expression in Indonesia. In a society dominated by Islamic traditions and culture, the Muslim community in Aceh employs the online public sphere to consolidate diverse social elements in an attempt to improve the quality of its democracy.

My research around the narrative of religious conversion among

Acehnese former Muslims in the digital space has some limitations. First, an individual's motivation for articulating their religious conversion experiences through a YouTube channel has varying facets. The study focuses on three aspects of the religious conversion experience: as a space for the remaking of new identities, for exchanging religious experiences, and for building religious solidarity with the new environment. However, other aspects should be developed, for example, how economic motivation drives the phenomenon of narrating one's religious conversion in the digital space. Furthermore, this research has not yet explored the economic and political dimensions related to the narrative of the conversion of Acehese former Muslims in the digital space. Secondly, this article has liminality because it does not capture religious conversion narratives on a wider spectrum with diverse geographies. I found several rural Muslims in the border areas of Aceh and North Sumatra who have left Islam but do not occupy the digital space as a medium of articulating their experiences of religious conversion. In this regard, further research is needed to enrich the Aceh public space construction discourse to obtain a more complete picture of both digital and non-digital public spaces regarding the dissemination of the religious narratives of former Aceh Muslims.

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The journal invites scholars and experts working in all disciplines in the humanities and social sciences pertaining to Islam or Muslim societies. Articles should be original, research-based, unpublished and not under review for possible publication in other journals. All submitted papers are subject to review of the editors, editorial board, and blind reviewers. Submissions that violate our guidelines on formatting or length will be rejected without review.

Articles should be written in American English between approximately 10.000-15.000 words including text, all tables and figures, notes, references, and appendices intended for publication. All submission must include 150 words abstract and 5 keywords. Quotations, passages, and words in local or foreign languages should

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All notes must appear in the text as citations. A citation usually requires only the last name of the author(s), year of publication, and (sometimes) page numbers. For example: (Hefner 2009a, 45; Geertz 1966, 114). Explanatory footnotes may be included but should not be used for simple citations. All works cited must appear in the reference list at the end of the article. In matter of bibliographical style, *Studia Islamika* follows the American Political Science Association (APSA) manual style, such as below:

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2. Booth, Anne. 1988. "Living Standards and the Distribution of Income in Colonial Indonesia: A Review of the Evidence." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 19(2): 310–34.
3. Feener, Michael R., and Mark E. Cammack, eds. 2007. *Islamic Law in Contemporary Indonesia: Ideas and Institutions*. Cambridge: Islamic Legal Studies Program.
4. Wahid, Din. 2014. *Nurturing Salafi Manhaj: A Study of Salafi Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia*. PhD dissertation. Utrecht University.
5. Utriza, Ayang. 2008. "Mencari Model Kerukunan Antaragama." *Kompas*. March 19: 59.
6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
7. Interview with K.H. Sahal Mahfudz, Kajen, Pati, June 11th, 2007.

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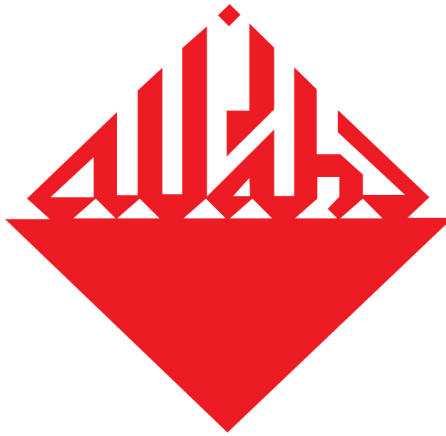
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(1640S-1660S) IN ARABIA AND SYRIA

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DOCUMENTING THE HALF-CENTURY EVOLUTION OF
ISLAMIC EDUCATION RESEARCH: A PROBABILISTIC TOPIC
MODELING STUDY OF THE LITERATURE
FROM 1970 TO 2023

Aziz Awaludin

EXAMINING NEW PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND
INTERFAITH DIALOGUE IN INDONESIA:
CASES OF WORLD PEACE FORUM (WPF) AND
RELIGION TWENTY (R20)

Ridwan, Djayadi Hanan, & Tri Sulistianing Astuti