

Traditionalist salafi's involvement in the religious moderation da'wah

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Abstract

Traditionalist Salafi groups differ from political and jihadist salafi groups. Traditionalist Salafi chose a moderate path in their preaching. This article aims to analyze the moderate path of Salafi Rodja in Indonesia. Using a qualitative method where data is collected through observation and reading the community's official website and interviewing key informants, we argue that Rodja as a traditionalist salafi in Indonesia develops a moderate way of preaching by applying two approaches. First, contextualizing the understanding of jihad by rejecting violence in the name of Islamic jihad. Second, engage in social activities by providing educational services and moral and material assistance to people in need. Both of these approaches show the humanization of salafi teachings which are usually associated with extremism. This fact shows that Indonesian traditionalist Salafi seeks to emphasize moderate and humanist religious ways in their preaching. However, the tendency to moderate the way (manhaj) of da'wah cannot be separated from its position as a breakaway among mainstream moderate Islamic groups (Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah), in addition to the government's efforts to eradicate extremist movements. This study contributes to the strengthening of moderate da'wah discourse among splinter groups.

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Abstrak

Kelompok Salafi tradisional berbeda dengan kelompok Salafi politik dan jihadis. Salafi tradisional memilih jalan moderate dalam dakwahnya. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis jalur moderat Salafi Rodja di Indonesia. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif di mana data dikumpulkan melalui observasi dan membaca website resmi komunitas serta mewawancarai informan kunci, kami berpendapat bahwa Rodja sebagai salafi tradisional di Indonesia mengembangkan cara dakwah moderat dengan menerapkan dua pendekatan. Pertama, mengkontekstualisasikan pemahaman jihad dengan menolak kekerasan atas nama jihad Islam. Kedua, terlibat dalam kegiatan sosial dengan menyediakan layanan pendidikan dan bantuan moril dan material kepada masyarakat yang membutuhkan. Kedua pendekatan ini menunjukkan humanisasi ajaran salafi yang biasanya sering diasosiasikan dengan ekstremisme. Fakta ini menunjukkan bahwa Salafi tradisional Indonesia berusaha untuk menekankan cara-cara keagamaan yang moderat dan humanis dalam dakwahnya. Namun, kecenderungan untuk memoderasi cara (manhaj) dakwah tidak lepas dari posisinya sebagai sempalan di antara kelompok arus utama Islam moderat (Nahdlatul Ulama dan Muhammadiyah), di samping upaya pemerintah memberantas gerakan ekstremis. Studi ini memberikan kontribusi bagi penguatan diskursus dakwah moderat dalam kalangan kelompok sempalan.

Kata kunci

pemaknaan jihad; moderasi; aktivisme sosial; salafi tradisional.

INTRODUCTION

The Salafi group is often seen as a group that carries radicalism-terrorism. This article seeks to examine the other side of the Salafi group, namely the traditionalist Salafi known as the purist Salafi that purely focuses on da'wah (preaching)(Gul, 2010) This group differs from the political and *jihadist* Salafi by being consistent with preaching Islam using the *manhaj* (ways of life) of *salaf sâlih* (the first three Muslim generations) and not tending to resist or rebel against the legitimate government. It is also not being involved in acts of violence and practical politics, and the most important point is to reject terrorism labeled *jihad* in the way of God (Adraoui, 2008). Furthermore, it also does not use physical force in response to non-Islamic West civilization as the *jihadist* Salafi group does.

Azra calls this group "soft Salafism," which religiously tends to be oriented to the first generation life era of Muslim but sociologically being progressive and dynamics following the changing socio-cultural life (Azra, 2018) Meanwhile, Saether calls it humanist Salafi (Saether, 2013) as well as quietist Salafi promoted by Meleagrou-

Hitchen.(Meleagrou-Hitchen, 2018) Moreover, Jajang Jahroni mentions Salafi with this character as a “peaceful Salafi.”(Jahroni, 2007)

Etymologically, according to Ibn Manzur (d. 771 H), *salaf* means predecessor or ancestor, who is older and more important in a tradition(Manzur, n.d.), so the term (سَلَفُ الرَّجُلِ) (one's ancestor)" means both parents who have preceded him (Al-Maghrawi, 1420). Terminologicily, the word *salaf* means the three first and best Muslims generation which consist of prophet friends (*shahabat*), its followers' (*tabi'in*), followers of the followers (*tabi 'al-tabi'in*) that are glorified by God, as the Prophet said, “The best human beings are in this period (namely the time of the companions), then afterward (the *tabi'in* period), then afterward (*the tabi 'al-tabi'in period*)”(Al-Bukhari, 2006).

The determination of the term *salaf* is not only based on time (the best generation time) but must be determined based on one's commitment to the Qur'an and al-Sunnah with an understanding of the *salih salaf*. Therefore, anyone whose opinions and actions are in accordance with the Qur'an and as-Sunnah (Pall, 2013) regarding *'aqidah*, law, and *suluk*, then he can be called a Salafi, even though he did not live during the Salaf generation. On the other hand, anyone whose opinions and actions do not follow the Qur'an and as-Sunnah, he cannot be called a Salafi even though he lived during the time of the companions, *tabi'in*, and *tabi' al-tabi'in*.(Al-Athary, 2010) Ibn Taymiyah said: “It is not a disgrace for a person who shows *manhaj salaf* and consecrates himself to *salaf*, even obliged to accept that because *manhaj salaf* is nothing but the truth” (Taimiyah, 2005). However, in the current context, groups calling themselves *Salafi* cannot easily be justified as *Salafi* as interpreted in several of the above senses. Joas Wagemakers even stated that Salafism is a branch of Sunni Islam whose followers in modern times claim to have followed the tradition of “pious predecessors” (*salaf sālih*) (Wagemakers, 2016)

It seems that Wagemaker's opinion can be accepted in the context of the current development of Salafis, because the Salafis that are currently developing are neo-Salafi groups that attribute themselves to the religious traditions of the Prophet and his companions. Moreover, the Salafis are not in the same movement in terms of the application of actions and methods, although the belief system (*aqidah*) is the same.(Ali, 2019) There are three typologies, each of which has different movements, namely: (1) traditional Salafi-rejectionist; (2) reformist Salafis; and (3) Salafi jihadists (Saether, 2013; Sageman, 2004; Wiktorowicz, 2006) Other terms promoted by de Koning to indicate the group are *selefies*, politically involved Salafists, and the *takfiri* Salafists (Salafi-jihadists) (de Koning, 2009). Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchen introduced the terms quietist (for those who encourage da'wah activities), activist (for those who are

involved in politics), and jihadist (for those who encourage *jihād* to take up arms to quell evil). Furthermore, Meleagrou-Hitchen argues between the terms Salafism and extremism (Meleagrou-Hitchen, 2018).

Recently, one of the Salafi communities with the above characters that focus massively on disseminating Islamic teachings in Indonesia based on Salafi *manhaj* (ways) is represented by the *Rodja* community. Some previous studies have discussed this community using multi perspectives, including works of Hasan (2006), Wahid (2013) Adeni (2016), Bakti (2018), and Yakin (2018) However, a study that focuses on the soft da'wah strategy of the Salafi has not been found. The traditionalist Salafi of *Rodja* displays its movement in a moderate path particularly seen from its involvement in combating terrorism in Indonesia.

This study is expected to contribute to the efforts of establishing religious moderation in Indonesia and the world. The study becomes more important when it relates to the efforts of making policies regarding the Salafi movement that are mostly viewed as the most contributing party to global terrorism. In the context of Indonesia, two Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are seen as the greatest Islamic organizations that support moderate Islam in Indonesia. However, we assume that other Islamic groups such as *Rodja* Salafi can also be considered a contributor to Islamic moderation discourse. In this article, we use the first type as an analysis foundation. This type is relevant to the *Rodja* Salafi character that reflects peaceful strategy in da'wah activities. The da'wah approach it uses is a contextual approach that concerns community needs (Mulkan, 2005).

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative method with a field study of the Salafi community of Cileungsi in Bogor, Indonesia. This community is a traditionalist Salafi group engaged in da'wah and social activities. It owns television and radio known as *Rodja TV* and *Radio Rodja* that can be visited online at <https://rodja.tv/> and <https://www.radiorodja.com/>.

Data collection of the study is carried out by conducting interviews with Salafi figures who are directly involved in Salafi da'wah activities in Cileungsi, including Abdul Qadir Jawas, Muhammad Nur Ikhsan, and Yahya Badr Salam. We also observe the group's da'wah movement by being directly involved (as participant observation) (Bakti, 2014) in the da'wah activities they carried out at Masjid al-Berkah We then conduct a reading of its official website to select da'wah content that reflects the religious moderation attitude.

The collected data are analyzed using the traditionalist Salafi characters as the approach. There are two steps of data analysis. *First*, looking at the moderate view of

this group in understanding the term *jihad*. The term *jihad* becomes a polemic in society as it is viewed as the factor of terrorist acts. *Second*, looking at the group's involvement in social activism to have a comprehensive understanding of *Rodja* da'wah orientation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

***Rodja* salafi as a moderate salafi: Is it possible?**

Wasathiyah or religious moderation is the essence and substance of religious teachings that are not at all excessive in terms of perspective or attitude. The principle of religious moderation (*wasathiyah*) is an attitude and perspective that is full of balance and justice values. (Kamali, 2015) The Indonesian Ministry of Religion defines religious moderation as a perspective, attitude, and behavior of always taking a position in the middle path, always acting fairly, and not being extreme in religion, with four indicators, namely: 1) national commitment; 2) tolerance; 3) non-violence; and 4) accommodating to local culture. (Kementerian Agama RI, 2019) Subhan, Dodego, and Witro mentioned that the estuary of religious moderation is to create an atmosphere of tolerance, peace, and harmony amid a multi-religious and multicultural life (Dodego, 2020) Meanwhile, Syamsun Ni'am's study shows that moderate Islam in Indonesia is rooted in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) (Ni'am, 2015).

In Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are known as the two greatest moderate Islamic organizations. NU becomes a moderate group with the influence of Syafi'i school in *fiqh*, Asy'ari-Maturidi school in theology, and al-Ghazali-Junaid al-Baghdadi in *tasawwuf* (Sufism). NU very often studies the inter-group differences of religious understanding so it becomes an inclusive movement. Meanwhile, Muhammadiyah succeeded in combining textual and contextual understanding by adapting to modern values, so its Islamic teachings can be relevant to the changing situation over time. Muhammadiyah has many social charities (*Amal Usaha*) spread widely in all regions of Indonesia (Darajat, 2017).

Concerning that, the moderation attitude of *Rodja* Salafi is questionable here. It is by itself not a moderate group when seen from its Islamic literal and textual understanding that contradicts the local culture in the form of religious activities existing in Indonesia (Al-Aql, 2007) such as visiting graves (*ziarah kubur*), celebrating *Maulid* (Prophet's birthday), practices of *tahlilan* (prayer ritual for the deceased) (Stańczyk-Minkiewicz, n.d.) It refuses the local cultural practices that deviate from the principles of Islam (Hasan, 2020).

However, considering *Rodja* Salafi as a moderate group refers to its rejection of violence and its involvement in social cares activities as Muhammadiyah does. Textual

religious understanding in the aspect of faith (*aqidah*) and worship (*ibadah*) and rejection to local culture cannot be merely an excuse to call the Rodja Salafi an immoderate group, because its understanding of Islam is contextual and progressive in terms of *muamalah* (social matters), so Salafi builds social institutions and schools, helps the poor and people in need, and creates jobs fields, aimed at minimizing ignorance and poverty which are often the basis of radical acts and violence. If viewed from the point of view of practical theology (Isgandarova, 2015) the salafi reflects an open theology. It follows Haedar Nashir's concept of religious moderation as noted by Alexander R. Arifianto:

“Religious moderation is not only about promoting kind words, but also adapting those words to acts of kindness especially by building socioeconomic infrastructure. This is because radicals are not oriented towards building infrastructure but tend to destroy it. As a result, the true essence of Islam in society is undermined by the actions of these radical actors. Instead, one should interpret Islam through reason and promote socio-economic development to eliminate the 'trigger' factors for a few Muslims to engage in radical actions, such as poverty and socio-economic inequality” (Arifianto, 2017).

Nashir's approach of religious moderation with socio-economic development is a new approach practiced by *Rodja* Salafi. Thus, the Salafi become a moderate movement by translating Islamic teachings into social life following the circumstances and needs of society. Omid Safi considered a religion that is always present to meet the needs of society as tolerant religion full of peace (Safi, 2003) Furthermore, Mark Woodward et al argue that the Salafi cannot always be assumed as a non-violent group, even associating Salafism with intolerance and violence, and Sufism with tolerance and non-violence is a baseless assumption (Woodward, Umar, Muhammad Sani Rohmaniyah, & Yahya, 2013) Salafi women's social role as studied by Tarwiyah in South Kalimantan in society also proves salafi's inclusive attitude. It shows Salafi women build a good relationship and social activities with their environment, behind their *burqa* and robes. This point supports the thesis of Žalec and Pavlíková (2021) that the majority of the adherents of world religions are religious exclusivists. However, religious exclusivism doesn't imply political exclusivism, and world religions are compatible with political pluralism (Tarawiyah, 2012). It means that the exclusive attitude of Salafi can be recognized in the context of Indonesia as a plural country.

However, justifying the Salafi as a moderate group cannot be understood by only adhering to the cultural da'wah approaches presented above. Other factors made *Rodja* Salafi a moderate group, especially in the context of political struggles in religious public

space. The Salafi group contests mainstream religious authorities of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah as the two greatest Indonesian Islamic organizations recognized by the Indonesian government (Akmaliah, 2020; Wahid, 2012). Salafi has to change its way of preaching (*da'wah*) to be seen as more moderate to continue to exist in the public sphere. This is done to support the policies of the Indonesian government, which through the Ministry of Religion, are seriously fighting terrorism and religious extremism. So, the soft movement strategy promoted by a certain community does not fully represent the original ideological attitude of the community. But, as far as contestation in the public sphere is concerned, the Salafi try to appear its self as a moderate movement.

The moderate salafi movement indicates that every religious movement continues to process to become a recognized movement with a form that is relevant to the context in which it lives and develops. Thus, the salafi movement that develops in one place cannot be equated with the movement and development in another place. Diverse social backgrounds make salafi grow with its own character. In Indonesia, being moderate is a necessity to be accepted by the public.

Salafi Rodja's contextual meaning of *jihad*

Rodja Salafi as the traditionalist Salafi fights terrorism in the name of *jihad* in the way of God. The concept of *jihad* which is misused to legitimize acts of violence is not in accordance with the principles of the Qur'an (Ramlan, Erwinsyahbana, & Hakim, 2016) and Sunnah and is counter-productive to the principles of Islamic da'wah as a religion of peace (*rahmatan li al-alamin*) itself. It is seen from Ustadh Abdul Qadir Jawas's views in one of *Rodja TV's* content.

"Threatening yourself, causing anxiety, shedding blood, rebelling against the authorities, frightening security, carrying out suicide bombings, killing innocent people, children, women, including killing unbelievers (*mua'had*), is not *jihad* and it is *haram* (forbidden) in Islam. Once again, it is not *jihad* and the law is *haram*" (Jawas, 2017).

A more contextual view comes from Ustadh Muhammad Nur Ikhsan when interviewed about terrorism. According to him:

"*Jihad* in Islam is carried out according to its needs. It is contextual in nature. In the context of the Indonesian state which is full of social problems, violent *jihad* is not justified. The poverty rate in Indonesia is still

quite high and there are many mustad'affin (weak people), so the jihad that is justified in this context is jihad with wealth (bi al-amwal). Acts of establishing hospitals, helping the poor, and providing educational services, and other social actions are the only justified jihad. It will be different if Indonesia is in a state of emergency war against infidels" (Nur Ikhsan, 2020).

The two above statements confirm the contextual understanding of *jihad* promoted by *Rodja* Salafi. To this community, *jihad* cannot always be interpreted as *al-qital* (war) physically, so taking the path of substantive *jihad* such as helping the poor that are in need become an important part of *jihad* in the global context. *Rodja's* rejection of acts of terrorism is naturally based on its main religious principle in which preaching (call for Islam) using the soft (moderate) strategy is more important than *jihad* taking up arms. So, da'wah cannot be equated with terrorism, and *jihad* must be carried out contextually. A contextual understanding of *jihad* is needed because generally jihadist actions represent errors in judgment, misunderstanding, and misinterpreting of reference sources.

However, the contextual meaning of *jihad* presented by the *Rodja* Salafi does not fully work. It is still in polemic. It faces the *jihadist* Salafi group that promotes the war ideology and moves massively. In addition, *Rodja* salafi's verbal da'wah itself still frequently condemns the different religious practices of other communities. It makes its moderate struggles in the form of contextual *jihad* fruitless and unworkable for building harmonious social order. For some cases as observed by Asy'ari (2013), Wahib (2017), Yakin (2018, p. 11) Adeni (2020), salafi's da'wah content does not reflect a moderate attitude of religion amid the plural society. It is important to note that the civilizational diversity with the lack of tolerance for different views will give rise to aggression and become an inspiration for more and more extremist activities of terrorist groups.

Rodja's involvement in socio-cultural activism

The contextual *jihad* of *Rodja* Salafi is seen from its social activism. Contextual *jihad* is also called *da'wah bi al-hal* (transformative *da'wah*). Da'wah, according to Farooqui (Farooqui, 2014), is something vital for the process of social-cultural transformation of society. Da'wah must touch the social realm in the form of solving social problems faced by society such as problems of poverty, injustice, law, and so on.

The activities the *Rodja* Salafi carries out are the establishment of educational institutions. One of the them is Yayasan Pendidikan Cahaya Sunnah (Education Foundation of Cahaya Sunnah). Viewed from its vision, this school is oriented to become

a quality Islamic elementary school that implements the Qur'an and Sunnah using ways of *al-salaf al-shalih* (first Muslims generation) understanding. The school focuses on preparing students with a noble character (*al-akhlaq al-karimah*) that masters knowledge and technology. The curriculum of this school is developed with an awareness of science and technology that is developing dynamically. The spirit of the content of the school curriculum provides Muslim learners with experiences to take advantage of science and technology developments (Cahaya Sunnah, 2015). It seems that Rodja Salafi is a progressive community that is open to change, not rigid, and against backwardness. The salafi education model that follows the modern style is able to produce individuals who are mature and wise in religion and are not easily tempted to take reckless actions, such as acts of terrorism and extremism.

The interesting point is the orientation of Rodja's school which helps the government in providing quality education services for the community. It also adopts state/government policy of education. It is in line with Saparudin's study in Lombok, East Indonesia, that the growth of Salafism is influenced by contextualizing proliferation strategies by integrating into the Indonesian national education system and selecting the greater Islamic traditions. By establishing officially certified schools and formal recognitions from the Indonesian government, the Salafi schools have found a way to successfully recruit a new young generation of Muslims in Lombok and beyond (Saparudin, 2017)

In addition to building educational institutions, *Rodja* Salafi involves in social care activities by helping people affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic as seen at figure 1. It is done regardless of the religious status of the people who are assisted. It is stated on Rodja's official website:

“As a form of concern for the affected community, the Rodja Cares for Humanity team assisted 2,000 families in the Cileungsi area, Bogor regency. This activity involved the Cileungsi District Covid-19 task force team to ensure this activity was safe. People who receive assistance are expected to maintain health protocols, by wearing masks, maintaining distance and hand hygiene, and being in good health when taking aid. The total assistance distributed in this program is Rp. 300,000,000 (three hundred million rupiahs)” (Radio Rodja, 2021).



Figure 1: Rodja's social care

The Rodja's humanitarian orientation as seen above reinforces its impartiality towards acts of violence. Rodja's involvement in humanitarian activities can be said to be an Islamic movement that seeks to build a humanist Salafi of Islamic society, such as the thesis presented by Saether that sees the humanist side of the Salafi (Saether, 2013). It seems that the Rodja's efforts are the same as those of the Islamic organization of Muhammadiyah, the greatest Islamic organization in Indonesia that supports the textual understanding of Islam in the issues of *aqidah* and *ibadah*, but balances it with social movements progressively. Jahroni views that an interesting point is that Muhammadiyah combines elements of Salafism and modernism. Since its establishment, this organization was determined to modernize Islam (Jahroni, 2007, p. 10).

Contextualization of the meaning of jihad and involvement in social activities by salafi groups is an attempt to become a moderate movement. The author views that on the one hand this shows a change in the orientation of salafi da'wah in Indonesia but on the other hand it could just be a kind of strategy being played by salafi groups to gain public space (Adeni, 2020). Apart from that, salafi in the Indonesian context cannot be equated with the salafi movement in the Middle East. The author sees that in Indonesia salafi try to adapt to the local conditions of society. Therefore, it is not surprising that the recent salafi movement has been trying to find recognition in society. Of course, they have to do this because the nature of Islamic moderatism that has taken root in Indonesia does not provide a place for fundamentalist movements that suppress the uniqueness of Islam in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The traditional Salafi of *the Rodja* community contributes to religious and social harmonization efforts. It seems that Salafi realizes that preaching in a pluralistic society

like Indonesia needs a soft strategy. The approach to da'wah in social-cultural ways is much more effective than acts that attack especially with physical violence. This type of Salafi condemns suicide bombings and rejects acts of terror even against non-Muslims. It also establishes educational institutions as a means of producing personal progressive Muslims and involves in social care activities by assisting communities in need.

Rodja's Salafi efforts to become a moderate community have indeed become a polemic on the one hand because of their presence which is often rejected by the society, although the rejection occurs due to the struggle for religious public space. In Indonesia, each religious group declares as a group that has the most authority over the others, so closeness to the government using the jargon of "religious moderation" becomes one strategy to gain political support. Therefore, changes in the da'wah face of the Salafi from hard to soft can also be considered as a strategy of adapting to government policies to exist in Indonesia's public sphere.

Beyond that, *Rodja* salafi's performance in the Indonesian context is important to consider as a new perspective in seeing the position of Salafi groups in the global realm, in terms of its contribution to building a harmonious social order.

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