

PERSPECTIVE

RESEARCHERS AT ISEAS – YUSOF ISHAK INSTITUTE ANALYSE CURRENT EVENTS

Singapore | 15 October 2020

Islamic Organizations and Environmentalism in Indonesia

*Aninda Dewayanti and Norshahril Saat**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Recent ecological disasters such as forest fires and haze have raised concerns for the environment among Islamic organizations in Indonesia. These sentiments are expressed through religious opinions (*fatwa*), or the creation of institutions looking into environmental matters.
- Three Islamic organizations have been at the forefront of championing environmental issues. The Ulama Council of Indonesia (MUI) has released fatwas on the environment, including several pertaining to the forest fires in Kalimantan and Sumatra. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah have also established sub-units that specifically aim to raise environmental awareness and promote initiatives ranging from plastic waste management to green lifestyle.
- In the post-Suharto era, various eco-religious groups have emerged organically. Led mostly by youths, their discourse on climate change is nuanced in response to local developmental issues in the districts they originated from, and hence sometimes resonate more than the discourse of the mainstream Islamic organizations.
- Two challenges persist within the pro-environment Muslim groups. The generation gap can be seen in their divergent views. Moreover, the discourse of some groups is based on theological viewpoints without sound knowledge about environmental changes and their daily impact on communities. This differentiates their views from those generally espoused by NGOs and international environmental groups.
- Diversity in the movement has significantly weakened its ability to lobby the state. Rigorous research and more organized advocacy strategies can create better societal awareness that is needed for cohesive action. Social media serves as a useful tool for achieving this purpose.

**Aninda Dewayanti is Research Officer with the Indonesian Studies Programme at ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute. Norshahril Saat is Senior Fellow and Co-coordinator of the Programme. The authors would like to thank Syafiq Hasyim and Ahmad Najib Burhani for their feedback and comments on this paper.*

INTRODUCTION

Since 1997, Indonesians have encountered numerous incidences of forest fires in peatland areas, particularly in Muslim-majority Sumatra and Kalimantan. In 2015, during one of the worst haze crises ever faced in the country, local communities and religious leaders in the Riau Province resorted to religious arguments and rituals, such as holding congregational prayers asking for rain, to halt the forest fire. In 2016, the Council of Ulama Indonesia (MUI) issued a *fatwa* (legally non-binding religious opinion) that forest-burning is sinful.¹ Nevertheless, these religious arguments have failed in stopping the slash-and-burn behaviours of farmers, and the forest exploitation by logging companies.

To what extent has the use of religion, particularly Islam, been effective in tackling environmental problems? Has climate change issues been a priority on Indonesian Muslims' agenda, particularly at the provincial and district levels? Islam has often been used as a vehicle for political advocacy, particularly to mobilize the masses during elections. To illustrate, the 2019 presidential election became a battleground for identity politics, making religion the central issue before corruption, abuses of power, and development lag. Religious identity has become the country's main political cleavage, even though Islam teaches harmony, plurality and tolerance.² Whether Islam facilitates or impedes appreciation of environment concerns remains to be tested.

This article aims to understand Islamic groups' articulation of the environment in Indonesia. It suggests that *fatwa* or religious opinions do not resonate on the ground, or even within the religious elite circles. This is not to deny that much work has been done by religious organizations at the grassroots level. While traditional religious authorities are still championing environmental issues through a formal institutional building, organic religious organizations have emerged and play the role in creating environmental awareness among Muslims. Arguably, the use of religion to promote environmental awareness has its limitations, as it is divorced from the broader national and global efforts in mitigating climate change.

RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES AND THEIR SUPERFICIAL VISION ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Indonesia houses the largest Muslim population in the world with 87 percent of its 270 million population professing the Islamic faith. However, Indonesia is not an Islamic state, it does not have Syariah embedded in its constitution, but instead upholds the Pancasila ideology. Thus, it is neither a theocratic or secular state. It also has a Ministry of Religion overseeing six official religions in the country. However, Islamic pluralism is manifested through active participation at the civil society level, run by mass organizations or *ormas*. Two of the biggest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, and arguably in the world is NU and Muhammadiyah. The former represents traditionalist Islam, and its members appreciate local culture in the formulation of religious beliefs. The latter represents modernist Islam, which, while critical of local beliefs, has always been committed towards reforms in education and welfare. Numerous works have examined the competition between the two organizations, but lately, scholars have spoken about the convergence of the two in terms of their religious orientation and intra-factionalism within the two. Both organizations retain

their fatwa-making bodies at the central level, which continue to have influence on their respective members.

In Muslim-majority Indonesia, faith-based organizations have generally struggled in keeping environmental awareness relevant to the Islamic community. Instead, identity politics and how the majority should ‘protect’ the minority remains the flavour of the mainstream political and social discourse. Still, MUI, NU and Muhammadiyah play a vital role in directing these narratives. In the realm of fatwa making, one must also examine the role of MUI (Ulama Council of Indonesia). Formed in 1975 by the Suharto New Order regime, its task is to issue fatwas that support the state’s ideology, Pancasila.³ While there may be disagreements between members of MUI and the Suharto regime, they agree with the state in most instances; if not, they would face the consequences. Scholars however observe that MUI became more assertive in the public domain after the fall of the New Order in 1998, and its height was during the Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono government (2004-2014) when MUI members began to penetrate some of the state’s institutions, though unsuccessfully. Under the current Joko Widodo government, MUI Chairman Ma’ruf Amin is the vice-president of the country. It must also be pointed out that MUI does not have any members of its own, and is mostly run by NU and Muhammadiyah members.

While this paper discusses the role of these Islamic organizations, it does not deny the existence of Islamic political parties. The oldest surviving Islamic party to date is the PPP. Other Islam-based parties include PKS, PAN and PBB. These are differentiated by their orientations, from progressive to Islamists. On matters pertaining to the environment, it is the *ormas* that play a more significant role. MUI, for instance, has a dedicated department that looks into environmental issues, called *Lembaga Pemuliaan Lingkungan Hidup dan Sumber Daya Alam* (LPLHSDA-MUI). Still, this arm is not of great significance compared to the fatwa-making body. Often, the religious rulings are general, and does not affect the day-to-day lives of the people. These *ormas* also have their local chapters in each of the provinces, as well as the districts. The discourse at the everyday level is therefore worth examining more than are the broad fatwas at the national level.

ENVIRONMENTALISM AMONG RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES

By definition, environmentalism empowers communities to raise the quality of life for mankind and all living things. It advocates cooperation between the economic, political, and cultural order to mitigate dangers posed to the environment. In Indonesia, social problems are mostly intertwined with poor environmental management, since it remains a largely agricultural society. For example, the problem of forest fires and haze in peatland areas was exacerbated by the power relations between the state, the corporations, and local farmers. The challenges for environmentalism is to make the often marginalised issue of environment part of mainstream concerns and discussions.⁴

Previous studies found that Islamic faith-based organizations in Indonesia use different mechanisms in their environmental advocacy work. Scholars have pointed out the concept of “eco-spiritual governmentality” to explain the way these organizations use technologies of power to self-govern, including by utilising their network of *pesantrens*, schools, and *kyais* as environmental subjects to expand their campaign on eco-theology.⁵ Initiatives

carried out by Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah serve as cases in point. Muhammadiyah conducts various voluntary programmes to engage its cadre in eco-theology, including the creation of *Mubaligh Lingkungan* (environmental preacher). Meanwhile, since 1996, NU has called for *jihad* (literally meaning struggle) against illegal logging and deforestation in Central Java. The use of the term demonstrates a strong desire to end what is seen as a detestable act. NU also promotes environmentalism through softer methods, such as preaching (*dakwah*). These are said to be an effective form of forest conservation in West Sumatra.⁶ Scholars have recognised the work carried out by Indonesia's religious environmental organizations, and have identified them to be playing a middleman role, embedded in, and shaped by, overlapping global and local forces.⁷ Nonetheless, the power dynamics within the religious authorities at the elite and grassroots level have so far not been adequately appraised.

THE EMERGENCE OF ORGANIC ECO-RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

More often than not, MUI, NU, and Muhammadiyah adopt a top-down approach when dealing with environmental issues, i.e. focussing on issuing fatwas and/or establishing institutions.⁸ There are also instances where religious elites, in their personal capacity, have initiated forums on environmental protection. For example, former Muhammadiyah Chairman Din Syamsudin launched the "Multi-faith Collaboration for Rainforest Protection". However, not only are these institutions weak in their coverage of environmental concerns, their scope is shallow, often leading to grievances within the community whose ideas are not accommodated. Fatwas issued at the national level do not necessarily penetrate to the grassroots where rulings issued by the local chapters of these organizations get a better hearing. Moreover, fatwas tend to hark back to the first centuries of Islam, and may therefore not be relevant to current pressing needs.

The ineffectiveness of Islamic organizations at the national level has led to the flourishing of numerous religious organizations at the grassroots level. These are independent movements not affiliated with, or which have little contact with the three major institutions mentioned. Although the agenda of the national and local level organizations may be aligned, their programmes are not synchronised.

Civil society is arguably the most crucial driver of change in post-authoritarian Indonesia. Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, the state's surveillance on religious matters is no longer strong and environmental NGOs have better chances of affecting the issue.⁹ At the grassroots level, environmentalist movements have benefited from this development and faith-based organizations have grown organically into a social movement (please see Appendix 1). This translates into different forms of political mobilisation: advocacy of community rights on environmental issues; opposition against the state's developmental policies and the oligarchic domination; the use of social media for eco-literacy and green lifestyle promotion, and: the establishment of faith-based eco-education institutions. These are not mutually exclusive, and the organizations' activities and ideas strongly overlap.

First, within the local communities, Islam-based movements organically championing political and developmental issues related to the environment are growing. Most of them were born out of concerns over some specific political event, such as conflicts related to

land use. Kader Hijau Muhammadiyah (KHM), for instance, started off as a movement in 2018 born out of grievances over the Sepat dam in Surabaya, East Java. The dispute over the dam pitted residents against a company called Ciputra Surya Inc., and the government of Surabaya; the dam project created problems from lack of wastewater management and potential flooding. In 2011, land conflicts in Kendeng Karst Mountain and Urut Sewu, Central Java triggered the Forum Nahdliyin untuk Kedaulatan Sumber Daya Alam (FNKSDA), an NU-affiliated grassroots initiative.¹⁰ Since then, this organization has been allying with environmental movements such as Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (WALHI) and Greenpeace. One ground-breaking outcome of this alliance was the production of a documentary called *Sexy Killers* which exposed mining oligarchs in Indonesia. The documentary was released a week before the 2019 Presidential Elections and drew more than 19 million viewers in 10 days.

Second, community efforts on eco-literacy and green lifestyle have demonstrated multiple nuances in the Islamic and ecology discourse. Islam Bergerak, for instance, ties environment issues to democracy and republicanism.¹¹ It propagates this narrative through articles, blogs, and discussion platforms, and the tone of these writings is rather strong and reformist. Despite having the same mission, KHM believes in using a softer approach, adopting subtle words and a neutral tone, in the spirit of *Al Ma'un*, Muhammadiyah's liberation theology which emerged in the 1990s and was developed through Ahmad Dahlan into a movement to engage younger Muhammadiyah cadres.

On the other hand, there are initiatives like Bumi Langit in Yogyakarta and Eco-Deen, which are starting to get the attention of urbanites. Operationalising the concept of "green Islam", these organizations promote eco-theology and enhance Muslim participation in environmental management and sustainable living. While Bumi Langit works on a physical, small-scale Islamic socio-ecological permaculture farm in Yogyakarta, Eco-Deen holds most of its activities via Instagram, Zoom and WhatsApp group discussions. The latter also organizes webinars or online tutorials about everyday green lifestyle, such as waste management. Nevertheless, it has been argued that this concept of green Islam is a "toothless tiger" when it comes to challenging the state's developmental agenda on natural resource extraction.¹²

Third, ecological Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) also facilitate environmental education and values. In Indonesia, the concept of ecological schooling is not new. Natural schools or *sekolah alam* had emerged in Denmark in 1950s and grew tremendously in Indonesia since the 2000s. This concept was to foster closer relations between children and the forest. In Indonesia, it was localised to build human-nature interconnections. The combination of conventional *pesantren* and natural schools has generated a variation of eco-education values. For instance, while the concept offered in Ecological Pesantren Ath Thaariq in Garut mostly adopts an agricultural curriculum model, Pesantren Misykat Al-Anwar in Bogor creates awareness on socio-ecological issues, including among students with family members who are victims of ecological conflicts. Despite its brand as a conventional *pesantren*, Pesantren Al-Falah in Bandung also highlights environmental protection in its teachings.

As it is, these Islamic movements have operationalised environmentalism at the practical and local level. However, their contributions at the discursive level, nationally and globally,

remain wanting. So far, these community-based organizations have used social media as the main tool to create awareness about their agenda: whether it is to draw people to rallies on social-justice issues in East Java, or to engage people in eco-theology discourse. Their target audiences are mostly youths. Islam Bergerak, for instance, champions ecological discourse with a religious perspective, regardless of the individuals' Islamic preferences. FNKSDA and KHM, on the other hand, hold NU and Muhammadiyah values respectively, though its operationalisation of environmentalism seems detached with the main institutional body. Despite these advances, their lack of discursive sophistication resulted in these not being co-opted by global environmental movements. Moreover, their contributions remain limited by theological grounds and are mostly embedded in particular socio-justice movements at the local level.

DO RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS MATTER IN ENVIRONMENTALISM?

Although MUI, NU and Muhammadiyah continue to be the dominant organizations in religious affairs, their narratives are disconnected from the local community. Some grassroots groups do not consider MUI's fatwas when faced with a socio-ecological conflict.¹³ This detachment possibly happens due to the generational gap across the organizations. Young cadres of Muhammadiyah, for instance, initiated KHM as an independent organization and differentiate themselves from the *Majelis Lingkungan Hidup* (MLH) under the Muhammadiyah board. Currently, KHM has 15 branches across the archipelago—three of them at the provincial level and the rest in local regencies and towns. They work mostly with both the local civil society movements and the Muhammadiyah network. Despite obtaining MLH's blessings, KHM runs independently. The same story applies to FNKSDA. Although they acknowledge having cultural relations with NU, and have obtained endorsement from NU leaders such as Alissa Wahid (daughter of former NU Chairman and Indonesia President Abdurrahman Wahid), the organization claims to have an eco-theology that might differ from NU's position. They also promote ideas that are different from MUI, an organization led by NU members. This young generation of Muslims are bold and able to mobilise the masses to work on sensitive ecological-issues related to conflicts and the impact of capitalism.

The disjuncture between grassroots environmental movement and mainstream have many causes, and is not limited to the rural-urban divide. In fact, the grassroots movement is a fragmented one. While some of them have interests in developmental projects, others fight against their environmental damages. Arguably, these divisions have allowed these sub-national religious organizations to flourish each in their own way.

Although religious organizations championing environmental issues helps create awareness among the masses, its contribution to broader climate justice is shallow. In fact, it ends up theologizing every debate on the environment instead of furthering understanding about the issues scientifically. These movements therefore need to appreciate and to engage in broader global debates related to climate change, instead of engaging in centuries-old discourses that may not have any relation to contemporary issues on climate change.

Finally, perfectionism should not be the goal of environmentalism. Instead, the focus should be on real systemic change. To achieve this, it needs to be as inclusive as possible and should

not discourage even minor contributions. Climate emergencies has given faith-based organizations a mould for presenting what sustainable living looks like to people who believe in faith. In disaster-prone Indonesia, religious organizations at all levels can work towards a systemic change and bring environmental issues into mainstream discourse.

Appendix 1. Some eco-religious Organizations in Indonesia

No.	Affiliation	Institutions
1.	Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI)-affiliated initiatives	MUI Fatwas related to the environment: a) Fatwa on recycled water No. 2/2010 b) Fatwa on forest & land burning No. 30/2016 c) Fatwa on endangered species to maintain ecosystem balance No. 4/2014 d) Fatwa on waste management No. 47/2014 e) Fatwa on eco-friendly mining No. 22/2011 f) Fatwa on utilisation of charity to build community sanitation infrastructure No. 001/MUNAS-IX/MUI/2015
2.		Lembaga Pemuliaan Lingkungan Hidup dan Sumber Daya Alam (LPLHSDA-MUI); releases books and scripts for Friday sermons (<i>khutbah</i>)
3.		Eco-Masjid
4.	Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)-affiliated initiatives	Lembaga Penanggulangan Bencana dan Perubahan Iklim (LPBPI-NU)
5.		Gerakan Nasional Lingkungan Hidup (GNKL-NU)
6.		Front Nahdliyin untuk Kedaulatan Sumber Daya Alam (FNKSDA)
7.	Muhammadiyah-affiliated initiatives	Majelis Lingkungan Hidup Muhammadiyah
8.		Kader Hijau Muhammadiyah (KHM)
9.	Ecological <i>pesantren</i>	Pesantren Ekologi Ath-Thaariq, Garut
10.		Misykat Al-Anwar, Bogor
11.		Eco-Pesantren Daarut Tauhiid, Bandung
12.		Pesantren Amumarta, Yogyakarta
13.	Ecological communities	Islam Bergerak
14.		Rumah Pengetahuan Daulat Hijau
15.		Bumi Langit permaculture farm
16.		Eco-Deen ID

- ¹ BBC News, “Forest-burning is a sin, says Indonesian fatwa”, 14 September 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37358253>
- ² Pepinsky, Thomas B. 2019, “Islam and Indonesia’s 2019 Presidential Election.” *Asia Policy* 26(4):54–62.
- ³ Saat, Norshahril. 2018, *The State, Ulama and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- ⁴ Anderson, Jon. 2010, “From ‘zombies’ to ‘coyotes’: environmentalism where we are”, *Environmental Politics*, 19:6, 973-991, DOI: 10.1080/09644016.2010.518684
- ⁵ Amri, Ulil. 2019, “Islamic Faith Based Organizations and Eco-Spiritual Governmentality in Indonesia”, in Kukreja (ed.), *Southeast Asia and Environmental Sustainability in Context*, Rowman and Littlefield.
- ⁶ McKay, et.al. 2014, “Practice what you preach: a faith-based approach to conservation in Indonesia”, *Cambridge University Press*, Volume 48, Issue 1, pp. 23-29, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605313001087>
- ⁷ Smith, Jonathan. 2017, “Connecting Global and Local Indonesian Religious Environmental Movements through Spatial Analysis”, *Kawistara*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 22 December 2017, pp. 207-314, <https://10.22146/kawistara.25908>
- ⁸ For a detailed analysis on fatwas, mosques sermon (khutbahs) and environmental law in Indonesia, see Ramlan, Shazny, *Religious Law for the Environment: Comparative Islamic Environmental Law in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia* (May 21, 2019). NUS Centre for Asian Legal Studies Working Paper 19/03, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3405923> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3405923>; and Mangunjaya FM, Praharawati G. Fatwas on Boosting Environmental Conservation in Indonesia. *Religions*. 2019; 10(10):570, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10100570>; Gade, A. (2015). *Islamic Law and the Environment in Indonesia: Fatwa and Da’wa*. *Worldviews*, 19(2), 161-183. Retrieved September 16, 2020, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43809529>.
- ⁹ Amri (2019) explains that environmental NGOs had a difficult relationship with the state during the Suharto era. These NGOs were torn between enjoying the government’s environmental projects or advocating community rights over the environment. The religious organizations were involved only later on, when the country faced population problems and needed assistance on family planning promotion. Amri, Ulil. 2019, “Islamic Faith Based Organizations and Eco-Spiritual Governmentality in Indonesia”, in Kukreja (ed.), *Southeast Asia and Environmental Sustainability in Context*, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- ¹⁰ Developmentalism and the exploitation of natural resources have also long been a concern for NU. Since the 1990s, former NU Chairman and Indonesia President Abdurrahman Wahid was quite vocal against the establishment of a nuclear power plant at the Muria Mountain, Central Java. Instead of building a nuclear plant with high risks to the people and environment around the mountain area, he suggested reallocating the plan to one of the small islands off northern Java.
- ¹¹ In an interview, Roy Murtadho, an activist as well as co-initiator of FNKSDA, Islam Bergerak, and Pesantren Misykat Al Anwar, mentioned that the current discourse of developmentalism is no longer expanding among Islamic religious thinkers in Indonesia, and the same goes for issues on the environment.
- ¹² Grossmann. 2019, ‘Green Islam’: Islamic environmentalism in Indonesia’, *New Mandala*, 28 August 2019, <https://www.newmandala.org/green-islam/>
- ¹³ In interviews, some of the religious community groups stated that they have never opposed MUI’s fatwas and ideas. Yet, they found them less relevant and do not resonate with people on the ground, especially the affected community. Nonetheless, fatwas and khutbahs are important in raising some issues, such as public health and vaccines.

To read earlier issues of ISEAS Perspective please click here:
<https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective>

Preceding three issues of ISEAS Perspective:

2020/116 “Elections or War? The Dilemma Facing Rakhine State” by Nyi Nyi Kyaw
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_116.pdf

2020/115 “How Hanoi is Leveraging Anti-China Sentiments Online” by Dien Nguyen An Luong
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_115.pdf

2020/114 “Constitutional Amendments Stalled: Thailand’s New Normal Politics Deadlocked” by Termsak Chalermpanupap
https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ISEAS_Perspective_2020_114.pdf

<p>ISEAS Perspective is published electronically by: ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute</p> <p>30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace Singapore 119614 Main Tel: (65) 6778 0955 Main Fax: (65) 6778 1735</p> <p>Get Involved with ISEAS. Please click here: https://www.iseas.edu.sg/support</p>	<p>ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute accepts no responsibility for facts presented and views expressed.</p> <p>Responsibility rests exclusively with the individual author or authors. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form without permission.</p> <p>© Copyright is held by the author or authors of each article.</p>	<p>Editorial Chairman: Choi Shing Kwok</p> <p>Editorial Advisor: Tan Chin Tiong</p> <p>Managing Editor: Ooi Kee Beng</p> <p>Editors: Malcolm Cook, Lee Poh Onn, Benjamin Loh and Ng Kah Meng</p> <p>Comments are welcome and may be sent to the author(s).</p>
--	---	--