

PERSPECTIVE

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Indonesian Islam beyond Habib Rizieq Shihab: Deconstructing Islamism and Populism

*A'an Suryana and Nur Syafiqah Binte Mohd Taufek**



This picture taken on December 12, 2020, shows Indonesian Muslim cleric Rizieq Shihab (centre) surrounded by his supporters upon arrival at the police headquarters in Jakarta, before he was arrested on December 13 over allegations of breaching coronavirus restrictions. Habib Rizieq is currently the most controversial ulama in Indonesia. Islam in Indonesia, however, is not monolithic and has numerous strands – some of which are moderate and serve as a bulwark against radical ideas. Photo: Jenaya, AFP.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The radical Salafi ideology of Muhammad Rizieq Shihab or Habib Rizieq, and the Islamic Defender's Front (FPI) have been at the centre of media attention and scholastic study for quite a while. Islam in Indonesia, however, is not monolithic and has numerous strands – some of which are moderate and serve as a bulwark against radical ideas. These diverse orientations are nevertheless understudied due to the prevailing discussion on Habib Rizieq as a key figure of religious populism and Islamism.
- This article presents some key thoughts of established and emerging religious thinkers, who subscribe to moderate views of Islam. Most of them are undervalued as ivory tower academics, although they actually have extensive reach at the grassroots, and are also seen as credible Islamic scholars (ulama). They espouse tenets of tolerance and non-violence in Islam, and hence are a significant force in countering the influence of the radical Islamist preachers.
- The recent retreat of radical and conservative Muslims following social and political pressures from the Joko Widodo government provides a timely opportunity for proponents of moderate Islam to boost their presence on social media – a crucial battleground nowadays in the perpetual war of religious ideas.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of populism and Islamism among politicians and Indonesian ulama (Muslim preachers) has become a subject of interest among Indonesianists. In particular, the role of Habib Rizieq Shihab, the Grand Imam of the Islamic Defender's Front (FPI), in exploiting Islamism and populist issues to attain social and political power, has been widely studied.¹ However, his hard-line Salafist views represent but one strand in Indonesian Islam. The excessive attention given him has sadly led to other strands and religious figures being understudied.

This article examines other religious discourses that challenge radical and populist views and that towards maintaining moderate Muslim practices. It aims to present to the reader the wealth of Islamic thought in Indonesia.

There is no doubt that Habib Rizieq is currently the most controversial ulama in Indonesia. He has been making headlines following his return to the country in November 2020 from his self-exile in Saudi Arabia. He was recently detained by the police for, among others things, allegedly violating the Covid-19 quarantine and faces legal prosecution which could jeopardise his social and political influence. If found guilty, he can be imprisoned for a third time; he was jailed for inciting violence in 2008 and for defamation in 2003. On 30 December 2020, he suffered another serious blow when the Joko Widodo (Jokowi) government banned FPI, an organization he founded, from organizing activities due, among other things, to FPI's lack of a legal standing.

Habib Rizieq began his career as a high-school teacher. It was in 1998 that he founded FPI. FPI is known for violent acts such as raiding bars and cafes that sell alcoholic drinks during the holy month of Ramadhan. Habib Rizieq, however, remained a peripheral social and political figure for years; both the masses and social and political elites kept their distance from him due to FPI's notoriety, and Habib Rizieq's divisive and combative style of preaching. However, he rose to prominence after leading a series of protests against Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) in 2016 and 2017 which led to the imprisonment of the former Governor of Jakarta on blasphemy charges. His populist fight against Ahok earned him accolades among poor urban Muslims who felt oppressed by the prevailing socio-economic system.

In April 2017, Habib Rizieq left for Saudi Arabia on self-imposed exile after being named a suspect in pornography-related and defamation cases. Despite his absence, he managed to maintain his popularity and influence on Indonesia's social and political events. Before being banned by the government, Front TV (the official YouTube channel of FPI)² uploaded videos of him and presented him on live teleconference during important events such as Prabowo Subianto's mass campaign during the 2019 presidential elections held at Gelora Bung Karno Stadium.³ A snippet of the video received over 200,000 views.⁴ By 2018, Habib Rizieq was surveyed as one of Indonesia's most influential ulama, alongside Abdul Somad, Yusuf Mansur and Abdullah Gymnastiar (Aa Gym).⁵

His view on Islam and the state is quite ambiguous. Habib Rizieq accepts Pancasila, the state foundation that promotes pluralism, as long as "the interpretation of Pancasila is still in line with Islam."⁶ On the other hand, he supports the establishment of Islam sharia in Indonesia. He backs Islamic movements that attempt "to make Islam sharia the law of the state, because this is a constitutional way of doing it, and the movement has to be supported as well by Muslims

in Indonesia.”⁷ He also argues that democracy is against Islam because it is not based on Islam and is created by infidels.⁸ Habib Rizieq criticises tolerance in Indonesia, claiming that these have been implemented excessively. He claims that during the holidays of non-Islam religions (such as Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism), “almost all government offices in Indonesia erect banners to commemorate the holiday and even organise special events to celebrate it.”⁹

As explained earlier, Habib Rizieq’s religious views have been the focus of scholar attention for quite some time. This has obscured the reality that Indonesia possesses many Islamic strands. The following section will discuss some established and emerging Muslim thinkers who serve as competitors to Habib Rizieq’s divisive and intolerant preaching.

MODERATE AND EMERGING THINKERS

The traditionalist and modernist Muslim groups, Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have made immense contributions to religious pluralism in Indonesia.¹⁰ These are reflected in the thoughts of their leaders or prominent members, which serve as a bulwark against radical forms of Salafism and other exclusivist ideologies. Established Muslim thinkers who are from these organizations, Said Aqil Siradj and Ahmad Syafi’i Ma’arif, for example, have promoted moderate Islam for years through their numerous speeches and writings. They have been facing tough competition from radical and conservative views of Islam, the latter being spread effectively through social media and offline activities.

Said Aqil Siradj, the current chairman of Nadhlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia, has played an important role in introducing and popularising the concept of *Islam Nusantara*. *Islam Nusantara*, introduced in 2015, refers to Islamic tenets that have “blended harmoniously with the original cultures of Indonesians, so long as these cultures do not violate Islamic sharia.”¹¹ To foster better relations between Muslims and Christians, he proposes the term “non-Muslim”, instead of “kafir (infidel)” to describe other faith communities since that better reflects the idea of equal citizenship among all Indonesians.¹²

Ahmad Syafi’i Ma’arif, who chaired the second largest Muslim organisation, Muhammadiyah, between 1998 and 2005, is another senior figure who has been combating religious radicalisation. He contends that radicalism is a product of the wealth gap in the economy.¹³ Indonesia may be a resource-rich country but few get to share the economic pie, and many remain poor. Political and economic elites are in collusion to enrich themselves, and law enforcement is weak. It is this unjust situation that motivates some religious elites to instill radical views among the marginalised.

Today, a new generation of modernist and traditionalist thinkers such as Rumadi Ahmad, Syafiq Hasyim, Ahmad Najib Burhani and Ahmad Bahauddin Nursalim who is famously called Gus Baha, continue to bring fresh ideas to the table. Widely regarded as academics, their contributions in Islamic sciences have been under-analysed.

Rumadi Ahmad, head of Nahdlatul Ulama’s Institute for Research and Human Resources Development (Lakpesdam), expanded the idea of *Islam Nusantara* by proposing three pillars to support religious moderation in Indonesia.¹⁴ The first pillar is moderation in religious thoughts. This pillar, according to Rumadi, rests on the historically peaceful dissemination of Islam since its arrival in Indonesia. This condition has generated community characteristics in

favour of religious moderation, namely *tawasuth* (moderate), *tawazun* (balanced) and *tasamuh* (tolerant). In having these characteristics, people emphasise harmony and moderation in responding to social developments. The second pillar is based on the spirit of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (commanding the good and forbidding the evil), and on that spirit being expressed through compassion, love and the avoidance of acts of violence. The third pillar is peaceful co-existence between Islam and the original cultures of Indonesia. According to Rumadi, peaceful co-existence can prevail if Muslims allow for creative dialogue between Islam and the original traditions and practices (*al-amaliah al-diniyah*) of Indonesia. Indeed, Islamic practices must be based on primary sources of Islam, such as Al Quran and Hadith. However, according to Rumadi, Muslim elites and commoners should not impulsively prohibit practices that stem from syncretism between Muslim and Hindu traditions. Otherwise, people will be pushed towards radicalism.

Syafiq Hasyim, a scholar with NU background, is an expert on, among other things, gender issues in Islam and on Islamic radicalism. On gender in Islam, he argues that fields such as theology and jurisprudence “continue to be heavily male-centric”.¹⁵ In fact, he sees patriarchal interpretations as not only un-Islamic but also akin to *shirk* (associationism).¹⁶ As such, he encourages Muslim women to study and interpret Islam to deconstruct the patriarchal understanding of religion and reclaim gender justice and egalitarianism as advocated by religion.¹⁷ On Islamic radicalism, he observes that in recent times, some scholars argue for tolerance of radical and intolerant views and practices in Islam because these are part and parcel of Islam. According to Syafiq, however, such views are to be tolerated only so long as they have not been actualised in the public sphere. Once these views materialise in public space, and even “violate shared aspirations manifested in the articles of state foundation, Pancasila, and the Indonesian Constitution, then they must be rejected.”¹⁸

Ahmad Najib Burhani is a Muhammadiyah scholar who writes extensively on religious minorities. He encourages mainstream Sunni Muslims to stand up against the marginalisation of religious minorities and to foster tolerance between communities.¹⁹

He points out five “cultural problems” that let “some people” in Indonesia ignore existing discrimination and intolerance toward certain minority faith groups in the country, in particular, the practitioners of folk religion.²⁰ The first cultural problem is the messianic tendency based on the idea that followers of minority faiths are heretical and that their souls are in need of salvation. The second cultural problem is the belief among some religious groups, such as FPI, that acts of violence, for example, against people of minority and “heretical” faiths, are justifiable and are part of Islam’s “religious calling.”²¹ In other words, these people feel that, in order to attain *dakwah* (preaching) objectives, resorting to violence is justified. The third cultural problem is euphemistic narratives of intolerance. This refers to phrases or expressions used to justify acts of violence against followers of minority faiths. For example, several community leaders in Tanjung Balai city, North Sumatra, misused the proverb *dimana bumi dipijak, disitu langit dijunjung* (when in Rome, do what the Romans do) in response to a riot in the city which resulted in a mob burning two viharas and five Confucian temples. The riot was the result of a hate speech campaign on social media following a dispute between an Indonesian woman of Chinese descent, who is non-Muslim, and officials of a mosque nearby over the noise level of the mosque’s loudspeaker. By uttering that proverb in public, the community leaders shifted the blame to the Buddhist minority for being “a minority that fails to know their place in the community.” The fourth cultural problem is conservative attitudes that support, agree with or keep silent about intolerant and discriminative practices in the

community, and consider members of the community who are followers of minority faiths to be rightfully deserving of intolerant or discriminative practices aimed against them. The fifth cultural problem is exclusive pluralism. This refers to the privilege given by the state toward religions that it acknowledges, namely Islam, Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism, and not to others.

Ahmad Bahauddin Nursalim, who is famously called Gus Baha, another thinker from Nadhlatul Ulama, is also attracting wider public attention. Gus Baha is wholly educated in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) and has never pursued a formal secular or religious education. He was initially famous among students of *pesantren* and the intellectual circle of Islam (both traditionalists and modernists). His audience expanded recently, with people following his speeches and sermons through YouTube postings uploaded by, among others, students from his *pesantren*. Gus Baha is famous for his extraordinary knowledge on, and his memory capacity of Al Quran and Hadith. Indonesia's most prominent expert on Quran exegesis, Quraish Shihab, once commented thus on Gus Baha: "It is difficult to find a person like him, who really understands, and has great memory for Al Quran, and also knows greatly the details of human experience and the practices (*fiqh*) of Al Quran verses."²² In addition, Gus Baha is also an extremely well-read ulama. He does not only read *kitab kuning* (classical Islamic books written in Arabic, which are staple reading for *pesantren* students), but also books written by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars such as Quraish Shihab and Karen Armstrong.²³

Gus Baha promotes a friendly and flexible face of Islam. Islam, according to him, does not consist of stringent rules; Islam does not scare people. Instead, Islam makes it easy for people to perform religious practices (religious services).²⁴ With regard to Islam moderatism, Gus Baha argues that ulama need to be moderate. Ulama with a hard-line religious outlook will alienate people while a lenient ulama will encourage permissiveness in religious practices. Hence, the Almighty God dislikes both these stances, he argues, and favours moderatism.²⁵

Another emerging ulama who is not from NU or Muhammadiyah, is Habib Husein Jafar Al Hadar, a young preacher of Arab descent who was born and raised in Bondowoso, East Java.²⁶ He completed his Master's degree in Quranic Exegesis at Syarif Hidayatullah State Islamic University,²⁷ and has written several books published by major publishing houses in Indonesia such as Gramedia and Mizan.

Less than three years ago, Habib Ja'far decided to embark on digital *dakwah* (online preaching) after realising that Indonesians are generally not interested in reading²⁸, but instead prefer to search for Islamic content on YouTube. This motivated him to set up Instagram and YouTube accounts in 2018 to engage in *dakwah* with the millennial generation. Currently he has over 273,000 followers on Instagram, more than 244,200 followers on Twitter and over 385,000 subscribers on his YouTube Channel.²⁹ He is known as an activist of Gerakan Islam Cinta (Islam is Love Movement), and as a content creator.

Though Habib Ja'far speaks on a variety of topics, his underlying message is that Islam promotes peace, mercy and tolerance. This is evident in his content on his YouTube channel such as "Islam bukan agama perang" ("Islam is not a religion of War")³⁰, "Islam itu agama cinta" ("Islam is a religion of love"),³¹ "Islam Bukan Agama Takfir" ("Islam is not a religion that easily labels others as infidel")³². Habib Ja'far expands on the concept of *Islam Rahmat li al-Alamin* (Islam as a mercy to all creation) through the concept of "Islam Cinta" where he

bases Islamic teachings on the idea of love.³³ This serves as an antithesis to exclusivist, extremist and intolerant interpretations of Islam which are considered to stem from hatred.³⁴

THE WAY FORWARD

The various thoughts on moderate Islam proposed by established and emerging Islamic thinkers in Indonesia compete with conservative and radical forms of Islam. Moderate scholars of Islam had been struggling to gain an audience amidst fierce competition from proponents of conservative and hard-line Islam. But recently, they have benefited from the stricter stance taken by the government against political and radical Salafism.

The banning of HTI in 2017, followed by the effective banning of FPI on 30 December 2020, and Habib Rizieq's pending prosecution for various charges, provide an opportunity for moderate Muslim figures to reclaim "lost territories" as radical and conservative ulama retreat from the public.

However, to ensure that their views of Islam regain influence, proponents of moderate Islam will need to be more proactive and creative on social media. They need to learn from how youngsters have been drawn to radical and conservative views partly because moderate views were disseminated badly, and therefore failed to appear as attractive alternatives.

¹ Several Indonesianists, with Prof. Vedi R. Hadiz as the leading figure, have written on Islamist populism in Indonesia over the last few years. Examples of their works, which also discuss populism issues being raised by Habib Rizieq, are:

1] Vedi R. Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 48:4, 466-583 (2018), DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2018.1433225.

2] Marcus Mietzner, "Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia", *Pacific Affairs*, Volume 91, No. 2: 261-282, (2018) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5509/2018912261>.

3] Marcus Mietzner, "Rival Populisms and the Democratic Crisis in Indonesia: Chauvinists, Islamists and Technocrats", *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 74:4, 420-438, (2020), DOI: 10.1080/10357718.2020.1725426.

² All social media accounts of FPI and Habib Rizieq have been suspended following the banning of the organization. Contents on Front TV have also been removed.

³ Other mass events where Habib Rizieq participated via live teleconferencing or which had his recording played include FPI's 21st anniversary and the demonstration against the Pancasila Ideology Policy Bill (RUU HIP).

See: [1] VIVA.CO.ID., "FULL! Rizieq Shihab Soal Pancasila & NKRI Bersyariah di Milad FPI ke-21". YouTube. Aug 26, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwHi8fSDK5k>

[2] Reza Deni, "Rekaman Suara Habib Rizieq Diperdengarkan Saat Aksi Unjuk Tolak RUU HIP di DPR", *Tribun News*, published on July 16, 2020, <https://www.tribunnews.com/nasional/2020/07/16/rekaman-suara-habib-rizieq-diperdengarkan-saat-aksi-unjuk-rasa-tolak-ruu-hip-di-dpr>

- ⁴ Pencinta Habib Rizieq Syihab. “Di Stadion GBK Habib Rizieq Lantang Mengatakan Ini, Kampanye Akbar”. YouTube. April 8, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S88Mj2N8xwU>
- ⁵ Lalu Rahadian, “LSI Ungkap 5 Ulama Paling Berpengaruh di Indonesia”, *Tirto Indonesia*, published on November 14, 2018, <https://tirto.id/lsi-ungkap-5-ulama-paling-berpengaruh-di-indonesia-c97m>
- ⁶ Habib Rizieq, *Wawasan Kebangsaan: Menuju NKRI Bersyariah* (Jakarta: Suara Islam Press, 2012), p. 12.
- ⁷ Ibid, p. 24.
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 56.
- ⁹ Ibid, p. 81.
- ¹⁰ Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 6.
- ¹¹ Idham Kholid, “Di Depan Jokowi, Said Aqil Jelaskan Makna Islam Nusantara”, *Detik News*, published on August 1, 2015, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-2980894/di-depan-jokowi-said-aqil-jelaskan-makna-islam-nusantara>
- ¹² Ibnu Hariyanto, “Said Aqil Soal Rekomendasi ‘Jangan Sebut Kafir ke Non-Muslim’: Untuk Orang NU”, *Detik News*, published on March 22, 2019, <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4479464/said-aqil-soal-rekomendasi-jangan-sebut-kafir-ke-non-muslim-untuk-orang-nu>
- ¹³ Ahmad Syafii Maarif, “Radikalisme, Ketidakadilan, dan Rapuhnya Ketahanan Bangsa”, *Maarif Journal* Vol. 5, No. 2 (2010): 147-158.
- ¹⁴ Rumadi Ahmad, “Penguatan Moderasi Beragama”, *Kompas Indonesia*, published on July 8, 2019, <https://kompas.id/baca/utama/2019/07/08/penguatan-moderasi-beragama/>
- ¹⁵ Yoginder Sikand, “Indonesia: Developing a Discourse of Gender Justice in Islam”, *Women Living Under Muslim Laws*, published on June 24, 2010, <http://www.wluml.org/node/6451>
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Syafiq Hasyim, “Involusi Makna Toleransi”, *Kompas*, published on May 15, 2017, <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2017/05/15/23025151/involusi.makna.toleransi?page=all>
- ¹⁹ Ahmad Najib Burhani, *Menemani Minoritas*, (Jakarta: PT Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2019), 1-33.
- ²⁰ Ahmad Najib Burhani, “Agama, Kultur (In)Toleransi, dan Dilema Minoritas di Indonesia”, *Geotimes Indonesia*, published on August 27, 2020, <https://geotimes.co.id/kolom/agama-kultur-intoleransi-dan-dilema-minoritas-di-indonesia/>
- ²¹ <https://geotimes.co.id/kolom/agama-kultur-intoleransi-dan-dilema-minoritas-di-indonesia/>
- ²² Muhammad Nasikhul Abid, “Mengenal Lebih Dekat KH. Ahmad Bahauddin Nursalim (Gus Baha)”, *Dosenmuslim.com*, published on Feb. 21, 2020, <https://dosenmuslim.com/biografi/mengenal-lebih-dekat-kh-ahmad-bahauddin-nursalim-gus-baha/>.
- ²³ Rahmat Hidayat Zein, “Gus Baha, Guru Yang Berwawasan”, *Qureta.com*, published on Dec. 3, 2019, <https://www.qureta.com/post/gus-baha-guru-yang-berwawasan>.
- ²⁴ Kalam – Kajian Islam. “Gus Baha, Gus Reza Lirboyo dan Gus Kautsar Ploso Ngaji Bareng di PWNU Jatim”, *YouTube.com*, premiered on Oct. 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpfJvkvip34>.
- ²⁵ Syakir NF, “Gus Baha Ungkap Sikap Moderat Para Ulama”, *NU Online*, published on Nov. 25, 2019, <https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/113885/gus-baha-ungkap-sikap-moderat-para-ulama>.
- ²⁶ Habib is a name used to address preachers who are descendant of the Prophet. Ayun Masfupah, “@Dakwah Digital Habib Husein Ja’far Al Hadar”, *Jurnal Dakwah*, Vol. 20, No.2 (2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14421/jd.JD202195>, 253.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Habib Husein cited a data released by UNESCO that stated only one for every 1,000 Indonesians like to read books. Source: Ibid.
- ²⁹ [1] Husein Ja’far Al Hadar, @husein_hadar. Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/husein_hadar/
[2] Husein Ja’far Hadar, @Husen_Jafar. Twitter. https://twitter.com/husen_jafar?lang=en
[3] Jeda Nulis. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCp7hJfiiocdY085XnWVrp2Q/videos>

[4] Habib Husein also has a Facebook account, Husein Jafar Al Hadar, which has 2,760 followers, <https://www.facebook.com/hozeint.hameed>

³⁰ Jeda Nulis. "Islam Bukan Agama Perang". YouTube. May 13, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhU0xWaqR5M>

³¹ Jeda Nulis. "Islam itu Agama Cinta". YouTube. May 19, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxpe51ke5ec>

³² Jeda Nulis. "Islam Bukan Agama Takfir (Mudah Mengkafirkan)". YouTube. June 9, 2018.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDUGM8zZsrQ>

³³ Muhyiddin, "Habib Husein, Dai Muda dan Islam Cinta", *Republika.co.id*, published on May 17, 2020, <https://republika.co.id/berita/qahfim458/habib-husein-dai-muda-dan-islam-cinta>

³⁴ Nur Mufidatul Ummah, "Konsep Dan Pengaruh Ide *Islam Rahmat Li Al- 'Alamin* Husein Ja'far Al-Hadar Terhadap Keberagaman Kaum Milenial Di Media Sosial", (UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya: 2020), 58.

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