

# PERSPECTIVE

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## The Complicated Role of Kerohanian Islam (Rohis) Alumni in Disseminating Islam in Indonesia

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FaceBook Page of the Kerohanian Islam in Kabupaten Maros in Indonesia, [https://www.facebook.com/ForosMaros/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/ForosMaros/about/?ref=page_internal). Kerohnain Islam groups have in general been understudied in Indonesia.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- The role of the Rohis (*Kerohanian Islam*) group in disseminating Islam (*dakwah*) in Indonesia has been understudied. The organization's executives are in fact responsible for organizing significant events such as religious learning forums (*majelis taklim*) and Quranic studies for senior high school students.
- This article discusses the unique role played by the Rohis alumni in transmitting Islamic faith to their juniors in high schools. In particular, the Rohis alumni influence students' minds through intense personal approaches; *liqo* (mentoring); and reading materials.
- The Rohis alumni and the organizations associated with them are however not monolithic. On the one hand, they are perceived to be disseminating conservative and radical Islam. Indeed, they predominantly subscribe to conservative Tarbiyah and Salafi teachings.
- On the other hand, many Rohis alumni subscribe to moderate versions of Islam, such as those promoted by Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. This diversity among Rohis alumni-based organizations often results in disagreement among them on which Islamic orientation should be taught in schools.

## INTRODUCTION

Kerohanian Islam (Rohis) is a largely understudied group in Indonesia despite playing an important role in the dissemination of Islam within the country's education system. It has been shaping the minds and behaviour of students since the 1980s.<sup>1</sup> The few existing articles on Rohis' strategic role in shaping Muslim students' behaviour argue that its activities are designed to prevent the spread of Western culture, and help tackle the negative effects of globalization and modernization. Najib Kailani, for instance, explains that the rise of Rohis' activism in the 1980s was due to moral panic among Muslims. He argues that Rohis' activism helped defuse the spread of Western and East Asian popular culture.<sup>2</sup> Other articles discuss the increasing role of Rohis in disseminating exclusivist<sup>3</sup> and fundamentalist views of Islam.<sup>4</sup> Also included in this category is the research done by Maarif Institute (2018) and Litbang Kemenag Semarang (2017), which found that the religious activities sanctioned by Rohis tend to promote conservatism, intolerance and discrimination, especially targeting Muslim students who do not wear the veil (*jilbab*).<sup>5</sup> A 2016 survey jointly organized by the Wahid Foundation and the Ministry of Religious Affairs, had 68 per cent of Rohis activists expressing readiness to perform jihad (holy war), and agreeing to the use of violence in the name of defending Islam.<sup>6</sup>

Even fewer scholars have focused their attention on Rohis alumni's role in transmitting Islam in schools, especially in senior high schools. Yusuf, Tahun and Asyhari (2015) explain how Rohis alumni work with Rohis executives at their former schools to organize study circles (*liqo*) to transmit their version of Islam to the students.<sup>7</sup> The Ministry of Religious Affairs' Report on the Evaluation of Rohis' Literature in Central Java and Yogyakarta (2017) shows that some Rohis alumni working with Rohis executives are Salafi-affiliated.<sup>8</sup> Salafi is a conservative brand of Islam that promotes a return to Islamic teachings as practised by Prophet Muhammad and the two generations after him. Aidulsyah (2016) presents a study on the role of Rohis alumni who are affiliated with the Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union (KAMMI) [Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)], Muhammadiyah, Nadhlatul Ulama, Salafi and many others.<sup>9</sup>

This article focuses on the role of former executives of the Rohis group (the Rohis alumni) and the influence they continue to exert in senior high schools. In many cases, Rohis executives at senior high schools sustain their religious activism after finishing their education. Many continue their studies in universities where they join extra-campus Muslim student organizations such as HMI (Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam/Islam Student Association), Tarbiyah student movement represented by KAMMI (Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia), Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah (IMM) and Persatuan Mahasiswa Islam Indonesia (PMII). Others join groups that promote transnational Islam such as the Salafi, and caliphate movements represented by Gema Pembebasan.

To shed light on their role and impact, we interviewed several Rohis alumni to understand the methods they use or challenges they face when conducting mentoring programmes. In contrast to dominant narratives that Rohis alumni constitute a monolithic organization, this article argues that they are fragmented. Infighting among Rohis alumni is common, especially when they subscribe to different strains of Islam, which reveals how they shape the religious

narratives that they propagate to students. Their fragmentation makes it harder to describe how they collectively shape students' minds.

## **THE HISTORY OF ROHIS**

Rohis is a student executive body (OSIS) section in Indonesia's private and public schools, and its executives are responsible for organizing religious events for students, including religious learning forums (*majelis taklims*), and Quranic classes. Rohis provides additional lessons to students to complement the limited formal Islamic education they receive in schools; two hours every week. Hence, Rohis' aim is to offer more knowledge of Islam to students in junior and senior high schools. It is also known as a youth association at schools, with their executives being responsible for handling all mosque activities.

Rohis began to appear in junior and senior high schools in Indonesia in the 1980s. In the 1990s, their numbers grew when religious conservatism flourished in the country, and the numbers skyrocketed following the fall of Soeharto's secular regime in 1998.<sup>10</sup> Rohis is present in almost all high schools in Indonesia. If we suppose that the average number of Rohis executives in a school is at least ten students, and since there are 27,930 general and vocational high schools in Indonesia,<sup>11</sup> then there are at least 279,930 Rohis executives throughout the country. The estimated number of students who become members or sympathizers of Rohis is undoubtedly much higher. A study by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2017 found that at least 70 students became members of Rohis in a Muslim-dominated senior high school.<sup>12</sup> It means the number of Rohis members in senior high schools is approximately seven times the number of Rohis executives; hence the estimated number of Rohis members in high schools in Indonesia is at least two million students. (Rohis executives are students who run Rohis activities, while Rohis members here refer to students who are active in, or at least frequently, following Rohis activities).

## **ROHIS ALUMNI AND THE DISSEMINATION OF ISLAM (DAKWAH)**

Various surveys and research indicate that schools' networking with external parties, such as Rohis alumni, contribute to shaping the narratives that Rohis Islam conveys to students at senior high schools in Indonesia.<sup>13</sup> In particular, the Rohis alumni influence the minds of students through intense personal approaches, through *liqo* (mentoring) and the dissemination of reading materials that represent their religious views.

The Rohis alumni are keen to mentor their juniors for various reasons. Some are driven by religious ideals, such as one stated in Hadith Al-Bukhari: "Muslims will be divinely rewarded if they disseminate Islamic faith, albeit only one verse." These alumni also have interest in disseminating the teachings of other organizations where they actively participate, such as extra-campus Muslim student organizations and organizations that promote transnational Islam.

Rohis alumni mentor their juniors in their personal and organizational capacities. In some schools, Rohis alumni join forces to establish a Rohis alumni organization dedicated to serving as mentors to juniors in their school. Examples of Rohis alumni organizations in several cities are the Bontang Rohis alumni forum (East Kalimantan),<sup>14</sup> the Rohis alumni forum throughout Bandung (West Java),<sup>15</sup> and the Jakarta Rohis Alumni Association. This benefits Rohis development since the grouping offers more support and guidance to Rohis executives and members in running Rohis programmes and events than individual Rohis alumni can offer.

School authorities have increasingly been careful in approving certain Rohis alumni to serve as Rohis executives' mentors in their respective schools because religious radicalization remains a hot topic in Indonesia today. Even more worrying, Rohis can be a breeding ground for terrorists. One Rohis executive and Rohis alumni of a state-run senior high school in Klaten, Central Java were arrested and convicted for their role in a terrorism case in 2011, including making homemade bombs.<sup>16</sup> Their group was convicted of carrying out various acts of terror during the Christmas and New Year celebrations.<sup>17</sup> This case should serve as a wake-up call for school authorities to tighten their vetting of Rohis alumni who wish to mentor their juniors.

## STEREOTYPING AGAINST ROHIS ALUMNI AND THEIR ORGANIZATIONS

Rohis alumni, in several studies, have been accused of being the culprits behind the rise of radicalism among Rohis executives and students.<sup>18</sup> Many Rohis alumni have developed *dakwah* models and crafted mentoring activities that follow models developed by radical Muslim groups; this has raised some concern among school staffs and parents of students. This stereotyping has also scared some senior high school students away from joining Rohis in their respective schools. These students (who are not Rohis executives) think that Rohis executives and alumni are close to, and even affiliated to certain Islamic political parties. Hence, the students hesitate to join, let alone be the executives of Rohis.

Not only non-Rohis students, but school and government authorities also harbour suspicions toward Rohis alumni. They question why it is necessary for Rohis alumni, in many cases, to get along intensely with Rohis executives in schools. They also think that Rohis alumni, mostly university students, are not neutral in their *dakwah* motives,<sup>19</sup> and they are often suspicious that the Rohis alumni tend to propagate their religiously radical views to high school students. The school and government authorities argue that to prevent radicalization at schools, Rohis alumni's mentoring activities need to be accompanied by the school's Islamic religious teachers. These authorities contend that the move is necessary because, in many cases, mentoring activities have been conducted without the schools' permission. Rohis alumni are aware of these suspicions, and the Rohis alumni who serve as informants in this research state that the suspicion is baseless, arguing that they had already rejected any affiliation with political parties or radical Muslim groups.<sup>20</sup>

## CONTESTATION OF ISLAMIC VIEWS

There is a dominant perception that Rohis alumni and their organizations are monolithic and disseminate conservative and even radical views. The truth is that Rohis alumni and organizations are fragmented. Rohis alumni usually come from varied activist backgrounds<sup>21</sup> such as HMI, Salafi, KAMMI, PMII, Muhammadiyah, Maiyah<sup>22</sup> and *dakwah* activities in campus mosques. When they get together to establish a Rohis alumni organization dedicated to mentoring juniors at their former school, they tend to face internal infighting within the organization. For example, Fachri Aidulsyah has shown in his journal article that a Rohis alumni organization operating in Kerjo Senior High School in Karanganyar regency, Central Java province, consists of members with diverse religious orientations. Their members subscribe to different strains of Islam, ranging from moderation (Nadhlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah) to the more conservative forms of Islam such as those promoted by KAMMI [PKS], Salafi and even Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) that campaigns for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. This diverse membership can also be found in a public school (SMAN 3 Boyolali) in Boyolali regency, Central Java province. The Rohis alumni organization that operates in this school consist of people whose religion orientations are affiliated with KAMMI [PKS] and Muhammadiyah.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, in many cases, no group or individual with a definite religious background is able to dominate discussions in Rohis alumni organizations, for instance, on the design of the organization's work programmes that can shape religious narratives for students. Differences in theological views and cultural practices affect their internal negotiations in, among others, mentoring curriculum, methods, and recommendations on which Muslim organizations Rohis and schools can collaborate with when organizing events. Each Rohis alumni has its own definite agenda.

One of the authors of this article found in her fieldwork that, in some senior schools in Yogyakarta province, this competition often becomes a source of conflict. For example, Rohis alumni who identify themselves as Salafists tend to be suspicious about Tarbiyah activists for covertly attempting to persuade their juniors to join the Tarbiyah movement.<sup>24</sup> Personal interviews with Rohis alumni at three senior high schools in Yogyakarta reveal that they disagree with the mentoring programmes proposed by their colleagues in the alumni organization, saying that the programme looks like a *liqo* programme (cell system) formulated and implemented by proponents of the Tarbiyah movement following the footsteps of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.<sup>25</sup> On another occasion, a Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) Rohis alumni invited juniors to study with NU religious figures about their religious views, and be exposed to NU cultural practices such as visiting graves, and asking the deceased to be an interlocutor to get blessings from Allah.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the specific religious view of an Rohis alumni organization can influence decisions on the mentoring curriculum and on which clerics are to be invited to conduct Islamic studies in schools run by the alumni. For example, a Salafist Rohis alumnus would develop a mentoring curriculum according to his view,<sup>27</sup> while Rohis alumni who are HMI and Muhammadiyah would be reluctant to invite an *Ustadz* (cleric) from NU.<sup>28</sup>

This proves that Rohis alumni organizations, while useful in pooling resources and strength, usually consist of Rohis alumni members with different Islamic ideological ideas. The resulting contestations then affect the formulation and the implementation of Rohis alumni programmes in a particular school. For example, Rohis alumni often engage in disputes on which mentoring method to implement. This contrasts with the popular belief that Rohis alumni and their organizations are monolithic in their religious orientations and espouse dominant religious narratives. These contestations temper the domination of certain strains of Islam affecting school students' minds.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Supriyanto et al. 2017. Peran Organisasi Kerohanian Islam (Rohis) Dalam Membentuk Perilaku Keagamaan Siswa Di Sekolah Menengah Atas. *Jurnal Sosio Akademika* Vol. 10/No. 01/November. See also: Wibowo, A. M. (2015). Peran Rohis dalam Pembentukan Sikap Keagamaan Peserta Didik (Studi atas Peran Kerohanian Islam Nurul Ilmi SMAN 3 Pekalongan) dalam Taruna (ed.). Peran Rohis di Sekolah dan Pelaksanaan Kurikulum 2013 di Madrasah. *Prosiding Bidang Pendidikan Agama dan Keagamaan, Kemenag*. And see: Astuti, R. (2010). Peran Organisasi Kerohanian Islam (Rohis) dalam Membentuk perilaku Keagamaan Siswa di SMA Negeri 1 Godean Sleman Yogyakarta. Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta.

<sup>2</sup> Kailani, N. (2011). Kepanikan Moral dan Dakwah Islam Populer (Membaca Fenomena 'Rohis' di Indonesia). *Analisis: Jurnal Studi Keislaman*, 11(1), 1-16.

<sup>3</sup> According to Husein (2004:29), Exclusivist Muslims are the Muslim groups with four characteristics: the literal approach to understanding the foundation texts of Islam, The Quran, and The Sunna; they are past-oriented; believe that Islam is the only way to salvation; and refuse the separation between Islam and state (Islam *din wa dawla*). They believe in a conspiracy between the Indonesian government and the Christian group that treats Islam with disrespect. See: Husein, F. (2004). Muslim-Christian relations in the New Order Indonesia: the exclusivist and inclusivist Muslims' perspectives. PT Mizan Publika.

<sup>4</sup> CRCS (2008). Laporan Tahunan Kehidupan Beragama di Indonesia. Yogyakarta: CRCS UGM. p. 27. Also see: Rosidin, D. N. (2013). Muslim fundamentalism in educational institutions. A case study of Rohani Islam in high schools in Cirebon. In *Islam in Indonesia* (pp. 215-226). Amsterdam University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Muslim, A. A. (2018). Menjaga benteng kebinekaan di sekolah: studi kebijakan OSIS di Kota Padang, Kab. Cirebon, Kab. Sukabumi, Kota Surakarta, Kota Denpasar, dan Kota Tomohon. Maarif Institute for Culture and Humanity. And Laporan Hasil Penelitian Evaluasi Buku Bacaan Rohis SMA di Jateng dan DIY, Kemenag, 2017. Also see Farha, Ciciek. 2008. Laporan Penelitian Kaum Muda dan Regenerasi Gerakan Fundamentalisme di Indonesia: Studi tentang Unit Kerohanian Islam di SMU Negeri. Penelitian tidak diterbitkan. Jakarta: Rahima Institute.

<sup>6</sup> Huda, M. N. (2017). Intoleransi kaum muda di tengah kebangkitan kelas menengah Muslim di perkotaan. Jakarta: Wahid Foundation & Australia Indonesia Partnership for Justice, p. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> Yusuf, M., Tahun, M., & Asyhari, B (2015) The Politics Of Religious Education, The 2013 Curriculum, and The Public Space Of The School. CRCS, UGM. P. 63.

<sup>8</sup> Laporan Hasil Penelitian Evaluasi Buku Bacaan Rohis SMA di Jateng dan DIY, Kemenag, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Aidulsyah, F. (2016). Berebut Ruang Publik Sekolah Pasca Orde Baru: Studi Kasus Pertarungan Politik Ideologi di Kerohanian Islam (ROHIS). *Jurnal Studi Pemuda*, 5(1), 370-385.

<sup>10</sup> Laporan Hasil Penelitian Evaluasi Buku Bacaan Rohis SMA di Jateng dan DIY, Kemenag, 2017. Also see Rosidin, D. N. (2013). Muslim fundamentalism in educational institutions. A case study of Rohani Islam in high schools in Cirebon. In *Islam in Indonesia*, p. 2016

<sup>11</sup> Indonesian Central Statistics Agency, 2021: p. 175-178

<sup>12</sup> See Laporan Hasil Penelitian Evaluasi Buku Bacaan Rohis SMA di Jateng dan DIY, Kemenag, 2017, p. 19-32.

<sup>13</sup> Thohiri, M. K. (2019, November). Radikalisme Islam dan Moderatisme Islam di Sekolah Menengah (Kontestasi Ideologi, Aktor dan Jejaring Sosial). In *Proceedings of Annual Conference for Muslim Scholars* (Vol. 3, No. 1,

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<sup>14</sup> More information Bontang Post, "Forum Alumni Rohis Bontang Terbentuk Jadikan Wadah Pembinaan Berkarakter", <https://bontangpost.id/forum-alumni-rohis-bontang-terbentuk-jadikan-wadah-pembinaan-berkarakter-islami/>, 9 May 2017.

<sup>15</sup> See Detik News, "Alumni Rohis Kota Bandung Demo Pemberitaan Soal Teroris", <https://news.detik.com/berita-jawa-barat/d-2025462/alumni-rohis-kota-bandung-demo-pemberitaan-soal-teroris>, 19 September 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Hayadin, H. (2016). Tragedi Kecelakaan ROHIS Keterlibatan Alumni ROHIS SMKN Anggrek pada Aksi Radikalisme. *Al-Qalam*, 19(2), 231-240. See: Liputan6. "Remaja yang Diduga Teroris Ternyata Pelajar", <https://www.liputan6.com>, 27 January 2011, <https://www.liputan6.com/news/read/317754/remaja-yang-diduga-teroris-ternyata-pelajar>.

<sup>17</sup> See: Riky Ferdianto. "Dalang Teroris Klaten Divonis Enam Tahun Penjara", <https://nasional.tempo.co/>, 8 December 2011, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/370648/dalang-teroris-klaten-divonis-enam-tahun-penjara>.

<sup>18</sup> Arrobi, M. Z. (2020). Islamisme ala Kaum Muda Kampus: Dinamika Aktivisme Mahasiswa Islam di Universitas Gadjah Mada dan Universitas Indonesia di Era Pasca Soeharto. UGM Press. Also see: Thohiri, M. K. (2019, November). Radikalisme Islam dan Moderatisme Islam di Sekolah Menengah (Kontestasi Ideologi, Aktor dan Jejaring Sosial). In *Proceedings of Annual Conference for Muslim Scholars* (Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 598-607). See: Aidulsyah, F. (2016). Berebut Ruang Publik Sekolah Pasca Orde Baru: Studi Kasus Pertarungan Politik Ideologi di Kerohanian Islam (ROHIS). *Jurnal Studi Pemuda*, 5(1), 370-385. And see: Salim, H., Kailani, N., & Azekiyah, N. (2011). *Politik Ruang Publik Sekolah: Negosiasi dan Kontestasi di SMUN Yogyakarta*. Yogyakarta: Monograf CRCS UGM.

<sup>19</sup> In-person interview with officials from the local education office and the regional Ministry of Religious Affairs, AT, RD, AR, and BK in Yogyakarta, June-August 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Interviews with AG and FR through focus group discussions held in Yogyakarta, February 2021.

<sup>21</sup> In-person interview with nine Rohis alumni in Yogyakarta during December 2020-July 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Maiyah is a follower of Emha Ainun Najib, a Muslim intellectual who follows Sufism.

<sup>23</sup> Aidulsyah, F. (2016). Berebut Ruang Publik Sekolah Pasca Orde Baru: Studi Kasus Pertarungan Politik Ideologi di Kerohanian Islam (ROHIS). *Jurnal Studi Pemuda*, 5(1), 376-378.

<sup>24</sup> In-person interview with IN, Rohis alumni, July 2021.

<sup>25</sup> In-person interview with AG (December 2020) and FR (February 2021), Rohis alumni, and members of the Rohis alumni organization.

<sup>26</sup> In-person interview with AG (December 2020) and FR (February 2021), Rohis alumni, and members of the Rohis alumni organization.

<sup>27</sup> In-person interview with IN, Rohis alumni, July 2021.

<sup>28</sup> In-person interview with RW, the Rohis alumni, July 2021. Also, in person interview with DY, April 2021, a teacher in a public high school of Yogyakarta.



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