

# PERSPECTIVE

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## From Liberalism to Sufism: Ulil Abshar Abdalla Gains Renewed Relevance Online Through *Ngaji Ihya*

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*Twitter Page of Ulil Abshar Abdalla at <https://twitter.com/ulil>.*

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- Ulil Abshar Abdalla, founder of the Islamic Liberal Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal or JIL), is a highly controversial Islamic scholar and activist in Indonesia. His publications and activism have constantly challenged and angered the orthodox Islamic ulama (religious elites). His liberal viewpoints, notably his support for religious minorities in Indonesia often triggered criticisms from the conservatives.
- However, since 2016, Ulil has undertaken efforts to change his controversial image on social media. Mainly through his Facebook page known as *Ngaji Ihya* (NI), the Islamic scholar has been teaching *Ihya Ulumuddin* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), a well-known classical text on Muslim spirituality and Sufism written by scholar Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad al Ghazali ath-Thusi asy-Syafi'i (also known as Muhammad Al-Gazhali), to his online followers.
- As a result of Ulil's preaching activities and growing influence on Facebook, he has become acceptable within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) circles for spreading mainstream Islamic knowledge. For this reason, Ulil is widely believed to be a "repentant" Muslim—one who has denounced liberal Islam and embraced traditionalism instead.
- In view of *Ngaji Ihya's* (NI) growing popularity, mainstream Muslim organizations such as NU maintain that the Ulil Abshar can play a crucial role in challenging puritan and conservative Salafi orientations which have recently infiltrated the digital sphere in Indonesia.
- However, this article seeks to demonstrate that Ulil has not been distancing himself from liberal Islam. In fact, his recent shift in religious orientation is merely part of a spiritual transformation. Furthermore, this article examines the role of Ulil's wife, Ienas Tsoraya, in popularising *Ngaji Ihya*. Unbeknownst to many, she has been instrumental in reaching out to the platform's female audience and raising its followership.

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, following the outbreak of COVID-19 in Indonesia, thousands of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) *kyais* (religious teachers) began to migrate their religious classes (*ngaji*) to the digital sphere. This move was considered necessary for preserving NU's outreach and presence following the introduction of COVID-19 preventive measures limiting all forms of mass religious gatherings, such as face-to-face interactions in mosques and Islamic boarding schools. However, NU was not the first to shift its religious classes online. Even before the pandemic, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, the so-called "liberal" kyai, had been utilising social media to reach out to his followers; in 2016, he pioneered a religious class called *Ngaji Ihya* on Facebook. Remarkably, unlike most online religious classes which are well patronized only during the month of Ramadhan, Ulil's *Ngaji Ihya*'s following has remained consistent even beyond the fasting month.

The teaching material used by Ulil during his religious classes is key in explaining *Ngaji Ihya*'s growing popularity within Indonesian society. While one would have expected Ulil, a liberal Islamic scholar, to refer to progressive books in his lectures, he chooses instead to teach *Ihya Ulumuddin*, a classical text associated with Sufism authored by Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad al Ghazali ath-Thusi asy-Syafi'i (also known as Imam Al-Gazhali, b.1058-b.1111). Such a move has surprised many within the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) community as they believe that only a senior ulama with the appropriate credentials, skills and morality is qualified to teach this text. Significantly, due to Ulil's selection of *Ihya Ulumuddin*, many Indonesians are beginning to suspect that he is abandoning liberal Islam and is embracing doctrines similar to the ones held by NU.

This article examines how Ulil Abshar, a controversial preacher associated with the Islamic Liberal Network (Jaringan Islam Liberal or JIL), has become socially accepted among traditionalist NU members and the Indonesian public. JIL is a critical movement against orthodox and conservative Islam, yet Ulil's choice to teach *Ihya Ulumuddin* in his religious classes, has largely pacified NU's attitudes toward him. Additionally, given Ulil's popularity on social media, NU has sought to leverage Ulil's potential in reaching out to urban Muslims, who are becoming increasingly conservative due to rising Salafi online influence. This article also examines the popularity of Ulil's *Ngaji Ihya* classes among women in Indonesia. Notably, what is often missed out when one analyses Ulil's apparent reinvention of himself is the sizable proportion of women in his online classes; they make up a huge percentage of his followership. Ulil's wife, Ienas Tsoraya, plays a crucial role in popularising *Ngaji Ihya* among women. Lastly, this article assesses how Ulil's *Ngaji Ihya* challenges criticisms levelled against him that NU's or traditional Islam's representation on digital platforms pales in comparison with the Salafis.<sup>1</sup>

## ULIL ABSHAR AND LIBERAL ISLAM

Since the establishment of the Islamic Liberal Network (JIL), founding member Ulil Abshar has been frequently denounced as a “liberal” by his orthodox opponents, including members of NU. Through the activities of JIL, Ulil proposes a contextual and critical interpretation of Islamic texts (ie. the Quran, Hadith, and legal canons), and emphasises rational thinking. On 18 November 2002, Ulil published a controversial article titled, *Menyegarkan Kembali Pemikiran Islam* (Refreshing how we think about Islamic tradition). This criticizes the textualist orientation of Islam which interprets religion in a rigid and closed manner without consideration for the Islamic principles of universal justice, tolerance, and respect for local cultural context.<sup>2</sup> Conservative Islamic groups were angered by this article, and on 20 December 2002, an Islamist non-governmental organisation (NGO) known as the Forum Ulama Umat Islam Indonesia/Indonesian Forum for Religious Leader and Islamic Society (FUII), issued a statement legitimising the killing of Ulil.<sup>3</sup> On top of this, Ulil also received death threats in the form of unsolicited packages containing explosives.<sup>4</sup>

Two decades later, Ulil seems to have moved on from his controversial past, and his *Ngaji Ihya* sessions on Facebook demonstrate a significant shift in terms of his religious orientation. Through his live Facebook sessions, it is evident that Ulil is no longer the firebrand and critical Islamic thinker that he was in the early 2000s, prompting questions as to whether he has abandoned his liberal viewpoints. In addition, many Indonesian Muslims are questioning the motivations behind Ulil’s sudden change of *dakwah* strategy and his selection of Al-Ghazali’s *Ihya Ulummudin* as the central text for his online classes. It is known that the classical text centres more on Sufism than liberal Islam and that it is a text that the orthodox scholar associates with. Interestingly, the incorporation of *Ihya Ulummudin* in his *Ngaji Ihya* sessions (whether intentionally or otherwise) has made him acceptable to mainstream NU members.

However, Ulil has explained that his religious transformation is simply a result of nostalgia aroused during the days he was stuck in traffic congestions from his house to his office. Ulil recalls that he started reminiscing over what he studied as a former *santri* in the *pesantrens* in order to fill up his spiritual emptiness during those moments. It was these moments that catalysed a change in his religious orientation.

## ULIL’S CRITICAL ROOTS

Ulil established his critical thinking skills and knowledge while studying in Madrasah Mathali’ul Falah, Kajen, Pati, Central Java. In the 1980s, the school was run by KH M. Ahmad Sahal Mahfudz, a former supreme leader (Rais Am) of Nahdatul Ulama (1999-2010). At the same time, Sahal was also a progressive Islamic thinker who contended that Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) must be practiced in tandem with Muslims’ everyday life. By proposing the *fiqh* social (social jurisprudence), he combined past traditions with material references from current Islamic jurists to solve problems presently faced by the Muslim community. This

method of thinking has forced many NU leaders in the *pesantren* to reinterpret their tradition in accordance with existing conditions.<sup>5</sup>

As a young and passionate reader, Ulil also exposed himself to ideas from Indonesian intellectual authors such as Abdurrahman Wahid, Goenawan Muhammad, Dawam Rahardjo, Ignas Kleden, and Nurcholish Majid. However, his critical views came at a cost—he was marginalised while studying at LIPIA (Islamic and Arabic College) in 1993. While LIPIA adopted ideas from prominent Islamist thinkers such as Sayyid Qutb and Abu A'la Al-Maududi,<sup>6</sup> Ulil went to the other end of the spectrum by joining JIL. Due to his connection with JIL, Ulil was further disassociated by his peers from other Islamic organizations, within the *pesantren* circles and NU networks.

Studying in the United States for a Master's degree in Comparative Religion at Boston University (2007) also enriched his classical Islamic knowledge. His interest grew in Fahkrhuddin Al-Razi's thought, one of the famous thirteenth century Persian Islamic interpreters/thinkers of the *Asy'ariyah* theological tradition. Even though it was not a mandatory subject, he enjoyed attending and reading the thinker's writings; specifically, to understand Al-Razi's synthesising of diverse materials from the Greek philosophy and the rationalist Mu'tazilah sect. For Ulil, Al-Razi's knowledge and his method could be adapted to the modern Muslim context. Studying classical Islamic thinkers then became Ulil's Ph.D. topic.<sup>7</sup>

This intellectual engagement encouraged him to write his Ph.D.,<sup>8</sup> although for reasons still unknown, he did not complete it. In 2010, he offered himself to be the Chairman of NU during a conference (Muktamar) in Makassar, Central Sulawesi, but failed to get that position.<sup>9</sup> After failing to be part of NU's elite circle, he continued to find other political opportunities and eventually joined the *Demokrat* party (2010-2015). Sadly, this political journey was short-lived.

Amidst these back-to-back challenges, *Ngaji Ihya* offered another step of his intellectual discovery that rooted him in the Islamic tradition as a *santri*. Well-known to many Indonesian Muslims, Al-Ghazali's classical Islamic books are mandatory in most *pesantren* affiliated with the NU tradition.<sup>10</sup>

## CONFLUENCE OF NU'S AND ULIL'S INTERESTS THROUGH *NGAJI IHYA*

NU's growing acceptance of Ulil today is partly due to its attempts to reach out to the young, social media-savvy Muslims in Indonesia.<sup>11</sup> There is a confluence of interests between Ulil and the more progressive segments in NU. By and large, the online Islamic space in Indonesia today is currently witnessing a rise in conservatism. Salafi-oriented preachers, among others, present themselves as the face of pure Islam, and target those living in the urban areas.<sup>12</sup> Their presence is now crowding out established Islamic organisations such as Muhammadiyah and NU.<sup>13</sup> Before this development, Indonesian Muslims were known for their moderate attitudes,

particularly their ability to balance local traditions with religious norms and to co-exist with other religions. They earned the name, “smiling face of Islam” for having lived peacefully with other ethnic and cultural groups, and celebrated diversity and plurality. Undoubtedly, many factors have contributed to rising intolerance in Indonesia, but the rise of the Salafi movement in digital space is arguably the most significant cause.<sup>14</sup> It is also inaccurate to simply blame Saudi Arabia or the Gulf states for the growth of the puritan ideology in Indonesia, since in the digital world, Salafism also spread out from Indonesia and the Southeast Asian region.

The idea to study and teach *Ihya Ulumuddin* came from Ulil himself. In 2016, he made this suggestion to revive his life as a *santri* while fasting during the month of Ramadhan. He shared that he had sought his wife, Ienas Tsuroya’s views on teaching *Ihya Ulumuddin*. The original plan was to simply read the classical text for self-study purposes but Ienas contended that studying it that way would be monotonous. Instead, she proposed making the learning journey accessible to more people, through live streaming on social media. As the couple was not technologically savvy at that time, they ended up recording their live streaming sessions via Ulil’s Facebook account regularly. His critics were quick to pounce on Ulil’s new move. Those who were clearly displeased with Ulil’s affiliation with JIL suggested that he had disassociated himself from his liberal ideology,<sup>15</sup> most notably through his decision to read *Ihya Ulumuddin*.

To provide some context, *Ihya Ulumuddin* mainly touches on spirituality and Sufism. In the *pesantrons*, this text is taught by senior *kyais*. Not everyone is qualified to teach the text; the person must have long teaching experience, be pious, and hold moral standing in the community. He must also be respected by the students, and be a person with humility. When Ulil decided to teach the text, netizens were quick to sensationalise his “repentance” from being a liberal (associated with Western thinking) to being a Sufi. Many also observed Ulil’s more mellowed way of speaking, which was very unlike his rhetorical and provocative nature of the past.

However, Ulil disagrees that teaching *Ihya Ulumuddin* is a sign of him distancing himself from his liberal-thinking past. For him, repentance means a sense of guilt for committing sins or crimes such as theft and corruption.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, a repentant Muslim must not only regret but struggle to correct past mistakes by changing their present attitude. By contrast, Ulil argues that his new teaching style is a step towards strengthening his acquisition of knowledge, and towards admitting that in Islamic jurisprudence, perspectives do evolve from time to time and with change of place. He confesses that he is taking a leaf from classical and modern Islamic ulama who experienced this form of scholarly evolution. Ulil names Abu Al-Hasan Al-Asyari (well-known as Imam Asy’ari, b.873-d.936) as an example. Imam Al-Asyari once followed the Mu’tazilah school of thought, which emphasises rational thinking, but changed his mind in order to follow the Sunni school of jurisprudence, which balances uncritical acceptance of ideas of savants of the past and rationalism.<sup>17</sup> Fast-forward to the twentieth century, the same can be said about a religious scholar in Indonesia. Harun Nasution (b.1919-d.1998) studied the Mu’tazila school during his early years as an Islamic intellectual. His university students were familiar with Harun’s Mu’tazilah-based works but nevertheless, towards the end of his academic career, he primarily focused on Sufism.

Ulil acknowledges that this new online journey requires him to alter his presentation style in order to engage a wider audience. He no longer sees value in public confrontation, and admits that in the 2000s, his views on Islamic renewal could be misconstrued as arrogant and provocative, which aided conservative Islamic groups such as FPI (Islamic Front Defender), HTI (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia), and MMI (Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia) in gaining followership. He confesses that he was once filled with youthful enthusiasm, but is now grown older, more humbled and matured.<sup>18</sup>

## ULIL'S DIGITAL QUEST AND THE FEMALE AUDIENCE

*Ngaji Ihya* has now been running for six years, since 2016, and has established a stable 300 viewers who tune in to its live sessions, while its Facebook recordings often reach out to more than 7000 viewers. Compared to the Salafi-based channels, the numbers are indubitably small. Nevertheless, if measured by NU standards, *Ngaji Ihya* is an original effort that other Indonesian Islamic thinkers are copying. On the one hand, it has created a new platform for traditional learning, one that applies digital methods, and Ulil can be seen as a pioneer in this regard. While the class centres on text (*kitab*), and in essence follows the NU tradition, it does not strictly follow the *pesantren* structure that emphasises the relationship between the *kyai* and the *santri*. On the other hand, Facebook has played a crucial role in reinventing Ulil's image. Significantly, migrating to a digital platform has opened doors for a bigger audience to scrutinise Ulil's thinking, and he has taken this opportunity to tone down the way he expresses his ideas. The digital platform has bridged the differences which he once had to his traditionalist counterparts in NU.

Whether intentional or not, his wife, Ienas Tsoraya also plays a significant role in Ulil's growing acceptance in mainstream Indonesian Islam. Ienas mainly manages Ulil's live streaming and recording through his Facebook account, identifying herself as *Mba Admin* (assistance staff) instead of calling herself *Nyai* (associated with someone who is a Kyai's wife, and who holds the second authority in a *pesantren*). Ienas also comes from a family lineage of scholars. She is the daughter of Musthofa Bisri, a man who has strengthened NU's credibility for years. In *Ngaji Ihya*, both Ulil and Ienas have made the difficult text easy to comprehend and learn.

Ienas's presence as "*mbak admin*" (lady administrator) is key to *Ngaji Ihya's* success. Interestingly, other liberal Muslim intellectuals who desire an online presence have their wives' backing them too. To illustrate, Titik Razak assisted Abdul Moqsith Ghazali's *Kitab Kuning classes*, and Maria Fauzi handled Munir Ikhwan's. The wives facilitate social interaction between the male religious preachers and female audiences.<sup>19</sup>

This *mbak admin* phenomenon has reshaped the image of Muslim women in traditionalist circles, where they were once perceived as old-fashioned and backward. Furthermore, their presence in these online projects presents their equal standing with their husbands, and this husband-and-wife collaboration is what the Salafi rival does not have. Feedback from female participations shared that *mbak admin's* role was what attracted them to attend *Ngaji Ihya*.<sup>20</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Ulil's and his wife's online initiative has unintentionally contributed to Ulil's overall improved image. *Ngaji Ihya* has become a medium for clarifying (*tabbayun*) Ulil's present and past viewpoints including those articulated when he was active in JIL. So popular is *Ngaji Ihya* that it is now extended to a hybrid (both online and offline) format called *Kopi Darat*. During the question-and-answer session that follows Ulil's sermons, the audience will often ask why the couple started *Ngaji Ihya*, given that it contradicts JIL's ideology. Ienas plays a key role in this clarification exercise by handling and responding to the audience's comments on Ulil's Facebook account and private messages.

In addition, *Ngaji Ihya* strengthens Ulil's traditionalist credentials by reminding the audience of his *santri* roots. He demonstrates his strong bonds with the NU tradition by underscoring the significance of the ties between *pesantren*, *kyai* and the classical *ngaji* method.<sup>21</sup> The programme's followers are also able to reconnect to the *santri* world that emphasises the centrality of texts (as opposed to rationalism).<sup>22</sup> In addition, many sought to obtain blessing (*berkah*) from the spiritual master through this activity.<sup>23</sup> The power of the online platform is that it can connect groups from different Indonesian provinces.<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, *Ngaji Ihya* attracted not only Indonesian Muslims but non-Muslims as well. Muslim *Ngaji Ihya* followers are highly impressed by Ulil's ability to blend progressive ideas and Islamic tradition. Non-Muslims, on the other hand, are attracted to his classes for giving them the opportunity to learn how *santris* read classic Islamic books. Ulil's appreciation of diversity, tolerance and pluralism also play an important role in attracting non-Muslims to his sessions. Through *Ngaji Ihya*, both these communities would like to be recognized as *santri* under the *pesantren* virtually led by both Ulil and Ienas. Previously, *santris* only refer to Muslims studying through the *pesantren* system. Through *Ngaji Ihya*, Ulil's students also include non-Muslims. Given the growing popularity of *Ngaji Ihya*, it could revolutionise *kyai-santri* relations in Indonesia in the near future.<sup>25</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10 (5/2020): 1–24; Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Pluralism, Liberalism, and Islamism: Religious Outlook of Muhammadiyah," *Studia Islamika* (1/2018): 433–470; Alexander R. Arifianto, "Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post- Reformasi Indonesia," *TRaNS: Trans -Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 1 (5/ 2020): 37–50; Jeremy Menchik, "Moderate Muslims and Democratic Breakdown in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 43 (7/2019): 415–433.

<sup>2</sup> Ulil Abshar Abdallah, "Menyegarkan Kembali Pemahaman Islam", *Kompas*, 18 November 2002.

<sup>3</sup> "Fatwa Mati Ulil Termasuk Ancaman Pembunuhan", *Tempo.co*, 7 December 2003.

<https://nasional.tempo.co/read/35921/fatwa-mati-ulil-termasuk-ancaman-pembunuhan> (accessed 7 September 2021).

- <sup>4</sup> “Ulil Abshar Dikirim Paket Bom Lewat KBR68H”, *detik.com*, 15 March 2011. <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-1592163/ulil-abshar-dikirim-paket-bom-lewat-kbr-68-h> (accessed 7 September 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> Some of his works in Bahasa Indonesia include *Nuansa Fiqih Sosial* (Yogyakarta: LKIS, 1994); *Pesantren Mencari Makna* (Jakarta: Pustaka Ciganjur, 1999), *Wajah Baru Fiqh Pesantren* (Jakarta: Citra Pustaka, 2004), dan *Dialog dengan KH MA Sahal Mahfudh: Telaah Fikih Sosial* (Semarang: Yayasan Karyawan Suara Merdeka, 1997)
- <sup>6</sup> Ahmad Suaedy, “Menuju Al-Ghazali Komprehensif Bersama Ulil Abshar Abdalla: Part1”, *Jelajah Pustaka*, 6 April 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvN4xOgybsE&t=1148s> (accessed 8 September 2021).
- <sup>7</sup> “Wawancara Ulil Abshar Abdallah: Kenapa Harus Jauh-jauh Belajar Islam di Amerika Serikat”, *Hauzah.wordpress.com*, 17 September 2007. <https://hauzah.wordpress.com/2007/09/17/wawancara-ulil-abshar-abdalla-%E2%80%9C%E2%80%A6kenapa-harus-jauh-jauh-belajar-islam-di-amerika-serikat-as%E2%80%A6%E2%80%9D/> (accessed 8 August 2022)
- <sup>8</sup> “Ulil Abshar Abdallah: Pengawasan Ceramah Perlu”, *Tempo.co*, 31 August 2009. <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/195255/ulil-abshar-abdalla-pengawasan-ceramah-perlu/full&view=ok> (accessed 8 September 2021).
- <sup>9</sup> Amin Mudzakkir, “Mengaji Al-Ghazali atau Refleksi Ulil Abshar Abdalla Sendiri?”, *Alif.id*, 2 June 2020. <https://alif.id/read/amin-mudzakkir/mengaji-al-ghazali-atau-refleksi-ulil-abshar-abdalla-sendiri-b229947p/> (accessed 8 September 2021).
- <sup>10</sup> “Ulil Abshar Abdalla: Sang Pendekar live Streaming Ngaji Ihya”, *mojok.co*, 14 May 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhIz7C71ioQ> (accessed 8 September 2021).
- <sup>11</sup> In response to this growing Salafi encroachment in digital space, NU, being the largest Muslim organisation in the country, introduced NUTIZEN (a catchy term for netizens). It is an NU-run mobile application downloadable via Playstore, created by Savic Ali, the Director of NU Online (launched on 4 February 2016). The app seeks to bring *ngaji* or traditional learning circles into digital space. In 2016, Savic estimated that there were around the 20 kyai (Islamic clerics) organising online classes through *Ngaji* Online. By 2017, the number had increased five times with 100 live streaming sessions.<sup>11</sup> Ulil was one of the earliest to utilise social media platforms for his classes, though he was not really considered part of NU circles, despite his *pesantren* and traditionalist training. His recent popularity did not escape NU’s attention.
- <sup>12</sup> Chris Chaplin, “Salafism and the State: Islamic Activism and National Identity in Contemporary Indonesia” (Copenhagen: Nias Press).
- <sup>13</sup> Wahyudi Akmaliah, “The Demise of Moderate Islam: The Demise of Moderate Islam: new media, contestation, and reclaiming religious authorities”, *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies*, 10 (1/2020), pp.1-24.
- <sup>14</sup> Birgit Bräuchler, “Islamic Radicalism Online: The Moluccan Mission of the Laskar Jihad in Cyberspace”, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 15(3/2004): 267–85; Noorhaidi Hasan, “New Media, Post Islamist Piety, and Cyber Islam: Islamic Knowledge Production in Indonesian Muslim Society” in Nabil Chan-Kuan Lin (ed), *Commerce, Knowledge, and Faith: Islamisation of Modern Indonesian and Han-Speaking Muslim Ummahs* (Tainan: Center for Multicultural Studies. College of Liberal Arts, National Cheng Kung University; Muhammad Asep Iqbal, “Internet, Identity, and Islamic Movements: The Case of Salafism in Indonesia” *Islamika Indonesiana* (2014/1): 81–105; Muhammad Asep Iqbal, “Cyber-Activism and the Islamic Salafi Movement in Indonesia”, Murdoch University, Australia; Merlyna Lim, “Islamic Radicalism and Anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet”, (Washington: East-West Center Washington, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Bonardo Maulana Wahono, “Ulil Abshar Abdallah dan Berkah Pendidikan Pesantren”, *lokadata.id*, 25 April 2019. <https://lokadata.id/artikel/ulil-abshar-abdalla-dan-berkah-pendidikan-pesantren> (accessed 8 September 2021).

<sup>16</sup> Ulil Abshar Abdalla, “Tentang Salah Kaprah Penggunaan Istilah Taubat”, *facebook.com*, 10 February 2018. [https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story\\_fbid=10160112202475533&id=762930532&\\_rdr](https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10160112202475533&id=762930532&_rdr) (accessed 8 September 2021)

<sup>17</sup> The ulama in Imam Asy’ari’s circle stated that this shift of orientation did not constitute repentance but transformation.

<sup>18</sup> Amin Mudzakkir, the senior researcher at BRIN (National Research and Innovation Agency) and one of the leading Islamic intellectuals in the NU tradition, explains how Ulil’s educational and spiritual journey strengthened his choice of Al-Ghazali’s work when he decided to teach on digital platforms. For Mudzakkir, *Ngaji Ihya*, is Ulil’s self-mirroring. Ulil experienced the dynamic intellectual and activism journey just like Al-Ghazali, who experienced knowledge transformation from rationalist Islam to Sufism. Historically, Al-Ghazali was made to choose between working with the rulers of Abassite caliphs—as the state’s advisor—or to leave this role to become an independent Islamic scholar disassociating himself from the material world and from power, to move towards spirituality. Ulil’s comparison with Al-Ghazali was that during his intellectual formative years, he invested his time to becoming a professional. Amin Mudzakkir, “Mengaji Al-Ghazali atau Refleksi Ulil Abshar Abdalla Sendiri?”, *Alif.id*, 2 June 2020. <https://alif.id/read/amin-mudzakkir/mengaji-al-ghazali-atau-refleksi-ulil-abshar-abdalla-sendiri-b229947p/> (accessed 8 September 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Amin Mudzakkir, “Apa Arti Mbak Admin Dibalik Pengajian Online?”, *Alif.co*, 28 April 2020, <https://alif.id/read/amin-mudzakkir/apa-arti-mbak-admin-di-balik-pengajian-online-b228435p/> (accessed 10 August 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Amin Mudzakkir, “Apa Arti Mbak Admin Dibalik Pengajian Online?”, *Alif.co*, 28 April 2020, <https://alif.id/read/amin-mudzakkir/apa-arti-mbak-admin-di-balik-pengajian-online-b228435p/> (accessed 10 August 2022).

<sup>21</sup> Feedback from the programme’s participants prove this point. For a former santri Imam Malik, *Ngaji Ihya* complements his professional entrepreneur career and helps him make difficult decisions, including whether to continue being in business or to pursue a PhD. Imam Malik, “Ngaji Ihya dan Peta Jalan Setelah 40 Tahun”, *Facebook.com*, 29 May 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/imam.malik.mm/posts/10156985625830059> (accessed on 10 September 2021)

<sup>22</sup> Evi Ghozaly, “Mengaji Ihya Ulumuddin Pada Gus Ulil Itu Seperti Candu”, *Kompasiana.com*, 7 June 2020. <https://www.kompasiana.com/evighozaly/5edcf152097f3616e86ce4e2/mengaji-ihya-ulumiddin-pada-gus-ulil-itu-seperti-candu> (accessed on 10 September 2021); Nadia Safira Cahyani, “Respon Ngaji Ihya”, *facebook.com*, 23 May 2020.

<https://www.facebook.com/nadia.s.cahyani/posts/4345477732132910> (accessed on 10 September 2021). Uswah, “Gus Ulil Sang Vioner Pesantren”, *Neswa.id*, 20 June 2020. <https://neswa.id/artikel/gus-ulil-sang-pionir-pesantren-virtual/> (accessed on 10 September 2021).

<sup>23</sup> Andre Moller, “Respon Ngaji Ihya” *facebook.com*, 29 May 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/andremoller/posts/10164169602630571> (accessed on 10 September 2021); Aji Wijanarko, “Respon Ngaji Ihya”, *facebook.com*, 29 May 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/aji.winaryoko/posts/10219712016583784> (accessed on 10 September 2021);

<sup>24</sup> Ienas Tsoraya, “Catatan Mba Admin Keliling Nusantara Bersama al-Ghazali”, (Bandung: Afkaruna, 2021).

<sup>25</sup>Ahmad Suaedy, “Menuju Al-Ghazali Komprehensif Bersama Ulil Abshar Abdalla: Part2”, *Jelajah Pustaka*, 6 April 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2RseiPI1mA&t=31s> (accessed 10 September 2021).

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