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Trends in  
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THE TRADITIONALIST RESPONSE TO  
WAHHABI-SALAFISM IN BATAM

NORSHHRIL SAAT

**ISEAS** YUSOF ISHAK  
INSTITUTE

# Trends in Southeast Asia

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# The Traditionalist Response to Wahhabi-Salafism in Batam

By Norshahril Saat

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The rise of Wahhabi-Salafi ideology in neighbouring Batam is causing concern in Singapore. There are worries that some Singapore Muslims are being radicalized by Batam's Islamic radio station Hang FM, which openly promotes Wahhabi-Salafi teachings.
- The uncovering by Batam police of a plan by five Indonesians to launch a missile from the island, targeting Singapore's Marina Bay, and the arrest of some individuals linked to ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) in Batam in August 2016 strengthen these fears.
- This article argues that Batam Muslims are non-violent traditionalists in their orientation, and key religious leaders from the state have come out against Wahhabi-Salafi's anti-pluralist ideas. Contrary to expectations, key traditionalist practices like mass prayers (*zikr*), and praises to the Prophet Muhammad (*selawat*), which Wahhabi-Salafis frown upon, continue to attract a huge following in Batam.
- In contradistinction to perceptions that Batam influences Singapore, the city-state does in its own right exert influence on its neighbour, and monetary flow from Singapore Muslims help keep traditionalist rituals alive.



# The Traditionalist Response to Wahhabi-Salafism in Batam

By Norshahril Saat<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

Existing research on Batam–Singapore relations has focused more on economic and trade ties as opposed to social issues. The ties between the two cities, which are 20 kilometres apart, are always discussed within the framework of SIJORI, a joint development and business venture between Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, links between the three states transcend economic, trade and security matters to also include religion and cultural exchanges. It only takes a 45-minute ferry ride from Singapore to Batam and the number of Singaporeans crossing over to Indonesia via Batam is high — comparable to the number that travels to Jakarta.

Batam is a highly industrialized city, attracting immigration from other parts of Indonesia, especially Java. According to the 2012 census, Batam has a population of 1.2 million people.<sup>3</sup> 77 per cent of them

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<sup>1</sup> Norshahril Saat is a Fellow with the Regional Strategic and Political Studies (RSPS) Programme at the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, Singapore. This paper was originally presented at the Political and Economic Trends in the Riau Islands conference, organized by the ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute on 20 April 2017. The author wishes to thank the participants for their feedback.

<sup>2</sup> SIJORI is an acronym which stands for Singapore, Johor, and Riau. See Francis Hutchinson and Terence Chong, eds, *The SIJORI Cross-Border Region: Transnational Politics, Economics, and Culture* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Batam Guide, Batam Indonesia Free Zone Authority <<http://www.bpbatam.go.id/eng/batamGuide/customs.jsp>> (accessed 20 October 2016).

are Muslims, 17 per cent are Christians, and 6 per cent Buddhists.<sup>4</sup> In terms of ethnicity, 27 per cent are Javanese, and the other major ethnic communities include: Malays (17.6 per cent); Bataks (15.0 per cent); Minangkabau (14.9 per cent); and Chinese (6.3 per cent).<sup>5</sup> Even though the proportion of Malays is smaller than the Javanese, yet as part of Riau, Batam strongly upholds its Malay character. It also has a sizeable minority Bugis community, which has strong trade networks.<sup>6</sup> Historically, Riau was part of the Johor-Riau Kingdom, and the name Riau appeared at least three times in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sources.<sup>7</sup>

Lately, there have been security concerns between the two cities. In August 2016, Batam authorities foiled a plot by a terrorist group called Cell Gonggong Rebus (GR) which planned to launch a rocket from the island towards Marina Bay in Singapore. The police arrested five Indonesians for the failed attempt. The militants were believed to have links with ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), and separatist groups in Xinjiang, China.<sup>8</sup> The leader of GR, Gigih Rahmat Dewa, travelled to Singapore several times before he was detained. He was married to a Batam resident and has a house in the city. Gigih also made several contacts with Bahrudin Naim, another Indonesian radical linked to ISIS and the person who allegedly masterminded the Jakarta attacks in 2016.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Effendy Asmawi Al Hajj, *Peta Dakwah Kota Batam* (Batam: Majelis Ulama Indonesia Kota Batam, 2014), p. 149.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Firdaus Hamta, “Membangun KEPRI Lewat Pendekatan Historis”, *Opini* 1, no. 2 (2016).

<sup>7</sup> Vivienne Wee, “The Significance of Riau in SIJORI”, in *The SIJORI Cross-Border Region*, edited by Hutchinson and Chong, p. 243.

<sup>8</sup> Wahyudi Soeriaatmadja, “Batam cell leader ‘helped 2 Uighurs flee from Malaysia’”, *Straits Times*, 10 April 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Arlina Arshad, “IT guy who plotted terror from Batam”, *Straits Times*, 14 August 2016.

Within a matter of days after the Cell GR discovery, the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs revealed that it had detained two Singaporeans under the Internal Security Act (ISA) and another two were given restriction orders. They were detained for either being ISIS sympathizers, or for considering flying to the Middle East to fight in Syria. Although the arrests involved Singaporeans, there was a link with Batam. The two ISA detainees — Rosli Hamzah and Mohamed Omar Mahadi — were self-radicalized and avid listeners of Batam’s Islamic radio station, Radio Hang FM or Radio Dakwah Sunnah.<sup>10</sup> The station is easily accessible via radio or online. Security analysts have alleged that the station is disseminating exclusivist, anti-pluralist and Wahhabi-Salafi ideas.

These two separate incidents indirectly support the narrative that Batam Muslims are becoming more radical and puritan. This paper discusses whether the nexus between Batam and terrorism is a fair assessment of Muslims on the island. Do these episodes manifest a changing character of Islam in Batam, a city known for its tolerance, pluralist values, and Sufism?

I argue that Batam Muslims condemn terrorism, and they are largely traditionalists. In other words, they are generally anti-Wahhabi-Salafi. Being anti-Wahhabi-Salafi, or Sufi-oriented traditionalists, however, does not make them less exclusive. For example, we still hear Batam Muslims desiring to see Muslim leadership in the city and country rather than a non-Muslim President or Governor.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Batam Muslims may be religiously traditionalist, but politically exclusivist.

This paper serves as a preliminary study of Batam Muslims and it is not intended to make any concrete conclusions. To begin, there is little literature that discusses Islam in Batam. This paper is based on my

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<sup>10</sup> Arlina Arshad, “ISA arrests: Batam Radio station draws strong opposition for extreme leanings”, *Straits Times*, 20 August 2016.

<sup>11</sup> This paper does not make the claim that traditionalists equates to moderation or progressivism. Recent race and religious tensions in Jakarta spearheaded by traditionalists Habib Rizieq Shihab demonstrates that traditionalists, or someone who practices traditional rituals, can also be exclusivist.

participatory observation and personal interactions with local Muslims on the island. I also visited some of the boarding schools and welfare homes in the city. In addition, I conducted a focus-group discussion with the city's religious elites, who are also key actors representing Muslims in the city. They gave insights into their organizations' activities as well as the mode of thinking towards issues concerning terrorism and society.

## **TRADITIONALISM, MODERNISM, AND SALAFI-WAHHABISM**

In terms of religious orientation, Indonesian Muslims can be characterized into two dominant categories: traditionalists and modernists. These are ideal-type categories which academics apply in their study of Muslim societies, and Muslims in general would not consider themselves to be part of those camps. There are also many overlaps between the two groups in terms of political affiliation, class identity, and location.

Very broadly, traditionalists are more appreciative of Islam being infused with local culture. They believe that Muslims should follow one of the four classical jurists: Hanafi, Maliki, Hanbali, or Shafie. Indonesians generally follow the Shafie School of law. Traditionalists contend that in today's context, religious texts can be reinterpreted to meet modern needs. However, a majority of traditionalists argue that the gates of independent judgement (*ijtihad*) are discouraged, thus Muslims need to obtain guidance from the four jurists who lived within the first three generations after the Prophet's death in formulating religious rulings. It is in the event that the writings of the four jurists are not helpful that they can come up with independent reasonings.<sup>12</sup>

The traditionalists are represented by an organization called Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, Revival of the Ulama), which was formed in

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<sup>12</sup> Increasingly, traditionalists have become open to independent reasoning. Today, the progressives in NU are creative and innovative in coming up with religious rulings, applying local and modern context to their reading of classical texts.

1926. In terms of membership, it is the largest religious organization in Indonesia. It oversees many Islamic boarding schools across the country, and has networks in many parts of the world. So powerful was NU that, in 1999, its chairman, Abdurrahman Wahid became the Republic's fourth president. Even though NU started off as a religious organization, for a period in its history, it functioned as a political party. In 1984, NU leaders decided to withdraw the organization from party politics for two reasons: on the one hand, they were pressured by then President Suharto to be apolitical; on the other, the organization's leader then, Abdurrahman Wahid, felt that NU should not bow to government pressure.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from NU, there are other organizations that are inclined to the traditionalist outlook. They are Nahdlatul Wathan and Al-Washliyah, which are smaller organizations compared to NU.

In contrast, modernists believe that there exists a normative Islam, defined by the religion's holy texts of the Quran and hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), and local cultures have to be amended to suit Islamic traditions. In Indonesia, modernists are critical of those practising rituals such as visiting graves of pious Muslims (*ziarah kubur*); celebrating Prophet Muhammad's birthday (*maulid Nabi*); organizing communal feasting (*kenduri*); and joining Sufi *tariqah* networks which continue the practices mentioned. These rituals are widely practised by the traditionalists and within NU circles. Modernists believe that the gates of *ijtihad* are not closed and can be interpreted and reinterpreted to meet modern needs. The modernists are influenced by the reformist movement that began in Egypt at the turn of the twentieth century.

In Indonesia, the organization closely associated with the modernist movement is the Muhammadiyah. It was founded in 1912 by Kyai Haji Ahmad Dahlan, a Muslim reformer. For promoting modernist ideas, Muhammadiyah is seen as NU's ideological rival. Unlike NU, Muhammadiyah as an organization has never been a formal political

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this episode, see Greg Fealy, "The Political Contingency of Reform-mindedness in Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama: Interest Politics and the Khittah", in *Islamic Legitimacy in a Plural Asia*, edited by A. Reid and M. Gilesenan (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 154–66.

party. This, however, does not prevent them from having members participating in politics. Its former chairman, Amien Rais, became a prominent politician; and between 1999 and 2004, he was the chairman of People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), the highest body in Indonesia's legislative assembly. On social fronts, Muhammadiyah is interested in welfare, charity work, and education.

There has been some confusion about what constitutes Wahhabi-Salafi ideology, as it shares many views with the modernists as opposed to the traditionalists. On rituals, Wahhabi-Salafis also frown upon practices such as *maulid*, *ziarah kubur* and *tariqah*. Nevertheless, in this paper, we distinguish Wahhabi-Salafi from Indonesian modernists because, over time, the latter have become more tolerant of local cultures. In Indonesia today, it has come to a stage whereby the traditionalists and modernists have agreed to disagree, and focus their efforts on tackling common challenges. The modernists in Indonesia have also distanced themselves from the Wahhabi-Salafi orientation and have condemned the group.

Wahhabi-Salafism was founded in eighteenth century Arabia by Muhammad Ibn Abdul Al-Wahab.<sup>14</sup> Followers of the ideology have sought to cleanse Islamic beliefs of "innovations". Wahhabi-Salafism believes that Muslims should adhere to the Quran and Sunnah, and not strictly follow the four legal schools of thought, though in reality, they promote the Hanbali perspective. A majority of Indonesian Muslims consider this school of thought to be divisive.

Wahhabi-Salafism first came to Southeast Asia through students who studied in Saudi Arabia. This is not a recent phenomenon. Traces of the ideology found in the region date from the nineteenth century. The Islamic resurgence period of the 1970s also led to greater penetration of Wahhabi-Salafism into Southeast Asia. Scholars have shown how the Saudi Arabian government exported the ideology accompanied by "petrodollars" in the form of donations to mosques and religious institutions. According to Leila,

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<sup>14</sup> Natana J. DeLong-Bas, *Wahhabi Islam: From Revival and reform to Global Jihad* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

The soaring oil prices after the war of 1973 [Yom Kippur War between Arabs and Israel] and the enormous wealth the Arab oil states commanded thereafter would give rise to other conditions — aside from vastly increased resources for funding Islamist outreach — that would further contribute to the spread of Islamism and that would promote the spread of Saudi Arabian and Gulf forms of religious practice to Egyptians and other Arabs and Muslims.<sup>15</sup>

A majority of Indonesian Muslims are traditionalists, though there are provinces in which modernists dominate. The majority of Muslims in Java are traditionalists, except for Jogjakarta, the province in which Muhammadiyah was founded. On the other hand, the modernists are dominant in Sumatera, particularly in towns such as Padang. The same generalization cannot be made for other communities such as the Malays and Bugis, because they can either be traditionalists or modernists, depending on where they reside.

Today, NU and Muhammadiyah have converged on many aspects of their religious outlook. In fact, members of both organizations participated in the state-formed ulama organization, Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI, Indonesian Ulama Council). MUI members consider their organization as an umbrella body overseeing other Islamic organizations in the country. In 1975, President Suharto formed the MUI, a national-level *ulama* organization that seeks to represent all religious elites in Indonesia. The main task of the organization is to issue religious rulings or *fatwa* (non-binding legal opinions), at the national level. The first chairman of the organization was Hamka, a modernist-oriented scholar. Subsequent chairmen of the organization have been rotated between traditionalists and modernists (most of them were either from NU or Muhammadiyah).

In recent times, scholars have condemned MUI for being conservative and exclusive. One religious ruling made by the organization that was

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<sup>15</sup> Leila Ahmed, *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 101.

widely condemned was the SIPILIS *fatwa* in 2005, an acronym coined to mean secularism, pluralism, and liberalism. MUI has also declared minority sects such as Shias and Ahmadiyyahs as deviant. Although MUI is a largely conservative organization, the leaders are not Wahhabi-Salafis oriented, and this is reflected in their public conduct. Some have joined public rituals and prayers associated with the traditionalist school and NU. In fact, the majority of MUI leaders are affiliated with NU, including its current chairman, Kyai Ma'ruf Amin.

## ISLAMIC ORGANIZATIONS IN BATAM

In Batam, there are about forty-three Islamic organizations.<sup>16</sup> Most of them are branches of societal organizations (*ormas*) headquartered in Jakarta. The number of Islamic organizations in Batam has grown exponentially in the last two decades, corresponding to the rise in religious piety of Batam Muslims. In 1995, there were 110 mosques and 96 prayer spaces (*musollahs*) in the city. By 2014, the number had increased to 612 mosques and 411 prayer spaces in all.<sup>17</sup> There have been rumours that some of these prayer spaces receive funds from foreign donors, especially from the Middle East. However, most of them are funded through donations from Muslims residing in Batam. Indonesian Islamic organizations have also funded these prayer spaces.

The most influential Islamic organization in Batam is the MUI, which is a chapter of the organization based in Jakarta. As mentioned, MUI serves as an umbrella organization for all Islamic organizations in the country. MUI issues *fatwas* (religious rulings) which are non-binding on Muslims, though they are generally followed.

According to Khairuddin, the Head of LPPOM-MUI (The Assessment Institute for Food, Drugs, and Cosmetics), Muslim organizations in Indonesia and Batam regard MUI as the umbrella for all Islamic

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<sup>16</sup> Effendy Asmawi, *Peta Dakwah Kota Batam*, pp. 151–53.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

organizations.<sup>18</sup> Nonetheless, the national MUI has little control over the MUI chapters in the provinces and the districts, even though their leaders are in regular contact.<sup>19</sup> Some of the branch MUI leaders are invited to MUI national congresses, held once in five years. The truth is that many of the MUI chapters are small, and run by less than ten members.<sup>20</sup>

MUI Batam is headed by Kyai Haji Usman Ahmad.<sup>21</sup> Its main office is located in the basement of the Masjid Raya in the city centre. To date, there is no *fatwa* compilation published by the Batam MUI, unlike the central MUI, which has published all *fatwas* issued since 1975. Just like the national MUI, the Batam chapter has a halal-certification arm, LPPOM-MUI, which is active in promoting shariah-based consumption, and issuing halal certificates to food outlets and slaughterhouses in the city. LPPOM-MUI has a team of officials to determine whether food outlets selling halal products meet Islamic requirements. Batam's halal industry is supported by the local government because it contributes to the city's tourism industry. Many Singaporean and Malaysian tourists visit the city, and the majority of them opt for a one- or two-day stay to purchase halal cakes and delicacies, and patronize halal-certified

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<sup>18</sup> Interview with Pak Khairuddin Nasution. Head of LPPOM-MUI, 15 February 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Norshahril Saat, "Theologians 'Moralising' Indonesia?", *Asian Journal of Social Science* 44, nos. 4-5 (2016): 546–70.

<sup>20</sup> Olle studied the MUI chapter in East Java and pointed out the impactful nature of the *fatwas* to the extent of promoted violence on "heretics". Similarly, Nur Ichwan conducted a study of the MUI chapter in Banten, and concluded the organization's role in promoting violence: John Olle, "The Majelis Ulama Indonesia Versus 'Heresy': The Resurgence of Authoritarian Islam", in *State of Authority: The State in Society in Indonesia*, edited by G. v. Klinken and J. Barker (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asian Program Publications, 2009), pp. 95–116; Moch Nur Ichwan, "The Local Politics of Orthodoxy: The Majelis Ulama Indonesia in the Post-New Order Banten". *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 6, no. 1 (2012): 166–94.

<sup>21</sup> I wish to thank Kyai Usman Ahmad for agreeing to speak to me regarding the issue of extremism in Batam on 15 February 2017.

restaurants. Muslim tourists expect Batam hotels to meet their dietary requirements.<sup>22</sup> Restaurants owned by non-Muslims also carry the halal label issued by LPPOM-MUI.

Apart from its involvement in halal-certification, MUI also conducts raids on houses or shops it suspects to be promoting deviant Islamic teachings. In 2006, MUI declared seventy Gafatar (Gerakan Fajar Nusantara) members deviant and urged its followers to return to true Islam. Later, it realized that the organization remained active underground despite MUI's warning. Some MUI Batam leaders urged the local government agency, Badan Kesatuan Bangsa, Politik dan Perlindungan Masyarakat (National Unity, Politics and Society Protection Body), to be stricter in issuing any permit for such religious groups.<sup>23</sup> This behaviour sums up MUI Batam's powers, in which it has no authority to ban any groups except to lobby the local authorities to do so.<sup>24</sup>

NU and Muhammadiyah also have branches in Batam. These organizations also issue *fatwas* to its members. In terms of membership, NU is the biggest organization in Batam, just as it is in the whole country. Currently, the chairman of the organization in Batam is Kyai Haji Hairul Saleh. Hairul claimed that in today's context, his organization (NU) and Muhammadiyah share similar views in condemning terrorism and what

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<sup>22</sup> Jannatun Naim, "Pemkot Batam gesa sertifikasi halal restoran", *Antara*, 17 October 2013. LPPOM-Batam's office is located on the same floor as the MUI Batam. LPPOM-MUI Batam feels that existing regulations should be strengthened in order to improve the capability of the organization to conduct spot checks on any abuses of halal certificates. See also Nikolas Panama, "Pengawasan Produk Halal di Kepri Masih Lemah", *Antara* 30 September 2015.

<sup>23</sup> *Jawa Pos*, "MUI: Kami Kecolongan, Ini Kelemahan Kami", 15 January 2016.

<sup>24</sup> Badan Kesatuan Bangsa, Politik dan Perlindungan Masyarakat is a body which oversees all societal organizations in the city, and addresses issues seen as divisive. See <<http://skpd.batamkota.go.id/kesbang/profil/struktur-organisasi/>> (accessed 13 April 2017).

they consider deviations from mainstream Islam.<sup>25</sup> They also run boarding schools on the island, although NU's far outnumber Muhammadiyah's.

## BATAM MUSLIMS AND TRADITIONALISTS

Analysts, scholars, and religious teachers in Singapore are concerned that Muslims in Batam are influenced by Wahhabi-Salafi ideas. In September 2016, the *Jakarta Post* published an article on the rise of Salafi movement in Batam,<sup>26</sup> where it indicates that there are about 100 radio stations across the country promoting Salafism, and one of them is located in Batam. In March 2017, the Voice of America (VOA) ran an article claiming the Wahhabi-Salafi movement is on the rise in Batam.<sup>27</sup> The article states that Batam has become a crossroad for Salafis in the region, including Singapore and Malaysia. It also pointed out the existence of Wahhabi-Salafi-oriented boarding schools, such as Pesantren Anshur al-Sunnah, located in the Cendana district. These schools were started in 2004 by an Acehnese, who was a graduate of the Medina University in Saudi Arabia.

However, as many observers will attest, it is difficult to pinpoint which schools are Wahhabi-Salafi-oriented and which schools promote traditionalism. The difficulty in doing so raises doubt how some scholars are able to claim that Wahhabi-Salafism is on the rise in the city. To begin, it is difficult for analysts to determine whether a group or a religious leader is pro-Wahhabi-Salafi because these have never claimed to be such. Their refusal to use the label is not because they fear being ostracized or condemned by fellow Indonesian Muslims. Rather, they hold that their beliefs and practices represent “true” Islam — in line with

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<sup>25</sup> Interview with Pak Hairul Saleh, Chairman of NU, 15 February 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Haeril Halim and Fadli, “Salafi movement gains ground in public sphere”, *Jakarta Post*, 2 September 2016 <<http://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2016/09/02/salafi-movement-gains-ground-in-public-sphere.html>> (accessed 18 April 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Krithika Varagur, “Salafi Movement Grows on Indonesia’s Batam Island”, 14 March 2017 <<http://www.voanews.com/a/salafi-movement-grows-on-indonesias-batam-island/3764858.html>> (accessed 18 April 2017).

the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad — and they do not consider themselves a “sect”. Thus, it is impossible to ascertain if particular schools are Wahhabi-Salafi-inclined, because the label is not indicated in their names, logos, and official statements. However, there may be clues nevertheless, as when followers tend to use terms like “Sunnah” (Prophet’s actions) or “Salaf” (followers of the pious generations of the Prophet and his companions) to describe themselves; it is however premature to conclude that all madrasahs carrying those terms are Wahhabi-Salafi.

One indication that Batam could be becoming exclusivist in its orientations is the discourse promoted by Radio Hang FM106. The station first started as an entertainment channel but was transformed into a *dakwah* (spreading the message of Islam) station in 2004, promoting Wahhabi-Salafi ideas. A businessman by the name of Zein Alatas owned the station, and he was allegedly a strong proponent of Wahhabism-Salafism.<sup>28</sup> The content of the sermons of the station range from spirituality to Islamic jurisprudence. In the 1990s, Radio Hang FM featured ideas from a Wahhabi-Salafi scholar from Indonesia, Abdull Hakim Abdat.<sup>29</sup> To this day, the station plays very little music, and instead it features sermons and Quranic recitation.

In early 2011, prominent Singaporean preacher Ustaz Rasul Dahri urged his followers to donate to and support Radio Hang FM. In a sermon uploaded on YouTube, he implied that his followers are supporting Salafism (the way of the Prophet and his companions) through their donations, and promised that God would reward all of them. Rasul claimed that it was through Radio Hang FM that his followers had access to his teachings. The use of the Batam radio station by a Singaporean preacher here is interesting. Wahhabi-Salafi ideas do not gain much support in Singapore and Johor, where the majority of the Muslim

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Amanda Lee, “Extremist ideology a staple item on Batam’s Radio Hang”, *Today*, 19 August 2016.

population is traditionalist in outlook.<sup>30</sup> The Johor religious authorities have banned Rasul from preaching in the state, and he was later arrested for preaching without permit. On 10 January 2017, the *Berita Harian* (Malay daily in Singapore) ran a story claiming that a prominent terrorist, Mas Selamat Kastari, attended Rasul's classes in Johor (until he was banned) before joining Jemaah Islamiah (JI).<sup>31</sup> In June 2017, the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) of Singapore banned nine books that Rasul authored, for extremist content.

The perception that Radio Hang FM preaches Wahhabi-Salafism has raised concerns among Batam residents. Some traditionalist *ulama* have come out in the open to engage the station's scholars. In December 2013, the Head of Ministry of Religion for Batam approved a public debate between preachers from Radio Hang FM (the so-called supporters of Wahhabism-Salafim) and the traditionalists (Aswaja, Sunni). The debate was held at Masjid Raya Baitulrahman, Sekupang. It showcased civil and cordial relations between the two camps, despite their differing views. The full debate was recorded and made available on YouTube.<sup>32</sup> Representing the traditionalists were Muhammad Idrus Romli and Muhammad Thobary Shadzily; and Radio Hang FM was represented by Zainal Abidin Shamsudin and Firanda Andirja. Both camps were allowed to speak for the same amount of time on issues pertaining to texts and rituals.

Judging from the debate, the traditionalists in Batam do not see Wahhabi-Salafism as a threat and are willing to engage them openly. The debate also shows that the disagreement between the two camps mainly rests on rituals associated with prayers and death. There was no indication that any camp condones terrorism. Interestingly, preacher

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<sup>30</sup> Norshahril Saat, *Johor Remains The Bastion of Kaum Tua*, Trends in Southeast Asia, No. 1/2017 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> *Berita Harian*, "Mas Selamat pernah ikut kelas Rasul Dahri di Johor sebelum sertai JI", 10 January 2017.

<sup>32</sup> See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DSkouYNtpOU>> (accessed 29 May 2017).

Zainal Abidin, who raised many points that could see him accused as Wahhabi-Salafi, indicated that he is also NU-inclined (meaning he has traditionalist roots). Zainal's case demonstrates the difficulty in pointing out whether a person is Wahhabi-Salafi or otherwise.

Undeniably, Wahhabi-Salafi followers exist in Batam, but their reach is not as extensive when compared to the traditionalists. While Radio Hang FM is still under operation, there are altogether seventeen radio stations in Batam including Radio Salam FM102.7, which is also a *dakwah* station.<sup>33</sup> In fact, according to NU members, they also run other radio stations in Batam that support Sufi and traditionalist practices. Also, the station is closely scrutinized by the Indonesian Broadcasting Corporation. Radio Hang spokespersons have denied the link between the station and terrorism, indicating that the station is against any form of radicalism.<sup>34</sup>

The popularity of traditionalist rituals provides clues that the NU-style of thinking is alive in Batam.<sup>35</sup> For example, in 2014, the Batam municipal government invited the famous Indonesian Sufi, Habib Syech Bin Abdul Qodir Assegaf, to lead a Sufi chanting session organized to commemorate the 185th year of the city's founding.<sup>36</sup> The session involved the use of music and the reciting of praises to the Prophet Muhammad, and thousands came to join the session. These practices are in fact frowned upon by Wahhabi-Salafi scholars.

In the same vein, on 12 December 2016, 3,000 congregants gathered at the Masjid Raya Batam, the biggest mosque in the city, to celebrate the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. The organizers claim that the event

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<sup>33</sup> Effendy Asmawi, *Peta Dakwah Kota Batam*, p. 155.

<sup>34</sup> Martha Soezean, "Radio Hang in Batam denies airing extremist sermons as claimed by MHA", *The Online Citizen* <<https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2016/08/23/radio-hang-in-batam-denies-airing-extremist-sermons-as-claimed-by-mha/>> (accessed 11 April 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Larno, "Pesantren Cetak Generasi Intelektual dan Spiritual", *Antara*, 20 July 2013.

<sup>36</sup> *Tribun Batam*, "Besok Acara Batam Berselawat Bersama Habib Syech bin Abdul Qodir Assegaf", 19 December 2014.

did not require any funding from the state government, as funds were collected from attendees.<sup>37</sup>

Islamic NGOs also seek to prevent Wahhabi-Salafi ideas from penetrating into the island state. In 2014, NU, Majelis Rasulullah (The Forum of the Prophet Muhammad) and Forum Pengurus Masjid dan Mushollah Kota Batam (Forum of Mosque Managers and Prayer Spaces in Batam) organized a protest demanding that the local authorities disband Radio Hang FM. The station was allowed to continue, nevertheless, despite all these protests.

Kyai Usman also argued that MUI, NU and Muhammadiyah were constantly in dialogue with Radio Hang, urging them not to preach divisive ideas in the community.<sup>38</sup> Once, he cited that the Wahhabi-Salafis were against them reading the Hizib, or special prayers commonly read by traditionalists, but MUI argued that the practice has always been part of mainstream Islam. Thus, there are constant attempts by key religious leaders in Batam to ensure that Wahhabi-Salafism remains marginal.<sup>39</sup>

The NU Batam Chairman also confirms that Batam remains a traditionalist city owing to his organization's efforts in preserving the *pesantrens* or boarding schools. It also organizes the Majlis Zikir Al-Khidir every year, which is normally attended by 20,000 people. In another example, the Jamaah Al Khidmah Batam, a traditionalist group, also organizes a special congregation that conducts Sufi rituals.<sup>40</sup> This event was attended by 30,000 people. This group mainly preaches the teachings of KH Romly Tamim (b.1888–d.1958) who was a leader of the Tariqah Qodariah Wa Naqsyabandiah (Sufi order). This is yet another sign that NU's influence remains strong in Batam.

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<sup>37</sup> *Batam Pos*, "3000 Umat Islam Bersholawat di Peringatan Maulid Nabi Muhammad", 12 December 2016.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Kyai Usman Ahmad, 15 February 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Pak Hairul Saleh, Chairman of NU, 15 February 2017.

<sup>40</sup> Jamaah Al Khidmah Batam <<https://alkhidmah-batam.blogspot.sg/search/label/Haul%20Akbar%20Batam>> (accessed 5 April 2017).

Often, analysts argue that Batam is turning to Wahhabi-Salafism because its religious schools receive donations from Saudi Arabia or Kuwait. I have come across some personal anecdotes that some prayer spaces receive funds from Middle East donors. Nevertheless, there is very little evidence to suggest that mosques that receive Saudi funding have shifted towards Wahhabi-Salafism. On the contrary, some mosques that receive money from such sources continue to be run the way traditionalist schools are normally run. For example, these schools continue to practise Sufi rituals such as mass chanting after their five daily prayers.

## THE SINGAPORE DIMENSION

There have been rumours that Saudi Arabia is funding some of the mosques and prayer spaces in Batam. While there may be some truth to this, Batam boarding schools and mosques also welcome donations from the region, especially from Muslims in Singapore and Malaysia. Singaporeans frequently visit these boarding schools and make donations directly to them, mainly for mosque building or orphanages. One mosque supported by Singaporeans is Masjid Muttaqin, located in the rural area of Batu Besar. Every year, the mosque receives donations, and in 2017, it received about \$6,000 from Singaporean donors. A tour group organizes a visit to the mosque, with about 100 Singapore Muslim participants. The imams of the mosque will organize series of talks and *maulids* (celebration of the Prophet's birthday) for their Singaporean guests. Some of the participants I spoke to during the tour shared that they followed such programmes every year.

In addition, there are some Singaporeans who come to Batam to conduct their Qurban ritual (sacrifice of goat or cow), held during the Eidul Adha (Festival of Sacrifice). Several agencies have arranged for packages, targeting Singapore Muslims, to witness animal slaughtering ceremonies in Batam's boarding schools. More Singaporeans are coming forward to participate in these Qurban rituals, and donating to the boarding schools in Batam. The reason why Singaporeans choose to conduct their Qurban in Batam is because they feel they can donate the meat to the Muslim community in the city. Comparing the Muslim community in Singapore and Batam, the Singaporean participants feel

that their countrymen are better off, and the meat would serve the Batam's underclass in a better way.

## **CONCLUSION: EXCLUSIVISM AND TRADITIONALISM**

There are fears, especially in neighbouring Singapore, that Batam is becoming religiously intolerant. The fears of Singapore leaders and security agencies are understandable, given the historically close ties between the Muslim communities of both countries. The recent arrests of a potential terror attack aimed at Singapore has exacerbated this fear. This has had an impact on Batam Muslims crossing over to Singapore, as some of them complain about the additional security checks placed on them by the Singapore immigration authorities. Nonetheless, the fear that Muslims in Batam are becoming fundamentalists is unfounded. My conversations with Batam religious elites show that they are largely traditionalists, and are seeking to combat the spread of fundamentalism.

As it is, the battle between moderates and terrorists remain within the domain of civil society. Dominant religious organizations — the MUI, NU, and Muhammadiyah — along with other *tariqah* groups and boarding schools have been strong in mitigating terrorism and fundamentalism, despite their internal differences. Batam has a self-checking mechanism that can monitor the rise of intolerance, including Wahhabi-Salafism, without any interference from Batam authorities.

However, concerns about Batam becoming the bastion of Wahhabi-Salafism and terrorism sidestep the question of exclusivist attitudes that Muslims may have towards non-Muslims. I contend that, for future research, analysts of Islam in Batam have to pose the right questions. While the Muslim leaders whom I spoke to condemn terrorism and radicalism, and they are traditionalists when it comes to religious rituals, they have also raised concerns about the possibility of having non-Muslims as their political leaders. They feel that Muslims are being marginalized in Batam. One plausible reason for this feeling is the rapid urbanization, which has changed the demographic conditions significantly. The Malays complain that they are outnumbered by the Javanese, and they are still grappling with what they imagine to be a significant rise in the number

of Chinese. This demographic change resulted from immigration from other parts of Indonesia (particularly from Java) to Batam. The city has also become a tourist spot, and is famous for its massage parlours, golf courses, and duty-free liquor shops, the last of which causes discomfort among Muslims.<sup>41</sup>

The religious elites' exclusivist attitudes towards non-Muslims is a reflection that while traditionalists may be open to differences on rituals, they may not be as equally open when it comes to political leadership and inter-ethnic relations. This is reflected during my conversations with some Batam Muslims who followed events in Jakarta. They closely watched the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial elections. Incumbent Jakarta governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) was running for re-elections for the Governorship of the capital, but was accused of contravening the city's blasphemy laws after he quoted a verse from the Quran during one of his speeches. Some Muslims took offence at his speech, and launched two massive protests in November and December 2016. The Muslim leaders I interviewed were concerned that their leaders in Central MUI were not treated with ample respect. In the end, Ahok lost the election.

Batam Muslims dispel the simplistic view of analysts and observers who conclude that traditionalist Muslims are moderates, while Wahhabi-Salafists are extreme. In reality, one has to closely examine the issues on which they are extreme or moderate. In addition, it is important to note that while Batam influences Singapore, there are also dynamics that operate in the opposite direction.

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