The contestation between conservative and moderate Muslims in promoting Islamic moderatism in Indonesia

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Abstract: This article seeks to explain the practice of Islamic moderatism in Indonesia. Although it is supported by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, Indonesia’s two largest Islamic organizations, moderatism has faced severe obstacles. This article relies on data collected through interviews and a review of the literature. Through interviews with leaders and academics associated with Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, information on these organizations and their role in promoting religious moderatism to counter the discourses offered by exclusivist organizations (such as the Islamic Defenders Front and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia) were collected. Data on these Islamic organizations were also collected through a review of these organizations’ internal documents as well as previous academic studies. This article shows that Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have committed themselves to maintaining and promoting a peaceful—rather than hardline—understanding of Islam. One of the greatest challenges faced by these organizations is the resurgence of conservative understandings of Islam that position the religion as rigid and exclusive. Such views, which run contrary to Indonesian culture, are prone to denying the validity of diverse cultures and thus commonly reject existing organizations. Another form of Islam is therefore necessary, one that

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT
The existence of Islamic moderation which is rooted by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia is going to be met by the re-existing power of conservative Islamic groups. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama as two main Islamic organisations present Islam with peace, tolerance, and inclusiveness. The da’wah models of these organisations are going to be regular along with their slogans which are “Islam Berkemajuan” for Muhammadiyah and “Islam Nusantara” for Nahdlatul Ulama. They are also going with the same mission which is “Islam Rahmatan Lil Alamin” or Islam is a mercy for all natures and mankind through Islamic Moderation. Meanwhile, there is an Islamic group that does da’wah with exclusiveness and stiffness that is in fact thought intolerance particularly onto other group of Islam and other religions.
emphasizes the application of essential Islamic values in all aspects of life. Rather than a rigid formalism, mutual respect between all parties is necessary.

**Subjects:** Sociology & Social Policy; Sociology of Culture; Sociology of Religion

**Keywords:** Moderation; Islamic organization; wasatiyah Islam; sustainability

1. **Introduction**

Ongoing efforts to introduce religious moderatism, such as those undertaken by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, have faced serious obstacles. Both of these mainstream organizations have taken moderatism as their primary value, using religious activities to forefront such ideals as inclusivity, tolerance, non-violence, and the accommodation of diverse cultures. However, these organizations’ noble visions have been marred by acts of intolerance perpetrated by hardline Muslims, especially against religious minorities. In 2019, the Setara Institute released a list of cases of intolerance in Indonesia, recording 655 instances where individuals’ religious rights were violated between 2014 and 2019. Investigating these acts of intolerance, many scholars have argued that they correspond with the rise of conservative organizations that promote rigid and formalistic understandings of Islam (Burhani, 2016; Juliandi et al., 2018; Mudzakkir, 2017; D. Wahid, 2014). Such groups have also been identified as stifling the rise of moderatism in Indonesia.

The rise of conservative Muslim organizations has strongly influenced the strategies used by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama to promote and realize religious moderatism. As public spaces have been dominated by conservative movements, both of these mainstream organizations have had difficulty disseminating their discourses of moderatism within Indonesia’s Muslim community. Some have argued that Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have been unable to address the challenges of the modern era, and thus Indonesian Muslims have turned instead to conservative movements (Hilmy, 2012). Using public spaces and social media (digital spaces), conservative organizations have developed discourses that reject moderatism and portray mainstream moderate organizations as undermining the piety of the faithful. Such discourses deleteriously affect the efforts of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama to promote inclusive moderatism. Muhammadiyah has been relatively relaxed in its response to these new religious movements, while Nahdlatul Ulama has been more reactive (Akmaliah, 2020). Ultimately, however, the success of religious moderatism depends heavily on the programs and strategies used by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama to campaign for and contextualize moderate Islam in Indonesia (Ridwan, 2021).

In the face of these challenges, academic discussion of religious moderatism has been common. First, scholars have investigated the forms of religious moderatism (Al-Rasyid, 2014; Faiqah & Praniska, 2018; Harto & Tastin, 2019; Mubarak & Rustam, 2018; Purwanto et al., 2019). Scholars have often sought to understand the synergy between religious moderatism and everyday activities, including those undertaken by the state and civil society organizations. Second, scholars have emphasized the opportunities for realizing moderate Islam in culturally diverse countries such as Indonesia (Akhmadi, 2019; Deny Irawan, 2018; Mubarak & Rustam, 2018; Syifa, 2019). Cultural diversity provides a means of realizing moderatism, emphasizing shared humanity over the interests of specific groups. Third, scholars have focused on the effects of moderatism on the creation of social harmony and order (Fuerst, 2018; Subkhan, 2019; Widodo, 2019; Yahya, 2020). Academics have investigated Islamic moderatism as a means of realizing a shared vision but failed to comprehensively discuss Islamic moderatism in the particular cultural climate of Indonesia.

This article seeks to provide a detailed exploration of religious moderatism in Indonesia. Conceptually, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have both provided Indonesia with a strong conceptual framework for realizing moderatism. To frame and guide its analysis, this article begins
by exploring how Islamic civil society organizations manifest their understanding of moderatism through their da’wah. Since their establishment, both Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama have promoted moderatism through various means. This article also explores the range of factors that have hindered the spread of religious moderatism in Indonesia. In this context, certain programs have been hindered by other elements of Muslim society. In its conclusion, this article discusses the consequences of ongoing efforts to restrict the teaching of moderatism vis-à-vis the position of religious minorities in Indonesia.

This article offers three arguments. First, the moderatism promoted by organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama has faced significant challenges from within the Muslim community. Second, organizations with strict and formalistic understandings of Islam have hindered the spread of religious moderatism, seeking instead to apply literal understandings of Islamic doctrines within diverse local contexts. Third, religious minorities have faced increased prejudice as a result of such formalistic understandings. Consequently, many have faced acts of intolerance and even violence.

2. Literature review

2.1. Religious moderatism

Religious moderatism is defined as a form of moderatism that emphasizes togetherness, tolerance, and harmony among all segments of society (Akhamdi, 2019). It may be realized in everyday social interactions and relations (Bachrong & Ansar, 2021), where it is used to create openness, balance, and tolerance (Tang & Chang, 2021). Religious moderatism is also understood as the “middle road”, that which exists between two opposites or extremes (Ushama, 2014)—in this case, negotiating religious understandings to find solutions to various problems (Hasan, 2021). It thus requires a significant shift away from radicalism (Drolet et al., 2021).

Religious moderatism must be implemented to realize national harmony (Fahruddin et al., 2021), as it has the potential to minimize conflict between religious communities. At the policy level, moderatism offers a strategic means of preventing the spread of radicalism (Hidayat et al., 2020). Religious moderatism refers to specific religious paradigms, attitudes, and practices that seek to create shared welfare (Sulaiman et al., 2022). This concept is associated with a broad range of religious activities. According to Tezcur (in Brocker & Kunkler, 2013, p. 171), moderatism refers to the deliberate choice to employ peaceful and non-confrontational strategies to find compromises and resolve conflicts, rather than violent, provocative, and confrontational ones.

In the context of Islam, religious moderatism is close to the concept of Islam wasatiyah, an important discourse that serves to counterbalance the violence perpetrated by those who fail to understand the essential character of Islam (Arif, 2020). This concept also serves to counter the interpretations that frequently misdirect and mis-blame others. Wasatiyah is a moderate understanding of Islam, one which rejects violence, defends the oppressed, opposes fanaticism, decries extremism, renounces intimidation, and despises terrorism (Fitri, 2015).

In Islam, moderatism is equated with wasatiyah, a concept that underscores the importance of balance, justice, and welfare, all of which are practiced as a means of realizing openness, humanity, and tolerance. The two terms have thus been equated in everyday usage (Niam, 2019). In the Middle East, for example, the concepts of ummatan wasathan and Islam wasathiyah were proposed by intellectuals as a means of challenging the religious extremism that emerged in the area (Diyani, 2019). As such, the concept of Islamic moderatism (Islam wasathiyatul) only emerged in response to frictions between two opposite movements that have claimed to represent Islam. First is the hardline and literalist approach to Islam, which perceives the religion as constant and immutable, as having little space for change—especially in matters of creed, worship, law, and muamalah (transactions). Such movements have been perceived as creating the perception that Islam is a violent, intolerant, and radical religion. Second is the liberal movement that has
promoted rationalistic thoughts and narratives, arguing that Islam must adapt to the times—including in matters of creed, worship, law, and muamalat (Arif, 2020). Such movements have been inclusive and tolerant, positioning Islam as a religion that is continuously responding to all outside changes.

2.2. Group resistance

Resistance refers to the strategies, means, and approaches used by dominated individuals or groups to challenge the oppression imposed upon them by others (N. Ismail, 2015). As such, it is also understood as actions undertaken by specific social and cultural groups to respond to others. Within a socio-religious context, resistance is defined as encompassing the responses of specific religious communities or movements. It is a form of opposition undertaken in response to ongoing changes and phenomena that do not reflect religious values (Sumbulah, 2014) or differ from mainstream practices (Pabbajah et al., 2019). Resistance thus occurs within contexts where people of different genders, classes, racial backgrounds, and religions do not enjoy equal power and must compete for dominance (N. Ismail, 2015).

Where minority-majority relations exist, they are marked by disparate power structures. This results in specific identities being reaffirmed and strengthened, as shown by the practitioners of local religions who have refused to convert to a mainstream religion despite state coercion. For example, when the Sultan of Siak instigated his program of Malayization and sought to Islamize the Sakai people, they refused to convert. Similarly, during the New Order, the government marginalized the Sakai people by exploiting their traditional lands for development projects without involving them in negotiations (Harahap et al., 2020). Religious resistance has also been practiced by the practitioners of Saminism, a local religious community that is marked by strategies such as meditation and contemplation (N. Ismail, 2015).

2.3. Islamic organizations

Speaking generally, organizations differ in their visions, missions, strategies, and programs (Sakdiah, 2014). Organizations are often created through the amalgamation of power to challenge outside forces (Kasim, 2016). They serve to unite diverse elements of society in the advancement of goals that cannot be realized by individuals (Setiawan, 2015). Such elements also underpin Islamic organizations, which were established to create a shared love for Islam and its teachings (Purba & Ponirin, 2013). Islamic organizations seek to create togetherness within the Muslim community and realize shared goals (Kasim, 2016).

Islamic thought is cultivated through an unending process that involves efforts to uphold and spread religious values (Fitriyani, 2010). Social organizations fall into several categories and may include socio-religious organizations, socio-political organizations, youth organizations, etc. Indonesia’s two largest Islamic organizations—Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama—have promoted moderation through their educational and socio-political activities (Abdurrohman, 2018). These organizations are distinguished from others by several fundamental differences, including: (1) their clear orientation toward advancing Islam, (2) their adherence to Islamic principles, values, and ethics in their everyday activities, and (3) their foundation in the Qur’an and the Sunnah (Sakdiah, 2014). Islam, in other words, is fundamental to these organizations.

These three concepts will be used to explore and explain the challenges faced by Islamic moderatism in Indonesia. The concept of moderation will be used to explore the position of Indonesia’s two largest Islamic organizations, i.e., Muhammadiyah and Nahdatul Ulama, and their ongoing efforts to promote religious moderatism. These organizations have provided Indonesians with two important umbrella organizations that cover not only Muslims but also non-Muslims. The concept of conservative Islam, meanwhile, will be explored to understand its effects on the social order in Indonesia, as well as the relationships between diverse religious communities. Indonesia’s multicultural society requires a means of cultivating Islamic practices while providing religious minorities with the opportunity to observe and practice their religious teachings.
Finally, the concept of social recognition will be used to understand how Islamic moderatism can be used to create a more accommodative social space.

3. Method
The topic of Islamic moderatism has been chosen for three reasons. First, Indonesia’s ethnic and religious plurality necessitates a means of creating harmony and unity. Second, although the majority of Indonesians are Muslim, their diverse understandings of religion should be used to create unity rather than division. Third, the relations between the state and civil society (including Islamic organizations) are highly dynamic, ebbing and flowing over time.

This article relies on data that were collected through interviews and a review of the literature. Interviews were conducted with ten informants, all of whom were leaders, academics, or ulamas with Muhammadiyah or Nahdlatul Ulama. These informants were chosen to obtain a deeper understanding of the factors that influence their understandings of religious texts (the Qur’an and the Hadiths) as well as their religious practices. Some interviews were conducted in person, while others were conducted using digital media. This dual approach was adopted due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Information on these informants is provided in the following table.

Aside from interviews, data were collected through a review of the literature, which included not only academic books and journal articles on the topic but also the internal documents of Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (including the documents prepared by Muhammadiyah’s 47th national congress in Makassar, South Sulawesi, and NU’s 33rd national congress in Jombang, East Java). These documents were used to describe these organizations’ ongoing commitment to advancing Islamic moderatism and realizing their programs in Indonesia.

These data were presented through several means. Interviews were transcribed, with pertinent data presented through quotations, contextualized interpretatively, and used to create a critical narrative. Interpretation was not limited solely to description; information collected from diverse informants was compared to find similarities. The analysis relied heavily on description, explanation, comparison, and interpretation. This enabled the researchers to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being studied.

Data collected through these methods were subsequently analyzed using the perspective of phenomenological sociology, as mediated through three important concepts: religious moderatism, group resistance, and (moderate, open, and tolerant) Islamic organizations. These three concepts emphasize that Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama occupy strategic positions in Indonesia, not only as pillars of religious moderatism but also guardians of national unity. Employing the perspective of phenomenological sociology, it is evident that Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have continued to advocate for religious moderatism even as other organizations have sought to undermine their activities. In this context, this article’s analysis is important for developing a framework for creating a more effective model of religious moderatism in the future.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Islamic organizations and the dynamics of moderatism
Indonesia’s two largest Islamic organizations, Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), are among the nation’s most important pillars. Since their establishment, these organizations have used their da’wah to advance public welfare. Both organizations have been identified as “advocates of moderate Islam” (Suharto, 2014), Muhammadiyah through its “Islam for Progress” and NU through its “Nusantara Islam”. Such slogans highlight these organizations’ belief that Islam is inherently and intrinsically intertwined with the social context where it is taught, interpreted, and practiced. Neither organization uses Islam solely to advance its own goals; rather, both emphasize
humanity above all. For these organizations, Islam is not solely a blessing for its adherents; rather, it is a blessing for all of Creation, one instilled with a spirit of equality and humanitarianism.

Both Muhammadiyah and NU have major congresses, held every five years, during which they make strategic decisions designed to reinforce piety, nationalism, and humanitarianism. Both Muhammadiyah’s 47th congress, held in Makassar from August 3–7, 2015, and NU’s 33rd national congress, held in Jombang in 2015, were important moments in these organizations’ efforts to counter radicalism and contribute to nation-building. Both produced important decisions for safeguarding religious harmony in Indonesia. During its congress, Muhammadiyah advanced the theme of “A Reform Movement for Indonesian Progress”, focusing on enlightenment as a means of providing liberation, empowerment, and advancement for all. It understood liberation as freeing human beings from the shackles of ignorance and poverty. Enlightenment, meanwhile, was defined as necessary for obtaining spiritual knowledge, resolving moral crises, and overcoming all of life’s challenges. For Muhammadiyah, any enlightenment movement should seek to establish just social relations that, recognizing the importance of human dignity, tolerance, and diversity, are free of discrimination. From this discussion, it is evident that Muhammadiyah is driven not to advance the interests of its members but also to realize the shared ambitions and goals of all of humanity (Kahfi, 2020).

From the beginning, Muhammadiyah’s efforts—which it refers to collectively as amar ma’ruf nahi munkar—have focused primarily on education and healthcare. These efforts have not been limited solely to Muslims; they have been offered to all elements of society, no matter their background (or religion). Its centers for Alleviating Public Suffering (Penolongan Kesengsaraan Oemoen, PKO), for example, were intended to help alleviate poverty and protect the vulnerable. During an interview, one Muhammadiyah leader stated that:

“The establishment of PKU (previously PKO) in Surabaya in 1924 was not intended to convert non-Muslims. PKU was intended purely to help all, including those who had difficulty finding treatment. Indeed, in its establishment, the support of Dutch and Christian nurses was important” (interview, R1, Muhammadiyah leader, Yogyakarta, 2020).

This is further supported by a speech delivered by Dr. Soetomo during the inauguration of the PKO. As he told his audience,

“Tomorrow morning, we will open this clinic. Anyone, be they European, Javanese (indigenous), Chinese, or Arab, may come. We will help them for free, so long as they are truly poor.” (Mulkhan, 2010, p. 84).

From this statement, it is evident that PKO was established solely due to Muhammadiyah’s concerns about the difficulties experienced by families with limited economic resources. The health services provided by Muhammadiyah were not intended to convert patients to Islam but to provide support to those who truly required it, no matter their ideological or religious background. Affordable healthcare, in other words, was provided solely to realize humanitarian values.

Likewise, Muhammadiyah’s educational facilities—its schools and universities—are made available to persons of all backgrounds. Indeed, in Papua, West Papua, and West Nusa Tenggara, numerous non-Muslims have graduated from Muhammadiyah-run schools. Even in Muslim-majority Java, many Muhammadiyah-run schools have non-Muslim students. At the Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta, for example, many students are graduates of non-Muhammadiyah schools. R2, a lecturer of Islam and Muhammadiyah Values, explained that:

“Many of the students in my class come from non-Muhammadiyah schools. They have only learned about Muhammadiyah bit by bit, after enrolling here. They don’t have issues with the fact that their university is owned and operated by Muhammadiyah” (interview, Yogyakarta, 2021).
R3 made a similar statement, noting that students from different backgrounds do not have any issues with learning about Muhammadiyah:

“Students, thus far, have had no problems with the Al Islam and Muhammadiyah Values course. They participate in classes well, as with their peers.” (interview, Yogyakarta, 2021).

A similar statement was made by R4, a lecturer at the Faculty of Islam, Ahmad Dahlan University, who explained:

“In our classes, many of the students come from organizations other than Muhammadiyah. Those from East Java, for example, generally come from non-Muhammadiyah schools and families. They have no trouble participating in our compulsory Islam and Muhammadiyah Values course” (interview, Yogyakarta, 2021).

Such statements indicate that, in its activities—particularly in the fields of medicine and education—Muhammadiyah does not exclude Muslims from other backgrounds. At its universities, students are not always from the organization; many are members of other organizations, and some are non-Muslim. Likewise, Muhammadiyah’s hospitals and clinics are open to patients of all backgrounds. Neither of these programs serves to create exclusivity, even as they affirm Muhammadiyah’s mission of creating public welfare.

Meanwhile, through its theme “Reaffirming Nusantara Islam for Indonesian and Global Civilization”, NU’s 33rd national congress showed its commitment to creating tolerance and peace (Mustofa, 2015). NU has focused not only on textual understandings of Islamic texts but also on translating Islamic values into real contexts. The organization has sought to create diverse media for disseminating its teachings and presenting Islam as a lively and friendly religion. Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama have thus sought to achieve a similar goal: to create prosperity for all of humanity. NU has employed a cultural approach to proselytization, teaching a friendly, open, and tolerant Islam that accommodates local cultural values. This cultural approach has been heavily influenced by the proselytization of the Wali Songo—the Nine Saints, those who first introduced Islam to the Indonesian Archipelago—as well as subsequent ulamas. During the early years of Indonesian Islam, Hindu and Buddhist traditions remained highly influential, and Muslims thus sought to accommodate these traditions while simultaneously internalizing Islamic values. Also influential were the teachings and models used by more recent ulamas, including Syaikh Abd Rauf al-Singkili al-Jawi, Syaikh Yusuf al-Makassari, Syaikh Abd al-Muhyi Pamijahan, Hamzah Fansuri, Muhammad Nawawi al-Bantani, and Muhammad Nafis al-Banjari. The founders of NU, such as Hasyim Asy’ari, deliberately chose to incorporate these cultural approaches into their da’wah model.

The cultural da’wah employed by NU has been heavily influenced by the fact that Islam coexists with local traditions within the same spaces. In its teachings, NU has accommodated diverse local cultures while simultaneously mainstreaming a moderate understanding of Islam. Cultural da’wah highlights the values of tolerance, moderation, mutual assistance, equality, and justice. In NU, these values are associated with four ideals of tawassuth (moderation), tawazun wa’l-tidal (balance), tasamuh (tolerance), and amar ma’ruf nahi munkar (Asmor, 2018). Referring to these principles, Fealy (1997: 225)—citing KH. Ahmad Shiddiqi—wrote that radicalism and criticism of the government were not organizational traditions, as NU has continued to uphold the principle of tawassuth (moderation).

Such moderatism cannot be separated from the organization’s articles of incorporation. In matters of fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), NU draws from four schools of thought: Syafi’i, Hanafi, Maliki, and Hambali. Meanwhile, in matters of akidah (creed), NU follows the teachings of Abu Hasan al-Asyari and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (Almu’tasim, 2019, p. 202). This indicates that the cultural da’wah employed by NU has deep roots in classical thought. The blending of turats wal
hadatsah (tradition and modernity) is key to the cultural practices of NU, which has adhered to the adage of almuhafadzah ala al-qadim al-shalih wa al-akhdu bi al-jadid al-ashlah (maintaining classical traditions that are good and adopting new traditions that are better; Sunarto, 2013). This adage highlights NU's continued use of the middle-of-the-road approach to proselytization.

From the beginning, both Muhammadiyah and NU have adhered to and practiced Islam wasta'iyah in their da'wah and activities, without discriminating against people of different religious and organizational backgrounds. Likewise, both share the mission of teaching a peaceful Islam that provides a blessing to all (Faiqah & Pransiska, 2018). Islam is positioned as a source of inspiration, including in social and political activities. These organizations have reaffirmed their commitment to translating Islam into a means of guiding everyday interactions and maintaining harmony between Indonesia's Muslim majority and its religious minorities. These organizations hold that Islam should ideally provide enlightenment and prosperity universally, serving as an umbrella that protects all; their vision, thus, contrasts markedly with the formalistic and integralist paradigm that has dominated recent discourses. Although these organizations differ in their specific methods, their substantial goals remain the same (Alhidayatillah & Sabiruddin, 2018).

These organizations have never been free of links with practical politics, and their members have commonly been associated with specific parties—Muhammadiyah with the National Mandate Party (Partai Amanat Nasional, PAN) and NU with the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, PKB). Such associations have been strengthened by several points. Each party includes particular organizational symbols in its logo. Central to PAN's logo is the sun, a symbol that has long been associated with Muhammadiyah. PKB, meanwhile, uses nine stars in its logo—similar to NU. This view is reinforced by the fact that each party has been led by organizational leaders, who have contested political power.

4.2. Moderate Islam and its challenges in Indonesia

Historically, Muhammadiyah and NU have been open to diverse communities—including non-Muslim ones. Both have promoted a peaceful and harmonious Islam, one that adapts to diverse contexts instead of rigidly adhering to established standards. These organizations' commitment to spreading the spirit of Islam has found a place in Indonesia's diverse society. Muhammadiyah is known for spreading a reformist view of Islam, one that rejects the contamination of pre-Islamic superstition (tahayul) and heretic innovation (bid'ah). NU, meanwhile, has offered a cultural da'wah that accommodates local culture (Arroisi et al., 2020). Although these organizations' approaches to da'wah differ, both seek to convey a comprehensive understanding of Islam and its teachings.

However, the moderate view of Islam promoted by Muhammadiyah and NU has been challenged by conservative Islam. Under the New Order, all movements had been closely monitored by the government, and few were willing to criticize the regime. After the fall of the New Order, Islamic movements began to actively promote diverse views of Islam—be it a moderate Islam similar to that advanced by Muhammadiyah and NU or the rigid and formalistic Islam used by critics of the government. Movements that identified themselves as Islamic began to spread the idea that Islam should influence all elements of life, including the power structures that constitute the state. Thus began what scholars have identified as Indonesia's conservative turn (Van Bruinessen, 2013), which has been marked (among other things) by various acts of intolerance and persecution against minorities, such as that experienced by the Ahmadi community in Tasikmalaya (Mudzakkar, 2017).

One incident that remains prominent in the minds and hearts of Indonesians is Jakarta's 2017 gubernatorial election. During this election, thousands of protestors came from throughout Indonesia to demonstrate against incumbent governor Basuki Cahaya Purnama (Ahok), whom they believed had committed blasphemy through statements he made regarding Surah Al-Maidah, Verse 51, during a speech delivered in the Thousand Islands. Some noted that Muhammadiyah and NU sought to control their members (D. Wahid, 2014). Movements such as the 212 Movement, 411 Movement, etc. included members of these organizations, who were participating without their blessings. Other
members of the organizations decried the erosion of solidarity within Muslim society. One prominent Muhammadiyah leader warned that this continued degradation underpinned the need for moderate Islam. “An unwillingness to fight, that is something that plagues moderate Muslims around the world. They have no spirit,” said R5 (interview, Yogyakarta, 25 August 2020).

The rise of conservative and formalistic Islam has been seen as a direct threat to all of Indonesian society, including the moderatism that has long marked Indonesian Islam. As noted by R6:

“In Indonesian Islam, moderatism has come from within. In Muhammadiyah, they have ‘Sincere Muhammadiyah’ and ‘Salafi Muhammadiyah’. In NU, they have members who fervently promote nationalism and their organizational goals. These views have had a strong influence on Islamic organizations and the moderatism they have sought to advance in this multi-cultural society” (interview, August 2020).

This was also recognized by HN, a central administrator with NU, who stated:

“The rise of conservativism and radicalism poses a clear and present danger to religious moderatism in Indonesia. These ideals are subversive, undermining our religious traditions—particularly in NU—and creating social conflict, including amongst Muslims” (interview, August 2020).

The challenges faced by Indonesian Muslims have faced diverse responses, including efforts to promote religious moderatism. Many have decried the erosion of public morality amongst all elements of society, as well as the acts of violence committed in the name of Islam. Likewise, ongoing economic difficulties have led many to be more willing to deviate from legal and religious norms. Others have maintained a nostalgia of sorts, pining for the past. There is a significant knowledge gap between elites, who have been unable to translate their teachings and authoritative resources into language that can readily be understood by their adherents. R8, an academic with NU, stated:

“The rise of Islamic conservativism has been, in part, because many adhere to old ideas that reject change. This is due to the knowledge gap between religious elites, as well as the fact that many convey their teachings in language that their followers cannot understand. Especially when it comes to moderatism … many have thus become antipathetic. They haven’t recognized the benefits of moderatism for the Indonesian people. It is religious elites’ responsibility to explain these things.” (interview, July 2020).

Conservative movements have perceived the religious moderatism promoted by Muhammadiyah and NU as serving only to undermine the faith of Muslims themselves. Such counter-discourses have continued to be spread, commonly being used to decry moderatism as a means of weakening Muslims.

The introduction of outside understandings has also reduced the influence of moderate Islam in Indonesia. This was recognized by R9, an academic with NU, who stated:

“One serious challenge being faced by moderate Islam today is the best means of dealing with different political choices. For example, Muslims with different political understandings are perceived as enemies. For people like that, religious views are simply used to advance their interests. There are also outside challenges, coming from the transnational Islamic organizations that have entered Indonesia and whose teachings have never been filtered by local organizations. Outside cultures are being forced on Indonesia, where we have our own culture. Our ideas are different, and they will never intersect.” (interview, Yogyakarta, July 2020).

Such transnational movements have penetrated the heart of Indonesian Islam through donations and institutional means. This was remarked upon by R10, a leader with Muhammadiyah Youth, who stated that:
“Transnational understandings have entered Indonesia through mosques, charities, and other media. In West Kalimantan, it has come from AMCF (Asia Muslim Charity Foundation, ed.), which has established educational institutions and offices in Muhammadiyah-owned buildings. The d’ai they produce, they tend to be Salafi.” (interview, July 2020).

This has been compounded by excesses within the Muslim community—excessive traditionalism, excessive liberalism, and excessive revivalism—which have created closed spaces where dialog cannot occur. Conservative movements have challenged the values of pluralism, tolerance, and religious freedom, and as a result, mainstream discourses have become increasingly exclusive (Pribadi, 2021). They fail to recognize that moderatism can contribute to national development, science, culture, and economy.

At the same time, the rise of conservativism has given rise to hardline religious practices. Conservative Islam in Indonesia cannot be separated from the influence of international conservative organizations, as well as these organizations’ call for a return to the Qur’an and the Sunnah—as understood literally and textually. In this context, Islam must be understood comprehensively, using a middle-of-the-road approach that creates harmony and unity (Kasdi, 2019). Islam should occupy a neutral position, one that accommodates a broad spectrum of interests. It must offer a medium for achieving the greater good, for benefitting all individuals, and thus must recognize that interpretations are not monolithic.

4.3. Reduced respect for social groups

One influence of conservativism in Indonesia has been reduced respect for social diversity. The rise of conservativism has corresponded with the rise of an “us versus them” mindset, with a clear and strict distinction—and even segregation—between religious groups, as seen in Ambon (Dandirwalu, 2014). In such a context, inter-communal violence is common, and as a result, many Indonesians are cautious when meeting people of other faiths. They are unwilling to enter other religious communities, a situation exacerbated by continued segregation and stigma (A. Ismail, 2017).

A report from the Setara Institute, cited previously, indicates that numerous acts of violence have been perpetrated against religious minorities. The Wahid Institute, which also releases annual reports on freedom of religion and faith, identified 184 cases of intolerance and 215 cases of violence in 2019. Of these, thirty were cases of hate speech against religious minorities; multiple cases involved acts of violence perpetrated by state and non-state actors (i.e., members of civil society).

Such acts of violence have targeted diverse religious communities. For example, thirty of the cases mentioned above were targeted at practitioners of indigenous faiths, while nineteen of them targeted Christians. Acts of violence against Indonesia’s Ahmadi community were particularly common, perpetrated by individuals who seek to monopolize religious understandings and deny all other interpretations (Jubba et al., 2019). Truth claims are dominated by religious majorities, who deny minorities’ claims and religious rights (Tajrid, 2012). In the context of Indonesian Islam and its dynamics, Sunnis monopolize truth claims. As a result, Shiites and Ahmadis have been marginalized. Therein lies one of the greatest challenges facing moderate Islam: providing space for minorities who have been subjugated by the majority.

Such claims to universal truth deny the reality of pluralism. Indonesians do not only adhere to one faith; they practice diverse religions and thus require a universal truth that upholds human dignity instead of promoting a singular textual truth (Jubba & Hidayati, 2018). Claims that deny salvation to others are detrimental, as they result in stigma being attached to religious minorities and undermine harmony. In such a situation, commonality is forgotten.

5. Conclusion

The ongoing efforts of Muhammadiyah and NU have faced significant obstacles due to the rise of conservative Islam in Indonesia. Although these organizations have promoted religious
moderatism as a means of upholding human dignity, they have been threatened by internal challenges. Conservative Islamic organizations and their monopolization of universal truths have increasingly gained power. Meanwhile, Muhammadiyah and NU have tended to remain on the sidelines, concerned more with reaffirming their own positions rather than challenging the conservative forces that seek to undermine them. At the same time, these organizations have confirmed their commitment to offering a humanitarian Islam that creates and maintains social harmony.

This article has provided an initial map of the opportunities and challenges faced by moderate Islam in Indonesia. This study has provided a contextual understanding of the obstacles faced, particularly the conservative understandings that have spread romantically at the local level. At the same time, it has offered a practical contribution by highlighting the importance of maintaining shared understandings between religious groups—including regarding the importance of upholding moderate values in everyday life. To curb the rise of conservatism, religious and social organizations need to promote moderatism through their formal and non-formal activities. Interfaith harmony should come not only from Indonesia’s largest religious organizations but also from all elements of society. Only then can harmony be realized. One important implication of this study is a new model for realizing moderate discourses through real action, one that relies on cross-institutional partnerships between religious organizations and government organs to create understandings of Islam that are moderate, open, tolerant, and sustainable.

This article has only investigated how Indonesia’s two largest civil society organizations have promoted religious moderatism. Further analysis is necessary to provide a more contextual understanding of moderate Islam and its realization in Indonesia. Aside from Muhammadiyah and NU, Indonesia is home to several other Islamic organizations, all of which may contribute to the manifestation of moderatism. Further research is necessary to better understand the external factors that have contributed to religious moderatism in Indonesia. More diverse datasets are also required, as this study has relied primarily on internal data from Muhammadiyah and NU. To ensure a more comprehensive understanding of religious moderatism, other organizations’ views and activities should be understood using a comparative approach. This study recommends a collaborative approach to disseminating discourses and taking real action to achieve religious moderatism at not only the organizational level but also at the smaller scale within communities throughout Indonesia.

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