

## **PRACTICING WHAT IT PREACHES? Understanding the Contradictions between Pluralist Theology and Religious Intolerance within Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*The Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has long been known for its moderate, pluralist theology. However, many grassroots NU clerics and activists do not pay attention to these pluralist teachings. Instead, they carried out attacks and religious persecutions against religious minorities such as the Ahmadi and Shi'ite communities in Indonesia. It is puzzling to see a big contradiction between the pluralist theological beliefs articulated by some of NU's senior clerics and the religiously intolerant actions conducted by many of its clerics and activists against religious minorities at a grassroots level. Using insights from social movement theory, this article argues that the roots of such contradictions can be traced back to NU's organizational structure, which is decentralized and leave ultimate theological authority with local clerics who run their own Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and issue their own theological interpretations and rulings (fatwa) that are being obeyed by their students and followers.*

*[NU telah lama dikenal berteologi moderat dan pluralis. Meskipun demikian, ulama dan aktifis akar rumput kurang memperhatikan ajaran pluralis*

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*tersebut. Bahkan sebagian dari mereka justru terlibat dalam penyerangan dan persekusi kelompok minoritas seperti Ahmadiyah dan Shiah di Indonesia. Hal ini cukup membingungkan dan kontradiktif antara artikulasi pemikiran pluralis tokoh senior NU dengan tindakan intoleran yang dilakukan pengikut NU di level akar rumput. Dengan pendekatan teori gerakan sosial, artikel ini menjelaskan kontradiksi tersebut dengan melacak akarnya pada struktur organisasi NU yang terdesentralisasi dan otoritas teologi berbasis ulama lokal yang mempunyai pesantren dan interpretasi keagamaannya sendiri yang dipatuhi oleh santri dan pengikutnya.]*

**Keywords:** Nahdlatul Ulama, social movement, religious intolerance, Indonesia

## A. Introduction

Religious intolerance has become an increasing concern in post-Reformasi Indonesia, as incidents of violence and persecution against religious minority groups in Indonesia have increased within the past decade. During this period, incidents of intolerance against religious minorities have affected members of the Ahmaddiya community, Shiite Muslims, and Christians. The persistence of religious intolerance incidents occurring over the past decade and the lack of willingness by both national and subnational governments to resolve the problem have seriously tarnished Indonesia's human rights records and international reputation as a consolidated democratic country.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the most troubling incidents of religious intolerance were directed against two notable Muslim minorities: the Ahmadis, originally brought to Indonesia from Pakistan during the 1920s by followers of its founder (and self-proclaimed prophet) Mirza Ghulam Ahmed, and Shiite Islam, which in contemporary times are being brought to Indonesia by Iranian preachers and Indonesian clerics who studied in Iran. Due to the Ahmadi community's belief that their founder was a prophet, in contradiction to the Islamic teaching that there can be no new prophet

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<sup>2</sup> International human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have cited intolerance incidents against religious minorities and the Indonesian state's failure to protect them from persecutions as a rationale for the poor human rights records ratings for Indonesia in the post-*Reformasi* period.

after the death of Prophet Muhammad, the Ahmadi community has been targeted with persecutions and violent attacks against their mosques and settlements in the past few decades. In Pakistan, the Ahmadis have been considered a heretical sect since 1960, and they have been classified as a “non-Islamic” religion since 1970, in spite of its followers’ insistence that given its theological roots and beliefs in the basic Islamic creeds, the Ahmadis are Muslims as well. As a result, the Ahmadis were targeted for numerous violent attacks both in Pakistan as well as in other Muslim countries such as Malaysia.

Shiism has been involved in violent conflicts with the mainstream Sunni community within Islam ever since the foundation of the religion in the seventh century. This conflict originated with the dispute on whether the successors of the Prophet Muhammad should come from the descendants of Imam Ali bin Ibn Thalib or whether it can come from any Muslims of good will. This dispute, which then was transformed to conflicts over other aspects of traditions, rituals, and authority, has sadly continued to this day, where Sunni-Shiite disputes can be seen in the ongoing violent conflicts in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as in periodic communal strifes in Iran, Lebanon, Pakistan, and numerous other countries. However, in Indonesia, for decades Shiism was tolerated, if not accepted by most mainstream Islamic groups, including the country’s two largest Muslim-majority organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, to be a legitimate Islamic sect.<sup>3</sup> It was only after Indonesia underwent an Islamic revival during the 1990s and 2000s, and numerous conservative, Salafi-oriented new Islamic movements emerged,<sup>4</sup> that this recognition was thrown into question, after these new movements began to gain power and influence within the country’s public sphere.

Within the past decade, several notable incidents involving the violent persecutions against Indonesian Ahmaddis and Shiite members have occurred, including those in West Lombok on 19 October 2005 and

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<sup>3</sup> This was affirmed by senior NU leaders such as Abdurrahman Wahid, the organization’s former chairman (1984-1999) and Said Aqil Siradj, its current chairman (2010-present).

<sup>4</sup> Such groups include the Muslim Brotherhood’s inspired Justice and Development Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera* – PKS) and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI).

in Cikeusik, Banten on 6 February 2011 against the Ahmadi Community, and the 12 August 2012 attack on the Shi'a community in Sampang, Madura. These violent incidents were encouraged by the actions of religious authorities, such as the 2005 fatwa of the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) which reaffirms its 1980 fatwa which declared Indonesian Ahmadis as a deviant sect prohibited them to proselytize their faith to outsiders. State actions taken to enforce the MUI fatwa, most importantly the June 2008 Surat Keputusan Bersama (Joint Ministerial Decree - SKB) issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Religious Affairs, and Attorney General's Office which declared Ahmadiyah to be a deviant sect and prohibited its members to proselytize their faith to outsiders, is also cited as official regulations that encouraged violence and persecutions to be committed against known Ahmadi members throughout Indonesia.

When one looks at the groups responsible for provoking these acts of violence against the two Muslim minorities, what is striking is the fact that they were not initiated by the usual suspects- radical Islamic groups such as *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front, FPI) or Laskar Jihad. Instead, they were staged by local clerics, their pupils within the Islamic boarding schools (*pesantrens*) that they founded, and the rank-and-file public who worshipped at their mosques. Often, the clerics were affiliated with Indonesia's largest Muslim-majority organization, the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), an organization that was publicly known for their advocacy of tolerance and pluralism for religious minority groups and their adherents.<sup>5</sup>

The fact that NU-affiliated clerics and their followers were the instigators of incidents such as the Sampang incident against the Shi'ite and the Kuningan and West Lombok incidents against the Ahmadis, indicate that there is a contradiction between official NU theology advocated by its leaders, most famously by its long-term chairman the late Abdurrahman Wahid, and the religiously intolerant actions conducted

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<sup>5</sup> Jeremy Menchik (2016) argues that NU's toleration of religious minorities is based on communal tolerance instead of individual-level tolerance commonly practiced in Western countries. Under communal tolerance, some religious minorities are tolerated, but not others, depending on whether such groups are theologically compatible with fundamental Islamic beliefs or not. This is why it can tolerate Christians and Hindus, but not Muslim minority sects such as the Ahmadis.

by some of its clerics and activists against religious minorities at the grassroots level. How can we explain this puzzle and understand why such contradictions take place?

Using insights from new social movement (NSM) theory, this article argues that the roots of such contradictions can be traced back to NU's organizational structure, which is decentralized and leave ultimate theological authority with local clerics who run their own Islamic boarding (*pesantren*) schools and issue their own theological interpretations and rulings (*fatwa*) to be obeyed by their students and followers. As a result, the opinions and rulings of the NU Central Board are not always followed by rank-and-file clerics. Consequently, unlike more hierarchical Indonesian Islamic organizations (i.e., the Muhammadiyah), NU leadership board has no institutional mechanisms in place to discipline these clerics and force them to accept the rulings it has issued.

After a brief review of social movement theory (especially the NSM paradigm), and how it relates to NU's decentralised organizational structure, this article tests this argument by comparing the tolerant theological teachings of prominent NU clerics such as Abdurrahman Wahid and Mustofa Bisri (Gus Mus), with the actual practices in Sampang and West Lombok during the time violent persecutions against Shiite and Ahmadi minorities living in these areas occurred. The data from newspaper and online accounts of the incidents is further enriched with first-hand data collected from the interviews with NU clerics and activists from the author's dissertation fieldwork in Indonesia, as well as from his subsequent research. The article finds sufficient evidence to affirm the argument and find that the religious intolerance actions committed by NU members have greatly tarnished the reputation of the NU as a moderate and inclusivist organization. The article concludes with some recommendations to prevent religious intolerance incidents by NU clerics and activists in the future.

## **B. Theoretical Framework**

One of the most widely used framework in the social sciences to explain how the structure of different social organizations are shaping their internal decision-making and the effectiveness of their policy strategies is social movement theory. Social movement theory has become

a large body of work seeking to explain the rising importance of civil society organizations (CSOs) with goals to advocate a given political change advocated by these groups. Social movement theory contains three main concepts: political opportunity structure, resource mobilization, and framing. *Political opportunity structure* is the availability political space (usually measured as an open public sphere in a democratic polity) for the movement to enable it to effectively carry out its advocacy. *Resource mobilization* is the ability of the organization to secure and utilize resources, both political and material, that enable it to carry out its advocacy campaign effectively, while *framing* is the rhetorics and narratives used by the organization to promote the causes it advocates. While opportunity structure and resource mobilization are structural-based determinants of a social movement's political actions and their successes and failures, framing is agent-based and can be utilized with little regard to the existing socio-political structure. It is widely utilized by the New Social Movements (NSM) paradigm that rose in the late 1980s and early 1990s to challenge the hegemony of the more structure-oriented, rationalist, resource mobilization school.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike its predecessors, which assume a coherent and unilateral social movement run by a group of activists who shares a similar set of goals, NSM theorists believe that a social movement can consist of “a plurality of groups, interests, and orientations, that can conflict or be in tension with one another”.<sup>7</sup> They believe that scholars should reveal “the existence of plurality, conflict, and tension in collective action” as well as how these conditions help to structure “the gestalt of contemporary

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<sup>6</sup> Unlike resource mobilization theory, NSM theorists argue that social movements are not necessarily cohesive and coherent political actors with rationally calculated goals. Instead, they can consist of multiple actors with few things in common except for their goal to seek change in a political problem (e.g., democratization, environmental protection, etc.). NSM advocates also argue that unlike earlier social movement theorists who argue that social movements have a material-based goals and always seek to be incorporated into formal political process (e.g., labour movements), instead the goals of social movements can be primarily ideational (e.g., environment, gender and racial equality) and often prefer to stay out of formal political process altogether.

<sup>7</sup> Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, ed. by John Keane and Paul Mier (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 351.

social movements and their composite groups”.<sup>8</sup> Based on these, a social movement is no longer assumed to consist of a group of activists who share a common sets of grievances against a social problem along with a common set of remedies to resolve them, but as a complex organization consisting of individual activists who can have different sets of goals and priorities and often disagree with one another on the best way to obtain them, while remaining members of a specific movement.

Scholars such as Gamson and Tarrow have differentiated social movements into two subgroups based on their organizational structures: centralized and decentralized organizations.<sup>9</sup> The former is characterized with a more coherent leadership hierarchy and decision-making structure. While such movements are able to issue decisions that have been carefully vetted and discussed by the leadership, and also have a better coordination between its hierarchy and rank-and-file members, centralized influence key decisions or acts in the name of the organization. They also tend to be more bureaucratic, which can creates longer time lags for decisions to be made.

On the other hand, decentralized organizations often consists of “a great variety of localized groups or cells which are essentially independent, but which can combine to form larger configurations or divide to form smaller units.”<sup>10</sup> Their lack of hierarchical structure enables rank-and-file members to have more authority over policy decisions, and in some cases, they can often act in the name of the organization without prior approval from its hierarchy. It is also often faster to discern and disseminate new ideas within decentralized organizations than centralized ones, as there are fewer ‘gatekeepers’ who can prevent the idea from being disseminated within the organization. Decentralized movements structure is also beneficial for groups operating under more repressive political environment, as it would not be easier for an authoritarian government to completely suspend their political activities. However, as predicted by the NSM theory, decentralized organization tend to have less

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<sup>8</sup> Greg Martin, *Understanding Social Movements* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> William A. Gamson, *The Strategy of Social Protest* (Homewood, Ill: The Dorsey Press, 1975); Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power Movement Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> Tarrow, *Power Movement Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, p. 130.

cohesion compared to the more centralized ones, as internal disputes and disagreements from within the organization on certain ideas and policies can easily be developed and not contained from within. As a result, different factions from the same organization can have contradictory positions that differ from one another regarding a particular issue the organization is trying to address.

The NU is an example of a decentralized social movement/civil society organization, as while the organization has a central leadership board (*Tanfidziyah*) and central advisory board (*Syuriah*) that are mandated by the organization's by-laws to be the ultimate decision making bodies for the organization, the organization neither controls nor funds its approximately 18,000 strong Islamic schools (*pesantren*), universities, and other social services institutions. Instead, these institutions were founded, operated, and funded by individual NU clerics (*kyai*) who declared themselves to be affiliated with the NU. These *kyai* held ultimate decision-making authority within their own *pesantren*, binding their students (*santri*) and local community members to the legal opinion (*fatwa*) and other religious directives they issued –including those concerning which candidates to support in national and local elections. Since authority rests on individual *kyais* instead of the NU central leadership board, the former often issue *fatwa* and other rulings that are contradicting, even conflicting, those issued by the latter. As a result, decisions issued by senior clerics who sat in the leadership board are often contradicted by individual *kyais* at the grassroots level. Sometimes these decisions are completely ignored by the latter.

### C. NU's Pluralist Theology as Articulated by Its Top Leaders

This contradiction between the theological rulings issued by the NU leadership and those held by rank-and-file *kyais* and their followers can be seen in the conflicting viewpoints regarding the issue of religious tolerance and pluralism within the organization. Over the past three decades, the NU leadership has strongly support a more tolerant and inclusive interpretation of Islam in its relationships with other religious groups in Indonesia. This can be clearly seen from the theological statements made by the late Abdurrahman Wahid, NU's long-term chairman (1984-1999) and a former Indonesian President (1999-2001).

Wahid was known to be a strong supporter for Indonesia's inclusivist ideology *Pancasila*, based on his belief that the national ideology is the best mechanism to protect and guarantee the religious freedom of Indonesia's minority religions. While 88 percent of Indonesian population are Muslims, there are a number of sizable religious minorities living in Indonesia as well: Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Confucians. The Indonesian Muslim community is also divided among traditionalist NU, modernist Muhammadiyah, conservative, Salafi-influenced Islamic groups, and numerous small Islamic minority sects such as the Ahmadi and the Shiite. This extraordinary religious diversity necessitates the need for a secular state, since it is the only one that would unite all members of these religious traditions under a single nation-state.<sup>11</sup>

Wahid argues that *Pancasila* reflects the religious plurality of the Indonesian people and ensures that members of these different religious traditions would be able to practice religious tolerance with one another.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, *Pancasila* recognizes the validity of theological revelations of each religious tradition and serves as the legal foundation for the state to guarantee and protect the religious freedom of all religions, particularly those of religious minorities. Under *Pancasila*, "all religions receive equal status before the law and receive the same legal protection from the state."<sup>13</sup> Should *Pancasila* be replaced as Indonesia's national ideology with the *shari'a*, Wahid believes that it will result in sectarianism that will privilege Muslims (specifically revivalist Muslims) over other religious traditions within the Indonesian society. Thus, Wahid rejects an Islamic state because:

....our nation is very heterogeneous in their way of life, thus the state could not only serve the interests of Muslims alone. Many Indonesian Muslims, myself included, have rejected the Islamic state in Indonesia. Their beliefs and opinions, along with those of Indonesians who are not Muslims (more than 10 percent of Indonesia's population), should be respected. It is foolish to assume that the concept of an Islamic state is accepted by all Muslims in this country, just because Islam is the majority

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<sup>11</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, "NU dan Negara Islam", in *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita: Agama, Masyarakat dan Negara Demokrasi* (Jakarta: Wahid Institute, 2006), pp. 100–5.

<sup>12</sup> Nur Khalik Ridwan, *Gus Dur dan Negara Pancasila* (Yogyakarta: Tanah Air, 2010), pp. 31–2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

religion in Indonesia.<sup>14</sup>

To preserve the climate that supports inter-religious tolerance and pluralism, Wahid argues that Muslims should engage in continuous dialogue among themselves, with non-Islamic religions, and with the greater human community. He cites a teaching issued by his mentor the late Achmad Siddiq, arguing that NU members should practice three forms of ‘ecumenic dialogue’ (*ukhummah*) with other religious groups: 1) dialogue with fellow Muslims, especially with Muhammadiyah members (*ukhummah Islamiyah*); 2) dialogue with all Indonesians, especially with non-Muslims (*ukhummah wathaniyah*); and 3) dialogue with the rest of humanity, to promote common values such as world peace, human rights, and environmental protection (*ukhummah basyariyyah*).<sup>15</sup>

Said Aqil Siradj, the current NU chairman, has stated that the NU will continue to promote religious dialogue with non-Muslim religions as part of its promotion of Islam as *rahmatan lil alamin* which is “tolerant, opposes religious exclusivism and separatism, and recognizes the religious plurality and diversity within the Indonesian society.”<sup>16</sup> He condemned recent attacks against minority Islamic sects at the hand of revivalist-leaning organizations, such as the Ahmadiyah and Shiite minority sects, and has pledged that his organization will continue to condemn violent acts against religious minorities.<sup>17</sup> Regarding Ahmadiyah, Said Aqil stated that while he considers it as a deviant Islamic sect, he argues that it should

<sup>14</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid, “Islam: Ideologis atukah Kultural?”, in *Islamku, Islam Anda, Islam Kita: Agama, Masyarakat dan Negara Demokrasi* (Jakarta: Wahid Institute, 2006), pp. 50–3.

<sup>15</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, “Traditions for the Future: The Reconstruction of Traditionalist Discourse within NU”, in *Nabdatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia*, ed. by Greg Barton and Greg Fealy (Clayton, Vic: Monash Asia Institute, Monash University, 1996), pp. 163–89.

<sup>16</sup> “Presiden Puji NU Tegakkan Pluralisme” (18 Jul 2011), <http://test.cathnewsindonesia.com/2011/07/18/presiden-puji-nu-tegakkan-pluralisme/>, accessed 5 Feb 2012.

<sup>17</sup> “KH Said Aqil Siradj: Jangan Ragu Dengan PBNU”, *The Wahid Institute* (22 Mar 2011), [http://www.wahidinstitute.org/v1/News/Detail/?id=295/hl=id/KH\\_Said\\_Aqil\\_Siradj\\_Jangan\\_Ragu\\_Dengan\\_PBNU](http://www.wahidinstitute.org/v1/News/Detail/?id=295/hl=id/KH_Said_Aqil_Siradj_Jangan_Ragu_Dengan_PBNU), accessed 5 Feb 2012; “Said Aqil: Syiah Tidak Sesat” (27 Jan 2012), <https://nasional tempo.co/read/379960/said-aqil-syiah-tidak-sesat>, accessed 5 Feb 2012.

not be dealt with using violence, as he argues that Ahmadiyah members are “full fledged Indonesian citizens which should be respected, protected and possess the same rights and responsibilities as any other Indonesian citizens.”<sup>18</sup> As Indonesian Ahmadis are also citizens, Said Aqil states that:

...there are our brothers with the same status and rights as any other citizens that we all should respect. This is *ukhawah wathaniyah* (dialogue with fellow citizens) within the NU. What is important is that they are not breaking any laws.<sup>19</sup>

Regarding the Shiite minority, Said Aqil has repeatedly declared that Shiism “is not a deviant sect and is a member of the Islamic community just like the mainstream Sunni majority.”<sup>20</sup> This is strengthening by a 2006 NU fatwa which states that Shiism is not a deviant sect. Said Aqil elaborates that within Sunni and Shia there are so many schools of thoughts, which indicates the wide range of theological diversity within Islam, but it is not something that should be condemned, but instead, “it is something that needs to be responded through dialogue (*ukhawah*) and toleration.”<sup>21</sup>

Former NU supreme leader (*rais aam*) Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri, also have condemned acts of violence against members of Ahmadi and Shiite minorities In regard to the Ahmadis, Bisri responded that:

The proper NU path to deal with a deviant sect is through peaceful dialogue to bring them to return to the right path, not through condemnations or through the use of physical violence. Anyone who resorts to violence [against members of the Ahmadis Sect] do not follow the NU path. Instead, an NU follower must approach them through the principles of neutrality (*tawasuth*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), and balance (*tawasun*).<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Pribadi Wicaksono, “NU: Ahmadiyah Menyimpang, Tapi Tak Boleh Dikerasi”, *Tempo.co*, <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/323143/nu-ahmadiyah-menyimpang-tapi-tak-boleh-dikerasi>, accessed 14 Dec 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Solichan Arif, “Ketum PBNU: Ahmadiyah Saudara dan Patut Dihormati” (14 Nov 2013), <https://news.okezone.com/read/2013/11/14/337/897151/ketumpbnu-ahmadiyah-saudara-dan-patut-dihormati>, accessed 14 Dec 2015.

<sup>20</sup> “Said Aqil: Syiah Tidak Sesat”.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> “Gus Mus: Jangan Gunakan Kekerasan pada Ahmadiyah”, *NU Online*, <https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/12105/gus-mus-jangan-gunakan-kekerasan-pada-ahmadiyah>, accessed 14 Dec 2015.

Bisri added that the great NU ulama of the past century all have considered Ahmadis to be a deviant sect. However, they allowed the sect to co-exist with the NU community. This is because these ulama “were following the path of the Prophet Muhammad (blessed are his name) who are wise in responding to differences [within the Muslim community].”<sup>23</sup> Lastly, Bisri condemns the violence against members of the Ahmadi community, stating that: “This is not about religious beliefs, but is about committing violence against. We cannot allow certain folks to play God and condemn their fellow mankind,” alluding to the alleged involvement of radical Islamic groups such as *Front Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Front, FPI), in inciting violence against Ahmadis, Shiite, and other religious minority groups in Indonesia.<sup>24</sup>

Even more conservative senior NU ulama such as Kyai Haji Sholahuddin Wahid (Abdurrahman Wahid’s younger brother) have condemned acts of violence against members of Indonesian Ahmadi community. He stated that,

The Indonesian Police must act swiftly against anyone who tried to destroy the praying facilities and assets that belongs to the Ahmadi community. It is important to do so, in order to prevent Ahmadi members to feel uncomfortable living in this country.<sup>25</sup>

Hence, we can conclude that there is a consensus within the NU senior ulama regarding the need of the NU community to tolerate members of religious minorities, including Muslim-minority sects, to engage in peaceful dialogue with them, and to condemn any violent acts against religious minorities. NU’s long-standing principles of neutrality (*tawassuth*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), and balance (*tawasun*) that have been revived by reformers such as Abdurrahman Wahid during the 1980s are being reinterpreted to justify the organization’s tolerant actions for

<sup>23</sup> Arie Yoenianto, “Gus Mus: Jangan Habisi Ahmadiyah” (12 Feb 2011), <https://news.okezone.com/read/2011/02/12/337/424215/gus-mus-jangan-habisi-ahmadiyah>, accessed 14 Dec 2015.

<sup>24</sup> “Gus Mus: Tindak Tegas Pelaku Kekerasan”, *NU Online*, <http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/26716/gus-mus-tindak-tegas-pelaku-kekerasan>, accessed 14 Dec 2015.

<sup>25</sup> “Gus Sholah: Jangan Sampai Pengikut Ahmadiyah Tak Aman di Indonesia”, *NU Online*, <https://www.nu.or.id/post/read/12066/gus-sholah-jangan-sampai-pengikut-ahmadiyah-tak-aman-di-indonesia>, accessed 14 Dec 2015.

religious minorities in light of increasing religious diversity in Indonesia. Members of the NU central leadership (PBNU) and its senior ulama, have affirmed these principles to condemn acts of intolerance and violence against Muslim-minority sects.

Hence, it is puzzling to see that at grassroots level, violent actions against these sects are still being committed, often by local ulama who affiliated themselves with the NU. The following section details some of these violent actions and the involvement of local NU communities in them, in order to explain the discrepancies between the tolerant theology promoted by NU leadership and the intolerant and violent acts committed by local NU ulama and followers against Muslim-minority sects against the Ahmadis and the Shiites.

#### **D. NU Local Branches' Intolerant Actions**

As pointed out in an earlier section, violence against Ahmadi and Shiite communities throughout Indonesia escalated since the 2000s. Acts of violence against the Ahmadis have increased in response to the MUI's 2005 fatwa which reaffirmed the organization's 1980 ruling which declared that the Ahmadis is a deviant Islamic sect that should be prohibited throughout Indonesia and to the joint declaration of the Ministries of Home Affairs, Religious Affairs, and Law and Human Rights of June 2008. Since 2005, violence incidents against the Ahmadi community in Indonesia had occurred in Kampus Mubarak, Parung (July 2005), Cianjur, West Java (September 2005), West Lombok (October 2005), Central Lombok (February 2006), Kuningan, West Java (December 2007), and Cikeusik, Banten (February 2011).<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, the most significant attack against the Shiite community in Sampang, East Java, in December 2011, although there were earlier attacks against Shiite

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<sup>26</sup> Erni Budiwanti, "Pluralism Collapses: A Study of the Jama'ah Ahmadiyah Indonesia and its Persecution", Working Paper, no. 117 (Singapore: NUS, 2009), p. 18, <https://ari.nus.edu.sg/Publication/Detail/1370>, accessed 18 Dec 2015; Robin Bush and Budhy Munawar-Rachman, "NU and Muhammadiyah: Majority Views on Religious Minorities in Indonesia", in *Religious Diversity in Muslim-majority States in Southeast Asia: Areas of Toleration and Conflict*, ed. by Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu (Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute, 2014), p. 28.

communities in Pasuruan and Bondowoso, East Java, as well.<sup>27</sup>

The increasing violent incidents against members of Ahmadis and Shiite minorities have been attributed to both the more exclusivist legal actions of the MUI and the Indonesian Government against both groups and the rise of more conservative, Salafi-oriented Islamic groups that have openly threatened violence against the two groups, such as the FPI, *Forum Ummat Islam* (Forum of Islamic Ummah - FUI), and *Lembaga Penelitian dan Pengkajian Islam* (Institute of Islamic Research and Study - LPPPI).<sup>28</sup> However, many of the actual perpetrators of these incidents were local-level ulama and their followers from mainstream Islamic organizations, notably the NU.

For instance, it is widely believed that violent persecutions of Ahmadis in West Lombok in 2005 were instigated by local Islamic clerics of West Nusa Tenggara (*Tuan Guru*), who interpreted and preached about the MUI *fatwa* against the Ahmadis to their local communities. As these *Tuan Gurus* were considered to be ultimate figures of authority for local Muslims, their provocative and angry sermons against the Ahmadis and their call for the faithful *ummah* to enforce the MUI *fatwa* were widely attributed as a primary motivator for the mass violent actions against the Ahmadi community in West Lombok.<sup>29</sup> As most *Tuan Gurus* and their *pesantrens* in West Nusa Tenggara were affiliated with the NU, one cannot help but conclude that it was the local NU affiliates within the West Nusa Tenggara province who were responsible for the violence and persecutions against the Ahmaddis within the province.

The same phenomena can also be seen in the actions of the local branch of the NU in Kuningan, West Java, when violence against the Ahmadis erupted in December 2007. The local NU board (*Pimpinan Cabang Nahdlatul Ulama - PCNU*) ignored the official position of PBNU for NU members not to commit acts of violence against the Ahmadis, but instead were involved in provoking and participating in the attacks against

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<sup>27</sup> Bush and Munawar-Rachman, "NU and Muhammadiyah: Majority Views on Religious Minorities in Indonesia", p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> Erni Budiwanti, *Pluralism Collapses: A Study of the Jama'ah Ahmadiyah Indonesia and its Persecution*, pp. 15–6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

the Ahmadi mosque and settlement within their district.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, violence against the Shiite community in Sampang were precipitated by the joint *fatwa* of the Sampang MUI and NU district branches which declared that Shiism is a deviant sect and that any acts of violence against Shiite followers were not caused by “radical Sunnis” but by acts of “defamation against religion” conducted by the local Shiite leader, Ustadz Tajul Muluk.<sup>31</sup> This declaration was issued in spite of the official position of the national MUI, as articulated by its then Deputy Chairman, Ma’ruf Amin, and those of the NU as declared by its Chairman Said Aqil Siradj, that Shiism is not considered to be a deviant sect, but instead is a “bonafide” member of the Muslim community.<sup>32</sup>

Local NU branches continued to defy the official position of the PBNU after these violent incidents have been committed. PCNU Kuningan ignored the pleas made by the PBNU to recant their support for the violent actions against the Ahmadis of Kuningan that PBNU had to reprimand the PCNU Kuningan Head Kiai Haji Mahmud Silahuddin.<sup>33</sup> In the aftermath of the Sampang incident against the Shiites, the PCNU of Eastern Java issued their own *fatwa* declaring that Shiism is a deviant sect. Habib Achmad Zein Alkaf, head of Eastern Java PCNU’s *Syuriab* (religious council) which was responsible for the issuance of *fatwa* on behalf of the organisation’s East Java chapter, condemned NU Chairman’s Said Aqil’s defense of the Shiites and accusing him of “betraying the NU.”<sup>34</sup> Lastly, the then chairman of the West Nusa Tenggara MUI board (whom was also a NU cleric) declared that:

We do not need to have dialogue and conversation with the local Ahmadis because government’s joint decree and the MUI *fatwa* have clarified their status [as a deviant sect]. Hence, there is no further communication between MUI and the Ahmadiyah Jama’ah.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Bush and Munawar-Rachman, “NU and Muhammadiyah: Majority Views on Religious Minorities in Indonesia”, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>35</sup> Mohammad Asyiq Amrulloh, Mustain, and Atun Wardatun, “Dampak Sosial Kekerasan Terhadap Jemaat Ahmadiyah di Lombok dan Upaya Resolusi Konflik”, *Jurnal Penelitian Keislaman*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2010).

There are strong indications that beyond theological and legal justifications declaring both Ahmadis and Shi'ite to be a deviant sect, local violence against members of both communities were also motivated by competition for mosque memberships and *pesantren* studentships between leaders of these sects and local NU clerics. This can be seen clearly in the case of Sampang, where the leader of the local Shi'ite community, Uztadz Tajul Muluk, was considered by many to be a leader with strong charismatic attributes who widely gained popularity during his *da'wah* (preaching) activities and is increasingly attracting young pupils to join his *pesantren*:

In the case of Sampang, the Shi'ite leader [Tajul Muluk] was someone with a rising reputation within the local community, while the local NU ulama (*kyais*) reputation and following were in decline. Hence, the kyais joined forces and rallied their followers to burn the Shi'ite mosque and settlement in the area.<sup>36</sup>

In West Lombok, there were also indications that the local ulama (*Tuan Gurus*) were also threatened by the preaching activities of the local Ahmadi clerics, who were persuading some local youths to join their *pesantren* schools. As a result, the attacks against the local Ahmadi community were not only directed to target their housing settlements, but also their mosques, *pesantrens*, and orphanages, which were considered to be the centre for the Ahmadis to try preaching their beliefs to the local community.<sup>37</sup> These attacks were justified by the clerics as an act of holy war (*jihad*) against 'enemies of the faith' (*musub akidah*) conducted by the 'true Muslims' [led by the *Tuan Gurus*] to defend their faith (*bela agama*) from the Ahmadi 'heretics'.<sup>38</sup>

However, while local-level competition between local NU clerics and members of the Ahmadi and Shi'ite minorities helped to drive violent persecutions against these minorities, international geo-politics is also used by some clerics as justifications for the NU to restrict the activities of these groups in Indonesia. This is especially directed against Shi'ites, which are currently engaged in conflict with the Sunni groups in

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<sup>36</sup> Interview with Ahmad Suaedy, Depok, West Java, 29 October 2015.

<sup>37</sup> Erni Budiwanti, *Pluralism Collapses: A Study of the Jama'ah Ahmadiyah Indonesia and its Persecution*, p. 17.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

numerous Middle Eastern countries. For instance, the Deputy Head of the Pesantren Al Hikam II in Depok, West Java, stated that Shi'a activities in Indonesia needs to be limited because:

Currently Indonesia has become a 'boxing arena' between two powers: Saudi Arabia which advocates Wahhabism, and Iran which advocates Shiism. Both of these theological streams are determined to provoke and destroy each other. In practice, anti-Shi'ite movements in Indonesia are often sponsored by the Wahhabis, while anti-Wahhabi movements are sponsored by the Shiites. Because of this, the NU *pesantrens* must reinforce their *Al Sunnah Wa Jamaah* teachings to compete against both the Wahhabis and the Shiites.<sup>39</sup>

Other NU activists also believe that the involvement of local NU *kyai* and their followers in the Sampang incident against the Shiite community might be instigated by Middle Eastern-influenced conservative activists, as part of a larger theological battle against Shiites:

There are certain segments within the Muslim community who sought to provoke and cleanse the Shiite community in Indonesia. Some of them are funded by the Saudis, while others are supported by the intelligence service of the Indonesian Army (TNI). There is little chance NU activists would suddenly turn against Shi'a on their own. If they did so, it is because of the Middle Eastern influence.<sup>40</sup>

Whether they are caused by theological, material, or geopolitical reasons, local NU members often perpetrated violent actions and persecutions against Ahmadi and Shiite communities, namely in West Lombok, Kuningan (West Java), and Sampang (East Java). As shown above, these action were often done in defiance of the NU national leadership which have consistently promoted toleration and peaceful dialogue with members of these minority sects and have condemned violent actions against them in all forms. As I shall argue in the following section, the discrepancy between the national and local NU policies toward Islamic minority sects need to be seen from the decentralised structure of the organization, which empowers local NU branches to openly defy the organization's national leadership and thus, can conduct punitive actions against these minorities with little fear of effective

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Arif Zamzori, Depok, West Java, 29 October 2015.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Ahmad Suaedy, Depok, West Java, 29 October 2015.

sanctions from the national authorities.

### **E. The NU as a Decentralised Organisation and Its Consequences**

Despite the fact that the NU has a national leadership board (PBNU) a religious council (*Syuriah*), and local leadership board (PCNU) in each Indonesian provinces and districts/cities, the leadership does not actually own NU-affiliated pesantrens, universities, hospitals, clinics, and other social service agencies that are affiliated with the organisation. Actual ownership of such institutions rest with the individual ulama (*kyai*) who founded the institutions, recruit students (*santri*) and staff members to run these institutions, and raise funds to finance them. In addition, there are numerous NU-affiliated NGOs, think tanks, and other civil society organisations, which are founded by NU activists, but are not formally affiliated with the organisation. These include prominent think tanks such as the Wahid Institute in Jakarta, *Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Masyarakat* (Institute for the Study of Islam and Society - LKiS) in Yogyakarta, Averroes Institute in Malang, as well as other similar institutions in other Indonesian cities.

As individual *kyais* normally founded the *pesantren* and recruit students and followers on their own, they gained autonomy and authority from local communities where they built their pesantren. While such an authority was individually centered around the *kyai*, but it is not transferred into the local and national NU leadership board. As a result, observers consider the leadership boards not to have much power and authority for individual NU followers:

There is no effective structure within the NU, as existing organisational structures within the organisation are not really effective. NU's on-the-ground foundation is based upon a *kyai* in a given village (kampung). Local people follow the *kyai*, but not the NU leadership boards.<sup>41</sup>

In an earlier time as a social movement which opposed Suharto's New Order regime during the late 1980s and early 1990s, this decentralised structure of the NU was beneficial for pro-democracy proponents within the organisation such as Abdurrahman Wahid and young activists within NU-linked NGOs and think tanks such as LKiS to spread their ideas on

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Ahmad Suaedy, Depok, West Java, 29 October 2015.

democracy and religious tolerance within the NU, as it allows them space to operate relatively freely within the organisation while effectively evade possible reprisals from the Suharto regime and conservative ulama within the NU.<sup>42</sup> However, in a democratic, post-*Reformasi* Indonesia, where numerous theological ideas from different streams and sources can be articulated freely within the public sphere, including among different NU *kyai* and followers, NU's decentralised structure reveals its disadvantages, as it becomes difficult for NU leadership to clamp down on individual *kyais* different interpretations on religious matters, including on how to treat Muslim minorities such as the Ahmadis and the Shiites.

Even though the NU claims up to 60 million Indonesian Muslims to be its followers, in practice, most of these followers are following the *kyais* who voluntarily affiliated themselves and their pesantrens with the NU. Because these followers (*jama'ah*) are actually following the *kyai*, it becomes impossible for the NU leadership board to control them:

Only a small number of NU jam'aah are actually registered as full-time members of the organisation (*jam'iyah*). Most jam'aah follow the NU because they follow the same traditions and rituals their kyais are practicing (e.g., praying over the deceased (*tahlilan*), praying over the graves of deceased ulamas (*ziarah kubur*)). However, most of them would never be active in NU's daily activities. Hence, *kyais* become very crucial in preventing religious conflicts, as it is the *kyai* who bind together all of his followers.<sup>43</sup>

Given the central role of the *kyai* in determining the possible actions of their *jama'ah*, including their behaviors toward religious minorities, their roles become very crucial in preventing religious conflict. However, this becomes problematic as the NU leadership board do not have much authority over most *kyais*:

The most effective ways to prevent intolerant and violent actions toward religious minorities is through the assistance of *kyais*. However, organisationally the NU do not have control over these *kyais*, even though they are nominally NU jam'aah. It is more effective to influence the *kyais* through informal channels (e.g., senior *kyais* whom used to taught them)

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<sup>42</sup> Bush and Munawar-Rachman, "NU and Muhammadiyah: Majority Views on Religious Minorities in Indonesia", p. 37.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Rumadi Ahmad, Jakarta, 30 October 2015.

rather than through the organisation, as the NU has little authority over these *kyais*.<sup>44</sup>

The NU only has some authority over *kyais* who are sitting as members of its local or national leadership boards. Hence it can issue sanctions over the head of the PCNU in Kuningan when he openly defied the PBNU's ban against committing violence against Ahmadi members. However, even this authority is limited, as these *kyais* can still openly defy PBNU and issue their own fatwa condemning religious minorities, as can be seen in the Sampang incident against the Shiites. As discussed earlier, when the PBNU affirmed their beliefs that Shism is not a deviant sect, the local NU branch in Sampang and the provincial Eastern Java branch issued their own *fatma* declaring that it is indeed a deviant sect. As the PBNU did not issue further clarifications, these local fatwa remained in force, leaving Shiite to be a deviant sect within the East Java province and allowing local authorities to provide ill-treatment against known Shiite followers, particularly those who lived in Sampang.

As *kyais* are self-autonomous, there is a great resistance from individual *kyai* to follow edicts and rules issued by other *kyais*, even though these kyais are technically having a greater rank as PBNU or PCNU members. Thus, many kyais often ignore the edicts of the NU's leadership board, as they believe that at the end of the day, their *santri* and ummah at the grassroots level, will likely follow and obey their fatwas and other teachings. This makes it difficult for the NU to resolve localised incidents of religious violence against Ahmadi and Shiite minorities, as can be seen in the cases of the Kuningan and West Lombok incidents against the Ahmadis and the Sampang case against the Shiites, as local kyais and local NU leadership boards decided to issue their own condemnations against these Muslim minorities, while the national leadership board is powerless to prevent such actions.

## F. Concluding Remarks

Utilising insights from new social movement theory, this article has highlighted the contradictions between the official theological positions of the Nahdlatul Ulama, issued by both the national leadership board

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

(PBNU) and by senior ulama within the organisation, with the actions of local NU branches (PCNU) and NU-affiliated *kyais* at local level, who often issued their own condemnations against Ahmadi and Shiite minorities and sometimes was even directly involved in violent incidents and persecutions against these Muslim minorities, specifically in the Kuningan and West Lombok incidents against the Ahmadis and the Sampang incidents against the Shiites. It argues that such contradictions is caused by the decentralised structure of the organisation, which favors local kyais over those of the PBNU leadership, as ultimate authority at the local level rests on these kyais. While the *kyais* command authority from their respective *santri* and followers, the NU leadership do not have such authority. This makes local *kyai* to have significant influence among their followers and have the final say over theological matters, especially over controversial issues such as how should one treat religious minorities such as Ahmadis and Shiites. Sadly, this often means that local *kyais* are able to exclusivist fatwas that condemn these minorities and encourage their followers to commit violence against them, defying PBNU policies that urged careful precautions and toleration for these persecuted minorities.

The decentralised structure of NU which had worked well for the organisation and allowed its activists plenty of room to maneuver to propagate their pro-democracy ideas during the decades of Suharto's authoritarian rule is now creating a major disadvantage for the organisation, as it creates opportunities for local *kyais* and local NU branches to openly defy the national leadership over questions regarding religious minorities, resulting in the latter to issue more exclusivist fatwas against these minorities. It also create difficulties for the national NU leadership to effectively discipline local *kyai* who had issued provocative condemnations against Ahmadi and Shiite minorities and had encouraged their followers to conduct violent actions against these groups, as local followers tend to accept the authority of local *kyais* over that of PBNU. However, the actions of the local *kyais* are clearly in conflict with those of the NU national leadership, which has clearly stated their condemnations against any acts of violence against these minorities.

In order to resolve this dilemma, PBNU will face some difficult choices, as efforts to create more coherent positions between national and local NU leaderships to prevent further violence against these

Muslim minorities would create plenty of conflicts and contestations between the national leadership and local ulama, who would have to see their authorities eroded over those of the NU leadership board. The local ulama would find it difficult to accept this, as it would have further eroded their authority. However, this might be inevitable if one wishes to protect religious minorities, particularly Ahmadi and Shiite minorities, against future acts of violence and persecutions in the future.

A middle way between PBNU and the local kyais that might be used to prevent future incidents of religious intolerance committed by NU clerics and activists is to open better cooperation and collaboration between PBNU and the rank-and-file clerics and other NU activists to socialize the pluralist theological teachings the NU by the senior leadership of the organisation to the grassroots members of the organization. PBNU can work together with the reputable pesantrens within the NU's schooling system, its affiliated organizations, such as its youth wing GP Ansor and its women's wing *Fatayat* and *Muslimat*, along with its affiliated think tanks and NGOs, to further promote these teachings within the NU community. This could be done by promoting more workshop and open discussion session with local ulama and their branches about religious minorities and on how one can tolerate their presence in spite of theological differences between the NU and these Muslim minority sects, in order to avoid future violent incidents against these minorities in the future.

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