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NEW RELIGIOUS PREACHER IN THE CHANGING RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY: THE OFFLINE AND ONLINE PREACHER OF USTADZ ABDUL SOMAD

Hamdani

Introduction

The proliferation of new Islamic preachers in Indonesia has seriously undermined conventional religious authorities. The media savvy of Abdullah Gymnastiar (popularly known as Aa Gym) serves as an example. Marketing himself to be an Islamic self-help psychology and celebrity guru through his TV channel and publishing company, he has significantly shifted traditional and hierarchical forms of religious authority towards a more familiar and relational kind of authority (Hoesterey 2008, p. 98). He masterfully commanded the media and learnt from secular sources of self-help manuals for Sufi wisdom (Watson 2005, p. 773). Another example is Felix Siauw. Despite coming from a Catholic background with limited understanding of Islamic tradition,

he has successfully drawn a large audience of Muslim youth in many occasions both online and offline. Hew (2018, pp. 64–65) found that Felix has more than four million followers on Facebook, two million followers on Twitter, one million followers on Instagram, and 20,000 subscribers on YouTube in 2017. He is one of the leading social media preachers in Indonesia today (Hew 2018, pp. 64–65).

The new media allows the Muslim public to choose which religious authority fits their intellectual capacity and preference. Like various TV channels which are offered by a service provider, customers can choose which programme suits their taste and individual leanings. As a result, they have the freedom to determine which religious agents are qualified and fulfill their social and spiritual needs. Turner (2007, p. 118) argues that in terms of access, the new media is basically democratic. In a democratic atmosphere, Muslims can find suitable religious opinions in accordance with their own preference in which Hosen (2008, p. 164) called “Fatwa Shopping”. When people feel that a religious edict (*fatwa*) does not fit their wish, they attempt to seek a second opinion. This fact reveals an opening trend of religious authority whose reception shows a surprising diversity in religious life. The democratizing potency of mass media technologies, according to Eickelman and Anderson (1999, p. 2), will have a good effect on strengthening civic pluralism, civil society and a challenge to authoritarian domination in Muslim-majority countries.

The emergence of new preachers is certainly as natural as the emergence of new celebrities in the entertainment world. People continuously expect newcomers to give an alternative or replace the old players. In the last few decades, Indonesian Muslims have known popular preachers such as Hamka, Qosim Nurseha and Zainuddin MZ. From a variety of Muslim preachers, the appearance of Abdul Somad shows a distinct episode in the various spectrum of traditional, moderate, conservative and radical leanings of preachers. His sermons often indicate a traditional understanding of a Muslim agent who interprets religious teachings as traditionalist *nahdliyyin* (members of Nahdlatul Ulama, NU) treat religious texts and realities. At some other times, he has shown his formalism approach and radical thoughts regarding social and political issues. While he has many fans both online and offline, Somad also triggers controversies occasionally which has created many opponents. Therefore, he gets many compliments and at the same time criticisms from the Muslim public. However, his way of preaching has opened the eyes of Muslims concerning a new method and proclivity

of transmission of religious knowledge in the midst of an old fashion way of Islamic preaching.

The investigation of this topic does not only reveal the complexity of religious authority in the Muslim world, but also the dynamic constellation of Indonesian Muslim actors due to the shifting social and political structure. In this case, the transformation is from an authoritarian regime of New Order to a more democratic atmosphere in which people can freely express their ideas and use various media. With the emergence of new media, established pillar of traditional authority is shaken by new actors whose influence emulates the old regime of religious guardians. Traditional authority which mostly relies on oral and print media has been challenged by a new community of internet-based network under the command of new intellectual elites. The new trend of changing religious authority has been identified by many scholars (such as Eickelmen and Anderson 1999; Watson 2005; Turner 2007; Mandaville 2007; Hew 2018; Slama 2018; Nisa 2018). As Nielsen (2016, p. 2) found that traditional Muslim authorities have lost ground after the appearance of new actors whose popularity has been supported by the use of new media and gained many followers. In the *dakwah* world, Ustadz Abdul Somad represents a new actor capable of reviving religious teachings in accordance with majority of public demand with an interesting mass communication. Although he comes from a traditional Islamic background, his speech does not fully represent his original training.

The influence of Abdul Somad in reshaping religious knowledge reveals the changing orientation of traditional agents into multi-faceted expressions of a new actor who speaks to a new audience. The emergence of Somad in various social media platforms has attracted many Muslim audiences who presumably found a suitable preacher in fulfilling their spiritual needs and moral guidance. Somad's followers on Facebook has reached one million, and two million on Instagram. In the YouTube channel, his videos have been viewed by more than fifty million viewers as of February 2018. For this achievement, the media termed him as "Da'i Sejuta View" (the preacher with a million viewers) on par with KH Zainuddin MZ's call, "Da'i Sejuta Ummat" (the preacher with a million audience) (Karni 2018, pp. 28–31). This raising star probably signifies an intertwining pattern of social and political life under the rivalry of authority among actors who continuously attempt to gain the people's support and a greater influence.

Profile of Ustadz Abdul Somad

Born on 18 May 1977 to parents of Malay and Batak descent, Somad was groomed into a religious person. In the small district of Silo Lama, Asahan, North Sumatra, the little Somad grew up with his parents, Bahtiar and Rohana. His father was a palm oil farmer, while his mother was a housewife (Interview with Ustadz Abdul Somad via WhatsApp Messenger, 26 July 2018). Through his mother, Somad has blood links with the great figure Sufi of Sumatra, Syaikh Abdurrahman or Syaikh Silau Laut. His mother raised her children using Sufi values; for example, she recited *Surah Al-Fatihah* (the first chapter of the Quran) a hundred times every night as a regular pray for the success of Somad's life (Gatra 2018, p. 36).

From a young age, Abdul Somad studied in Islamic schools. His grandfather seemingly designated his path towards *dakwah*. It was said that two hectares of coconut field were prepared by his grandfather to support this aim. "It is intended to spread God's messages. He [Somad] should attend Islamic schools", said his grandfather (Gatra 2018, p. 36). That was why he was sent by his parents to his elementary school (SD) in Al-Washliyah Medan and he graduated in 1990. In the same foundation, he continued his studies at MTs Mu'allimin Al-Washliyah and graduated in 1993. His parents later sent him to Pesantren Darul Arafah, Deli Serdang, North Sumatra. He spent only a year there before moving to Madrasah Aliyah Nurul Falah in Indragiri Hulu and graduated in 1996 (Mamnun 2016).

He pursued his undergraduate studies at the State Islamic University (UIN) Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau. However, he did not continue his study at this institution because he decided to take up a scholarship from the Egyptian government to study at Al-Azhar University, Cairo. He was one of the 100 recipients of the scholarship out of 900 Indonesian applicants. After he graduated from Al-Azhar University, he pursued his master degree at the Institute of Dar Al-Hadith Al-Hassania, Morocco. This time, he was also granted a scholarship from the Morocco government after competing with many applicants. At this university, he deepened his understanding of the science of Hadith and wrote a thesis on the "Rijal al-Muwatta' wa al-sahihaini alladzina dhu'afa'ahum al-Nasa'i fi kitab al-Dhu'afa wa al-Matrukin: jam'an wa dirosatan" (Comprehensive Analysis of Narrator of al-Muwatta' and Shahihain (Compilation of Hadith) which are regarded weak by Imam Nasa'i in his work: Dhuafa and Matrukin) (Somadmorocco 2010).

Somad's intellectual capacity and sense of humour has been perceived by his friends since his student days in Egypt and Morocco. This combination later became his "selling point" in preaching. During his studies at Al-Azhar University, he performed remarkably well as proven by his "*jayyid*" (good) grades since the first semester until the end of the course (Gatra 2018, p. 36). His ability to deliver a religious speech was known during his student days at Morocco. The audience enjoyed his speeches when he was invited by the Indonesian Embassy to give a short sermon (*kultum/kuliah tujuh menit*, a seven-minute speech) during the month of Ramadan. He was able to fluently recite many quotes from the Quran and Hadith, names and history of *ulama*. He also peppered his talk with jokes (Interview with Nasrullah Jasam, a friend of Somad, Jakarta, 10 May 2018). However, Somad admitted his intellectual capacity with a humble confession by revealing his experience at Al-Azhar University, Egypt, where he did his undergraduate studies. He said: "Saya ini otaknya pas-pasan" (I'm not a smart person) and that was why he could not take part in many activities (student organizations) like other smart students. He also said that he was able to obtain "*jayyid*" (good) grades only after working hard and concentrating on his studies (Talk Show tvOne 2018).

Back to his hometown, Somad applied for a teaching position at the State Islamic University (UIN) Sultan Syarif Kasim (Suska) in 2008. He was accepted by the Faculty of Ushuluddin (Theology) and taught the science of Hadith. His name, in full family name and academic title, was written in the university's list of lecturers as Abdul Somad Batubara, Lc., D.E.S.A (UIN Suska Riau undated). At his workplace, he also delivered religious speeches on many occasions, such as during the reunion of the alumni of UIN Suska, Jum'ah sermons, public lectures, and during the welcoming of Ramadan. Since Somad was very well-known to the public, the university benefitted not only from his fame when advertising their campus, but the student enrolment had also increased, particularly in the Faculty of Ushuluddin (Gatra 2018, p. 31). In the Islamic university, Somad was an important asset such that other lecturers defended him when the public found out about his involvement with the radical political movement, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI). In a statement published by the media and broadcasted on YouTube, several lecturers from the "Asosiasi Dosen Indonesia" (ADI, Association of Indonesian Lecturers) testified that Somad was a good lecturer and had never been involved in the radical political movement (MPC-ADI Suska Riau 2017).

His popularity has intensified in the last few years since his sermons were uploaded to YouTube. A creative team supporting him, Tafaqquh, has played an important role in publishing Somad's videos in various social media channels (Interview with Ustadz Abdul Somad via WhatsApp Messenger, 26 July 2018). His viewership on social media has increased significantly since then, and his popularity extends beyond Indonesian cities to other Asian countries such as Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. The way he preaches is favoured by many Muslims, not only because of the topics of choice, but also due to his eloquent speech combined with a humorous style. He admits that his idols are Syaikh Muhammad Mutawalli Sya'rawi (a prominent Egyptian preacher) and Hamka (a respected Sumatran preacher) (Interview with Ustadz Abdul Somad via WhatsApp Messenger, 1 August 2018). To the Indonesian public, the art of preaching combined with humour attracts a strong audience. KH Zainuddin MZ, an Indonesian preacher whose popularity was sustained by his eloquent speech and humour, is a good example. In addition, the benefit of using social media is that the audience can watch the sermons at their own convenience and share it among their networks. Therefore, Somad's popularity has been increasing such that he has become too busy and cannot accept any invitations, even from President Jokowi (*Berita Indonesia* 2017). He admits that his schedule has been fully booked until May 2020 (Interview with Ustadz Abdul Somad via WhatsApp Messenger, 1 August 2018).

Somad's popularity and his social impact has been recognized by the public. It is not a wonder that people have great expectations of him to become an even greater figure. Due to his great influence, *Republika Daily* nominated him as one of the "Tokoh Perubahan 2017" (Agent of Change 2017). On 10 April 2018, he accepted the award which was delivered by Zulkifli Hasan, the chairperson of People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) (*Republika.co.id* 2018). At the regional level, Somad was awarded a title of honour "Datuk Seri Ulama Setia Negara" which pledges him as a committed agent in delivering Islamic teachings and being loyal to the state. This title was awarded by the Institute of Malay Culture (LAM, Lembaga Adat Melayu) in Pekanbaru, Riau on 20 February 2018 (*Tribun Pekanbaru.com* 2018). Additionally, Somad has also been nominated as a potential candidate for Vice President, presumably representing Muslim voters. Recommended by the elites of the 212 pro-movement, Prabowo Subianto and Ustadz Abdul Somad were paired as president and vice president candidates to win the 2019 presidential election, which of course did not materialize as Prabowo

later named Sandiaga Uno as his running mate (Tempo.co 2018). A few months before the recommendation, Abdul Somad's name also unexpectedly emerged in the list of presidential candidates in a survey by the National Survey Media (Median, Media Survey Nasional) on 1–9 February 2018 (Suluh Riau.com 2018). This indicates that the public has big expectations of Ustadz Abdul Somad to take opportunities beyond his current position.

The Ideology of Ustadz Abdul Somad

Born in a traditional Muslim family, Somad grew up following the Sunni theology which is affiliated to the "*Ahlussunnah wal jama'ah an-nahdliyah*" faction. It is a religious ideology adopted by NU which includes several aspects of Asy'ariyah and Maturidiyah theology. It recognizes four schools of thought (Maliki, Hanafi, Syafi'i and Hambali) in Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and the mysticism framework based on Imam Al-Ghazali and Imam Junaid Al-Baghdadi's doctrine (Tim PWNU Jawa Timur 2007, p. 3). This ideology idealizes some important principles of religious framework such as *tawasuth* (moderatism), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), *i'tidal* (justice), and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil) (Tim PWNU Jawa Timur 2007, pp. 57–60). In terms of cultural perspective, the *aswaja an-nahdliyah* adopts a receptive approach to local culture based on the principle of "*al-muhafadzah 'ala qadim al-shalih wal akhdzu bi al-jadid al-ashlah*" (preserving good old traditions and accepting new and better traditions) (Tim PWNU Jawa Timur 2007, p. 31). Hence this religious credo accommodates many local cultural practices such as *tahlil* (death ritual), *slametan* (traditional feast), reading of the book of Barzanji, performing *wayang* (puppet) and other traditions (Haidar 1994, p. 333). This worldview also recognizes four spirits of social and religious life: *ruhut tadayun* (religious spirit), *ruhul wathaniyah* (spirit of nationalism), *ruhut ta'addudiyah* (spirit of pluralism) and *ruhul insaniyah* (spirit of humanity) (Tim PWNU Jawa Timur, pp. 47–50). In layman's terms, it is often conceptually simplified into the concept of three *ukhuwah* (unity/fraternity), which are: *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic unity), *ukhuwah wathaniyah* (national unity) and *ukhuwah Insaniyah/Basyariyah* (unity in humanity) (Affandi and Rohani 2017, pp. 175–76).

In his sermon, Somad conveys that *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* is the middle path between two extremes: *jabariyah* (fatalism) and *qadariyah*

(free will). This theology essentially refers to the people who follow the tradition of Prophet Muhammad and who are also known as *ahlussunnah* (the people of the Prophet's Sunnah), the antithesis of *ahlul bid'ah* (the people of religious innovations) which refers to the people who hold onto theological perspectives that contravene the credo (Ajl 2017 and Somad 2017a). Somad also consistently emphasizes that tolerant practices of traditional Muslims such as performing *tahlil* (prayers for the deceased), celebrating *maulid* (the Prophet's birthday) and visiting graves (*ziarah kubur*) as religious and cultural practices that do not contravene Islamic teachings (Tafaquh 2016). These practices have been criticized by puritan Muslims as religious innovations which are forbidden. In this regard, Somad convincingly explains the lawfulness of these practices by utilizing religious texts and reasoning to back his arguments.

However, Somad's traditional views are not automatically parallel with mainstream *nahdliyyin* (NU agents). His opinions indicate his inclination to conservative ideas and phobia to liberalism, secularism, pluralism, and shi'ism which are misunderstood or exaggerated as a serious threat to Indonesian Muslims. This proclivity has been showed by the current marginal faction of NU which called themselves as the "NU Garis Lurus" (lit. Straight Line of NU), which claims to be the righteous faction of NU. Somad's inclination towards the "NU Garis Lurus" can be observed from his response towards a question on which NU cleric should be followed, whose reputation was not contaminated by the "virus of secularism and liberalism": KH Luthfi Bashori, KH Idrus Romli and Buya Yahya (Somad 2017b). This statement has certainly triggered criticism from many people, particularly *nahdliyyin*. While the "NU Garis Lurus" does not represent the majority of NU, Somad's statement has been perceived by some as worsening and dividing the NU organization (Rohman 2018). This perception is much more dangerous than Wahabi agents attacking the NU's religious practices (Zain 2017). Somad should withdraw his statement because it will confuse many people and erode the authority of NU organization, said a commentator (Rohman 2018).

Another one of Somad's surprising statements is his mockery of an NU agent, Ahmad Ishomuddin, in his response to the question on the MUI agent from Sumatra. Somad had unexpectedly humiliated the young and bright NU leader by saying that he was fired from the MUI office after testifying for Ahok's case. Further, he attempted to shame

Ishomuddin by questioning three things: his doctoral degree, circumcision and pilgrimage (Ishomuddin 2018). These allegations were denied by Ishomuddin in a calm response by stating that all of the accusations were baseless. He had already performed *hajj* (pilgrimage) and was circumcised in his childhood. In addition, he had never claimed to own a doctoral degree, including when he testified for the case of HTI, in which he addressed himself as Ahmad Ngishomuddin, M. Ag., or KH Ahmad Ishomuddin (Redaksi 2018a). One of NU's elites, Yahya Cholil Staquf, commended Ishomuddin's mature response.

On the one hand, there is someone like Pak Kyai Ahmad Ishomuddin who is capable of responding to a mockery in a calm and relaxed manner. Because Pak Ishom knows, those who humiliate him merely "talk without evidence", expressing their hatred with black campaigning and slander. Pak Ishom may have learned from Gus Dur and Kyai Said Aqil Siroj who have been treated badly by people, but they did not take it personally and can enjoy life. Slander, mockery and hate speech have been treated as a refresher and sweetener of life (Redaksi 2018b).

Somad's support of HTI often links him to their radical ideas to replace the current political system. Although he has displayed efforts to present a sense of nationalism and acceptance of Pancasila recently, the digital traces which are documented in YouTube continue to give an impression of his support for Islamism and formalization of sharia. In the congress of Khilafah (global Islamic leadership) in Riau on 26 May 2013, Somad clearly showed his support of the idea of establishing a *khilafah* and appealed to the audience to get their children to take an oath (*bai'at*) to the *khilafah* who will lead the world. He believes that the *khilafah* is the solution to all problems. By quoting a Prophetic saying, he strengthened his argument: "*Ya Ibna Khawalah, idza ro'aita al-khilafah nazalat al-ardha al-muqoddasah*" [O Ibn Khawalah, if you find a *khilafah*, it must be descended from the holy land]. He also mentioned another Prophetic saying: "*Man mata wa laisa fi 'unuqihi bai'at, mata mitatan jahiliyyah*" [Those who died without taking an oath (to *khilafah*), he/she will die in *jahiliyah* (un-Islamized)] (Somad 2013). Somad's statement about *khilafah* can be found in a question and answer session when an audience asked him about *khilafah*. By quoting a Prophetic saying, he divided the five periods of *khilafah* chronologically and predicted the end period of *khilafah* to be as successful as the Prophet Muhammad's period. It is the period of the Prophet Muhammad, *khulafaur rasyidin* (four credible leaders), monarchy, dictator and *khilafah* as the Prophet's

practice. On this occasion, he encouraged the audience to struggle for it (Cahaya Islam 2017).

Somad's proximity to hardliner groups whose reputation tends to wreak havoc, gives an impression of his support for intolerant groups. Since the 212 movement, these groups have a more solid network and political leverage to gain support from the Muslim public. Somad's worldview which is inclined to Islamism and formalism has the same frequency as these groups. His religious and political insights are seemingly close to that of Rizieq Shihab based on his statement when asked about Rizieq Shihab. He has shown his admiration to the leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI, Front Pembela Islam), describing him as a brave religious leader who has lived up to the principle of "*amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar*" (enjoining good, forbidding evil) (Ceramah Terbaru 2017). He also defended Rizieq Shihab and his organization which notoriously present Indonesian Islam with angry faces and violent approaches as part of their implementation of the Prophet's attitude in dealing with non-believers. According to Meong Channel (2017), "Muslims should be angry, according to Somad, if God's laws and his religion is undermined or attacked by the infidels, and the act of being angry is in fact considered to be an *ibadah* (good deed)". At the end of 2017, Somad visited Rizieq Shihab in Mecca during his minor pilgrimage (*umrah*) and met him for about two hours (*Kumparan News* 2018). Rizieq, who had been staying in Mecca since the middle of 2017, is a government fugitive for pornography allegations and nine other cases (Tempo.co 2017).

Although his sermons reflect a good mastery of comparative school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence, Somad's statements frequently fell under the conservative categories of Islamic interpretation. Certain Muslim audiences were surprised with his statement on the impermissibility of celebrating Mother's Day, use of "Merry Christmas" greeting by Muslims, drinking coffee at Starbucks, having a non-Muslim leader in Muslim society, framing Syrian civil war as merely a Sunni-Shia conflict, and resentment to Shia and liberal Muslims. These views might represent the "conservative turn" of Indonesian Islam (van Bruinessen 2014). When the MUI issued the unlawfulness of secularism, pluralism and liberalism in 2005, according to van Bruinessen, it signified the conservative proclivity of Indonesian Muslims. This *fatwa* was a result of radical Muslims joining the MUI with the support from conservative factions of the Muslim population (van Bruinessen

2014, p. 28). On several occasions, Somad also criticized the idea of secularism, pluralism and liberalism. Without a deep understanding of these concepts, he elaborated on them based on his own understanding and believed that they were Western concepts that contravene Islamic teachings (Amil Islam 2017).

Although he was not involved in the 212 movement, Somad's political orientation is easy to identify. One of his agitated oration on YouTube has clearly demonstrated his position through the Ahok controversy. In front of a crowd, Somad zealously provoked the masses to voice their zero tolerance towards non-Muslim leaders. "No infidel agent dares to be a leader in a majority Muslim community. There is no compromise in this issue", he screamed (Al-Faqih 2016). Through his sermon, he showed his rejection to having non-Muslim leaders by referring to Surah Al-Maidah verse 51 (prohibition to appoint Jews and Christians as *aulia* [interpreted as leader]), although he has shown tolerance towards different religion in other occasions. He said the idea which supports non-Muslim leaders is secular and liberal, and should be challenged (Hot News 2017). The Ahok controversy, according to Somad, has a positive impact in differentiating between human and Satan, friend and enemy (Bisjarah Channel 2017). This simplistic perspective on the *muamalah* (non-definite or worldly) aspect has been constantly repeated with a similar exclusionary tone concerning the Ahok's case using a black and white approach. That is why Somad assumes that Muslims who defend Ahok are deviant Muslims. "They are wrong, sinful and aberrant", while those who are against Ahok are right, fine and authentic Muslims (Gaata TV 2017).

Religious Authority and Preachers

Fragmentation of authority is a common global trend in the Muslim world: from the authoritative *ulama* as the primary locus of authority to the new religious intellectuals (Kramer and Schmidtke 2006, p. 175). As Kaptein (2004, p. 128) argues, religious authority is no longer the sole domain of the *ulama* as religious specialists par excellence. Moreover, the concept of religious authority is very much subject to changes in the political, social, educational, and religious spheres in Indonesia. Turner (2007, p. 132) found that mass education has created a systematization of Islamic teachings through various media resulting in a distinct religiosity. It is self consciousness and reflexive

religiosity which question traditional forms of knowledge that have been preserved by traditional elites. The advance of literacy and extensive global market for religious texts have enhanced the demand for print texts and website access. This new development has encouraged competition between the traditional *ulama*, new intellectuals and the state to control official religion (Turner 2007, p. 132). In other words, the traditional voice of *ulama* has acquired a new competitor, not only from the circumference of the *ulama* themselves, but also from outside the circle (Kaptein 2004, p. 128). Felix Siauw, for example, has been a popular preacher and has many followers particularly among Muslim youth, even though he has recently converted to Islam and graduated from an agricultural university. It is similar with Irena Handono, who has a Catholic background and was a church-activist-turned-popular-Muslim-preacher after converting to Islam when she was twenty-six.

The democratic nature of the Indonesian public has led to the exponential proliferation of emerging religious preachers. Besides the credible *ulama* which have competence in Islamic studies and have been recognized by the Muslim public such as Ahmad Mustofa Bisri, Maimun Zubair, Quraish Shihab, and Ahmad Syafi'i Maarif, there are newcomers which are younger and lack deep knowledge of Islamic sciences such as Abdullah Gymnastiar, Arifin Ilham, Yusuf Mansur, Mamah Dedeh, Felix Siauw and Abdul Somad whose followers continuously grow in the midst of contested authority. Other trends include the emergence of preachers from several categories such as child preachers, Chinese-convert preachers, ex-rock preachers, and ex-church activist preachers. However, the competence of the newcomers has often been questioned by Muslim scholars due to their lack of mastery of Islamic sciences and contribution of radical ideas to the Muslim audience. In response to this trend, the government issued a list of approved Islamic preachers to anticipate and overcome such problems. One of the MUI (Indonesia's Ulama Council) agents admitted that the "policy could suppress the emergence of preachers who do not really understand Islam, thereby giving people a wrong understanding about it". The growing trend of incompetent preachers was also worrying as this could lead to a degradation of the quality of religious understanding of Indonesian Muslims. Hosen (2017) labelled such unqualified preachers with "Ustadz Jadi-jadian" (lit. not real) or "Ustadz Karbitan" (lit. immature or forced preacher) due to their inclination to answer questions beyond their knowledge and claiming themselves as well-versed preachers.

However, unlike new preachers whose competence in Islamic studies are still limited, Ustadz Abdul Somad has sufficient mastery of Islamic sciences. His educational background in *pesantren*, Al-Azhar University and the Institute of Dar Al-Hadith Al-Hassania has convinced many people of his authority to speak for Islam. His memorization and eloquence in citing the Quran, Hadith and the opinions of the *ulama* has impressed the Muslim public as the ideal *ulama* who has the capacity to “impose rules which are deemed to be in consonance with the will of God” (Gaboriau 2010). During a religious event which invited Somad as preacher, he was given the label of *ulama* which was inscribed on a big banner as “Ulama Besar dari Riau” (Great Ulama from Riau). When Somad was invited to Jakarta, Vice President Jusuf Kalla praised Somad, commenting that his sermon was based on evidence and that the way he conveyed was easy to understand (Riana 2018). Ustadz Shamsi Ali, an Indonesian imam in a New York mosque, also argued that Somad has extensive knowledge and reference in Islamic teachings. His way of communication has a strong character (assertive) and is exciting (humorous) (Shamsi Ali 2017).

However, Somad’s inclination to Islamism and formalism makes him fail to communicate his teachings to the moderate factions among Indonesian Muslims. The moderate paradigm of NU and Muhammadiyah which emphasizes the use of non-violence and accepts the current Indonesian political system does not accommodate Somad’s worldview. The religious authority of NU and Muhammadiyah as the biggest Muslim organizations in Indonesia has been challenged by this new agent who slowly undermines the established institutions of religious movement with his growing followers and sympathizers. Somad’s relations with conservative and radical groups have created a network and community which has endeavoured to distance from old traditions and set up their own internal conception of authority, authenticity and continuity (Turner 2007, p. 127). His connection with FPI, HTI and the 212 movement’s pro-elites has proven his different platform from NU and Muhammadiyah’s agenda of moderating Indonesian Islam.

Amid obscuring the conception of the *ulama* in the public discourse, Somad has taken advantage in manipulating the Muslim public by imposing Islamic interpretations based on his own understanding. While for a long time the authority of the *ulama* was presumed, the current

developments of the Muslim world have contested that concept (Hatina 2009, pp. 2–3). Hassan Al-Turabi, for example, defines the word *ulama* as “those versed in the legacy of religious (revealed) knowledge (‘ilm), which means anyone who knows anything well enough to relate it to God” (Ibid., p. 2). According to Azra (2002), the most fundamental requirement to be an *ulama* is to have an excellent knowledge of *fiqh* (Islamic law) and classical Islamic knowledge based on Al-Quran, Hadith and *kitab kuning* (lit. Yellow Books, classical works written by Muslim scholars centuries ago). The mastery of these disciplines is necessary to make decisions regarding Islamic jurisprudence. Also, the *ulama* must have a good understanding of the sources and methodology to issue *fatwa* (religious edict) (Nor Ismah 2016, p. 493). Although people assume Somad to be an *ulama*, however, in a humble confession he admitted that he is not. “I am not an *ulama*. I am just a preacher. On a scale of 1 to 100, I must be on the lowest level.”

Somad’s habit of answering all questions in his sermons from the pulpit has given two impressions. Laymen and supporters deemed him as a well-versed cleric on Islamic knowledge who has never disappointed them. Among his fans, Somad has successfully combined scholarship and comedy through mass communication. “The young Hamka was born”, commented his follower (Indonesiana.id 2017). However, some of his statements triggered controversies in the public such as his comments on Rina Nose, his condemn of Syria’s leader, Bashar al-Assad, and his statement on the history of Red Cross. In a question and answer session, Somad insulted Rina Nose (a young celebrity) for taking off her veil in a pejorative manner. To him, covering the female *aurat* (nakedness) is obligatory and it is a form of personal spiritual change known as *hijrah* (religious transformation). In this regard, he suggested that Muslims do *hijrah* in a total mentality (Islam Channel 2017). Somad also simplified the conflict in Syria as a religious, faction-based conflict. He said that Bashar al-Assad represents the Syi’ah, while the rebellion fights for Sunni Islam. The Association of Syam Alumni of Indonesia (Alsyami) attempted to clarify this issue, but was ignored by Somad. Without referencing to credible sources, Somad argued that the symbol of the Red Cross symbolizes Christian theology missionary. These statements certainly do not reflect a good scholarship and was presumed by the Muslim public as arbitrary views which will lead the audience to misleading assumption of realities.

Conclusion

Since religious preachers have played an important role in the transmission of religious knowledge to the Muslim public, their role in the formation of religious understanding and moral configuration of Indonesian Muslims cannot be ignored. The deepening religiosity of Indonesian Muslims in the last few decades has involved a variety of preachers who conveyed religious messages and have shaped Muslim spirituality. The emergence of Ustadz Abdul Somad in the era of new media does not only signify the changing patterns of religious authority, from traditional to a more intertwined trend of religiosity, but it has also demonstrated a successful experiment of new media as the tool of *dakwah* (propagation) that at the same time magnifies a personality's influence. While authority, according to Kaptein, can be referred to notions, in text, in groups of persons and in institutions, the authority of individual in the case of Ustadz Abdul Somad is inevitably contested among the Muslim public. The more he answers questions from his audience, the more the public recognizes his competence or disputes against him.

It is a new pattern whereby a preacher's reputation is sustained over the recognition he receives and at the same time, the rejection of his authority is due to his statements or opinions on certain issues. Controversial statements by Ustadz Abdul Somad on *khilafah* (a global Islamic political system), Starbucks, Mother's Day, "Merry Christmas" greeting, Ahok's case and other issues can be identified as examples of how he has been appraised and treated differently among pro and contra Muslim public. Some observers say that he has an excessive ambition to answer all questions regardless of whether he has sufficient knowledge or not concerning the issue. In the transparent and democratic trend of social media, Somad's strengths and weaknesses can be easily analysed by experts and trigger a controversy leading to negative sentiments against him. It is therefore not a wonder that Somad is often barred or tried to be banned by his haters to deliver sermons in certain places such as Bali, Hong Kong and Semarang.

Despite his Sufi and traditional background, Somad's views reflect a complex religious and political standpoint which is possibly influenced by the new wave of Islamism, radicalism and populism religious movements. His ideas on the formalization of Islamic Shari'a and his campaign for the concept of a *khilafah* system do not represent the

mainstream thought of traditional or *nahdliyyin* Muslim community who accept the secular Indonesian political system (Pancasila). He also frequently constructs the simplification of political realities which have been presumably produced by the elite's conspiracy against Muslim aspirations. Whether it is a personal preference or impulse to fulfill certain audience's favourite topics of preaching, Somad's statements have led to a variety of paradox ideas which frequently confuse some audience. While he has encouraged diversity (*kebhinekaan*) and unity (*ukhuwah*), at the same time he has discouraged pluralism and triggered social fragmentation by strengthening the politics of identity. It is interesting that such paradox ideas were conveyed from the pulpit and favoured by current Muslim audience both online and offline.

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