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# **Towards a More Illiberal Pluralism? Reexamination of the Nahdlatul Ulama's Turn Against Islamic Fundamentalist Groups in Contemporary Indonesia**

## **Ke Arah Pluralisme Tidak Liberal? Kajian Ulang Perlawanan Nahdlatul Ulama terhadap Kumpulan Fundamentalisme di Indonesia Kontemporer**

M. Khusna Amal\*, Uun Yusufa\*\* and Muhammad Faiz\*\*\*

### **Abstract**

The rise of Nahdlatul Ulama's intolerant response to Islamic fundamentalist groups has revived the long-standing scholarly debate on the future of Indonesian pluralism in post-reform era. Some scholars have overlooked that NU's response is contrary to the principles of liberal pluralism because it violates religious freedom for minority groups. Some others argue that such response actually confirm the consistency of NU's stance as a moderate Islamic organization in protecting and advocating religious pluralism in Indonesia. However, only a few scholars have studied how intolerant responses within NU and its various forms are discussed from a more critical, emphatic and comprehensive perspective. This article examines the conflicting response within NU over Islamic fundamentalist movements. This article is a qualitative research that employs a pluralism perspective as its main approach to analyzing the data. Based on a case study of local NU in Jember (East Java), it was found that many elements of NU Jember used a repressive approach in countering Islamic

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fundamentalist movements. This was due to the disbandment of the FPI, the termination of religious gatherings of the HTI by the State, and the rejection of the establishment of Imam Syafi'i Islamic Junior High School by the Salafis. Some, however, used non-repressive strategy against puritanical preaching of HTI, FPI and Salafi groups that are often considered heretical and in conflict with the belief of other religious groups. As result, the NU's attempt to protect the religious freedom from fundamentalist attack turned into a threat to principles of pluralism. Indonesia's religious freedom, I argue, is now in slow but perceptible process of deconsolidation.

**Keywords:** Moderate Muslims, Nahdlatul Ulama, Intolerance, Islamic Fundamentalist, Pluralism.

**Abstrak**

Kebangkitan tindak balas tidak bertolak unsur Nahdlatul Ulama terhadap kumpulan fundamentalis Islam telah menghidupkan semula perdebatan ilmiah yang telah lama berlarutan mengenai masa depan pluralisme Indonesia dalam era pasca reformasi. Sebahagian sarjana terlepas pandang bahawa tindak balas NU bertentangan dengan prinsip pluralisme liberal kerana ia melanggar kebebasan beragama bagi kumpulan minoriti. Sebahagian yang lain berpendapat bahawa respons sebegitu sebenarnya mengesahkan konsistensi pendirian NU sebagai sebuah organisasi Islam yang sederhana dalam melindungi dan menganjurkan pluralisme agama di Indonesia. Namun, hanya segelintir sarjana yang mengkaji bagaimana pelbagai tindak balas tidak bertoleransi dalam NU dibincangkan dari perspektif yang lebih kritis, tegas dan menyeluruh. Artikel ini mengkaji tindak balas yang bercanggah dalam NU terhadap gerakan fundamentalis Islam. Artikel ini merupakan kajian kualitatif yang menggunakan perspektif pluralisme sebagai pendekatan utama dalam menganalisis data. Berdasarkan kajian kes NU tempatan di Jember (Jawa Timur), didapati banyak elemen NU Jember menggunakan pendekatan represif dalam menentang gerakan fundamentalis Islam. Ini disebabkan oleh pembubaran FPI, penamatan perhimpunan agama HTI oleh Negara, dan penolakan penubuhan Sekolah Menengah Pertama Islam Imam Syafi'i oleh Salafi. Walau bagaimanapun, ada yang menggunakan strategi bukan represif terhadap dakwah puritan kumpulan HTI, FPI dan Salafi yang sering dianggap sesat dan tidak percaya kepada pegangan

kumpulan agama lain. Akibatnya, percubaan NU untuk melindungi kebebasan beragama daripada serangan fundamentalis bertukar menjadi ancaman kepada prinsip pluralisme. Kebebasan beragama Indonesia, saya berpendapat, kini dalam proses dekonsolidasi yang perlahan tetapi boleh dilihat.

**Kata Kunci:** Muslim Moderat, Nahdlatul Ulama, Intoleransi, Fundamentalisme Islam, dan Pluralisme.

### **Introduction**

During the last decades, particularly since the downfall of Soeharto's New Order regime in 1998, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, the Revival of Islamic Scholars), the largest Muslim organization and popularly known as the champion of Indonesia's moderate Islam, has shown its high resistance to fundamentalist groups such as Indonesian Hizbut Tahrir (HTI), the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam/FPI*), and Arab-inspired Wahhabi or Salafi conservatives and Muslim Brothers. NU's activities in encouraging the government to disband HTI and FPI<sup>1</sup>, the emergence of the hashtag #sink PKS (the party insulting NU clerics) and the rise of anti Wahhabism campaigns are part of NU's resistance against these Islamic fundamentalist groups. NU has explained that the Islamic fundamentalist movement is a serious threat to the pluralistic order of religious life in Indonesia. K.H. Said Aqiel Siradj, the General Chairman of NU (*Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama/PBNU*) for the 2010-2022 period, stated that the latent danger to the disintegration of the Indonesian nation comes not from the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia/PKI*), but from radicalism and terrorism in which Wahhabism was one of the main sources<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Mietzner, M. (2018). Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia. *Pacific Affairs* 91, No. 2, p. 261-282.

<sup>2</sup> Hakim, S. (2021). *Said Aqiel Sebut Ajaran Wahabi dan Salafi Pintu Masuk Terorisme*. 30 Maret.

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The increasing resistance of NU to Islamic fundamentalist groups has driven an intensive and long debate among scholars. Some scholars have overlooked that such resistance actually confirms the consistency of NU's position as a moderate Islamic organization in protecting and advocating religious pluralism in Indonesia. As known, NU has long been known as a champion of Indonesia's moderate Islam which played an important role in supporting tolerance, pluralism and democracy agendas. At the same time, it is also known as a vanguard organization in combatting various forms of radicalism and terrorism that can threaten Indonesia's moderate Islam and the integrity of the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia as well. At the 32nd NU Congress in Makassar, 22-28 March 2010, for example, NU explicitly has shown its opposition to Islamic groups which they called "radical conservatives" who have intolerant attitudes and commit violence. These groups are also recognized as wanting to change the Republic of Indonesia into an Islamic state<sup>3</sup>.

Some others, however, have argued that NU's resistance to fundamentalist groups showed the dark side of pluralism within moderate Islamic organization. For example, NU's involvement in encouraging the government to make regulations to disband radical mass organizations was seen as a form of NU's illiberal response to minority groups including HTI, FPI and others. They view that such an attitude not only contradicts the norms of liberal pluralism as the main pillars of democracy, but also the image of NU as a role model of moderate Islamic organization<sup>4</sup>. The implication is that the image of pluralist NU in the post-reform era looks more conservative compared to previous periods, especially the 1980-1990s<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> Hefner, R. W. (2000). *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, Princeton. New Jersey: Princeton University Press; Hilmy, M. (2013). Wither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU. *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 7, No. 1, p. 24-48; Hamdi, A.Z. (2021). Constructing Indonesian Religious Pluralism: The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Countering Religious Extremism. *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 15, No. 2, p. 433-464.

<sup>4</sup> Mietzner, M. & Muhtadi, B. (2020). The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia. *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 42, No. 1, p. 58-84.

<sup>5</sup> Bruinessen, M. V. (ed.). (2013). *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn"*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.



However, the critical views of the scholars above are not entirely without *merti*, given that cases of religious intolerance and violence targeting minority groups, both radical and non-radical, often involve moderate Islamic elements including NU. The violence experienced by minority groups such as Ahmadiyah (Parung, Bogor, West Java), Shia (Sampang, Madura, East Java), and Chinese-Christian minorities during the Islamic Defense Action in Jakarta, allegedly involved actors from among NU. Such acts of violence prompted scholars to assess NU's illiberal religious moderation<sup>6</sup>.

Unlike existing scholarly works, this article offers a more critical and balanced perspective in explaining NU's resistance towards Islamic fundamentalist groups. It does not intend to suggest that all NU's resistance is completely contrary with principles of religious pluralism. In fact, many NU's people nowadays are inclusive towards the existence of fundamentalist particularly Arab-inspired Salafi, but not their intolerant religious belief. Here, religious pluralism can be interpreted as religious teachings that emphasize the importance of a person accepting, recognizing, and respecting the diversity and differences in theological beliefs of other people. In a liberal democracy, the freedom of every individual to express their civil rights must not conflict with applicable legal norms and rules. In case of a breach of civil liberties, law enforcement or the State has the official authority and power to resolve it. Only by enforcing fair laws can democratic social order be realized<sup>7</sup>.

This article addresses these crucial issues and discusses to what extent NU's resistance to Islamic fundamentalist groups represent its less pluralist religious behavior. I choose the topic of local NU in Jember (East Java) as a case study to examine the attitude of mainstream

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Fealy, G. (2019). Reformasi and the Decline of Liberal Islam, Thushara Dibley and Michele Ford (ed.) *Activists in Transition: Progressive Politics in Democratic Indonesia*. New York: Cornell University Press. Menchik, J. (2014). Productive Intolerance: Godly Nationalism in Indonesia. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, No. 3, p. 591-261. Menchik, J. (2015). *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Mietzner, M. & Muhtadi, B. *The Myth*, p. 58-84.

<sup>7</sup> Mujani, S. (2007). *Muslim Demokrat: Islam, Budaya Demokrasi dan Partisipasi Politik di Indonesia Pasca Orde Baru*. Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama.

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Islamic organization in its interaction with fundamentalist minority groups particularly HTI, FPI and Salafi. It was based on a series of field research carried out from March-October 2019 during which the author observed NU religious activities, interviewed a number of NU administrators and activists, and reviewed official NU documents and published articles in media.

In responding to the question above, this article is divided into three parts. The first part provides a brief discussion on the rise of the religious intolerance and its relation with the Salafi revivalism. The second part explains the NU elements in response to the Salafi groups and analyzes their underlying arguments and reasons. The third part examines the extent to which NU's intolerant response to the Salafi groups can be classified as less pluralist. The last part provides conclusion and a critical analysis on the various NU's intolerant responses to Salafi groups as well as its meaning to the contemporary religious pluralism in Indonesian Muslim.

### **Salafi Revivalism and Religious Intolerance**

Many scholars observed that the post-reform process and freedom play essential roles in strengthening moderate Islamic groups in Indonesia. However, they have failed to utilize their power to promote tolerance, pluralism, and democracy agendas as in the previous period. The fragmentation of moderate Muslims into various groups based on pragmatic political interests and their respective communalism lines are some of the factors leading to the decline in the progressive role of these pluralist Islamic agents.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, the freedom and openness achieved after the reform era can be used effectively by fundamentalist and radical Islamic groups to express their theological and political identities through various media. They are the most active in propagating puritanical Islam. They call on Muslim to return to the original ways of Islam by

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<sup>8</sup> Hadiz, V. R. (2005). *Dinamika Kekuasaan, Ekonomi Politik Indonesia Pasca Soeharto*. Jakarta: LP3ES. Hadiz, V. R. (2016). *Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

emulating the Prophet and the early Muslim generations.<sup>9</sup> The *Tarbiyah* (Indonesian version of Muslim Brotherhood) affiliated with the Prosperous Justice Party (*Partai Keadilan Sejahtera/PKS*) is one of the fundamentalist agents with an organized network and varying *dakwah* instruments ranging from *halaqah*, *majlis ta'lim*, educational institutions, and political parties. FPI and Salafi also use *majlis ta'lim*, Islamic boarding schools, television, and other social media platforms to spread their influence and religious understanding. Furthermore, HTI activists are increasingly developing their *dakwah* movement by targeting young Muslims in urban areas. According to various studies, these groups significantly increased during the presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004-2014) and started infiltrating schools, campuses, and the bureaucracy.<sup>10</sup>

The presence of these fundamentalist Islamic groups contributes to conservatives, intolerance, and religious violence in various forms. The use of digital media plays to spread and promote false Islamist agendas. Social media have facilitated the fragmentation of authority and religious pluralism, thereby presenting opportunities for conservative non-traditional religious elites and other uncivilized segments with valuable tools and opportunities to instill hatred of other religious groups and violence against minorities.<sup>11</sup> This is similar to the propaganda of the Laskar Jihad group in the religious conflict in Maluku, the hate speech campaign carried out by FPI and its Islamist colleagues in mobilizing the masses to demand the imprisonment of Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) for blasphemy cases, etc.<sup>12</sup>

Although fundamentalist Islamic groups are different in organization and strategy of struggle, however, they have a common point in terms of upholding Islamic religious orthodoxy based on the Qur'an and Al-Hadith, homogenizing Islamic traditions and culture on

<sup>9</sup> Meijer, R. (2009). *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement*. New York: Columbia University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Mietzner, M. The Myth, p. 58-84.

<sup>11</sup> Hamayotsu, K. (2014). The Limits of Civil Society and Democratic Indonesia: Media Freedom and Religious Intolerance. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 43, No. 4, p. 658-677.

<sup>12</sup> Azali, K. (2017). Fake News and Increased Persecution in Indonesia. *Persective*, No. 61. Neyazi, T.A. and Muhtadi, B. (2021). Selective Belief: How Partisanship Drives Belief in Misinformation. *International Journal of Communication* 15, p. 1286-1308.

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the Arab model, and Islamizing society and the state. In fighting for their Islamism agenda, they are often involved various forms of intolerance, discrimination, and religious violence activism. They are also actively involved in attacking other people's beliefs with justifications for apostasy, polytheism, infidel, un-Islamic, syncretic, heterodox, etc. They are even often involved in the persecution of non-radical minority groups such as Ahmadiyya, Shia, Baha'i, religious sects, Liberal Islam Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*/JIL), Christians, etc. The case of mass mobilization in the name of Defending Islam with the 212 movements is an example of intolerance and religious violence acts involving radical groups.<sup>13</sup>

The increasing trend of religious radicalism and violence, which initially occurred at the national level, has spread to various regencies such as Jember. Religious radicalism in this area, which comprises traditionalist Muslims, has strengthened since the reform era due to the involvement of the Salafi groups. Not long after the formation of the FPI at the national level, the Jember branch was established. Since its inception, this Islamic militant group has carried out various acts of intolerance and religious violence such as controlling gambling places, selling liquor, prostitution. They also support the idea of some conservative Muslims from the PKS in fighting for "Religious Jember" by making regional and government regulations based on Islamic law.<sup>14</sup>

HTI has re-emerged and expanded its influence in Jember since its inception in the New Order era. This group forms *halaqah* (religious gatherings) on public campuses such as Jember University and Polytechnic as well as in urban areas to spread its religious ideology. The presence of popular HTI preachers such as Felix Siau and Hannan At-Taki, which offer a new and more millennial style of *dakwah* through social media, has contributed significantly to attracting passionate young Muslims who are indeed passionate about new Islamic identity.<sup>15</sup> HTI activists in Jember have also succeeded in increasing the number of their communities, especially from the urban educated middle class, by inviting Islamic boarding schools to join and support the agenda. Some

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<sup>13</sup> Arifianto, A.R. *Practicing*, p. 241-264.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with PCNU Jember administrators, September 7, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Heryanto, A. (2015). *Identitas dan Kenikmatan: Politik Budaya Layar di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Gramedia.

boarding school leaders have even become HTI elites and participate in spreading the agenda of the Islamist group's struggle.<sup>16</sup>

The Salafi group is listed as radical Islam agents that have successfully developed their religious influence through *dakwah* activities and the establishment of Islamic educational institutions. Before the arrival of Jember Salafi figures in the early 2000s, religion was studied in Yemen. Lukman Ba'abduh and Umar Jawas established the first Salafy Islamic Boarding School and Imam Syafi'i Dirasat Islamiyah High School (*Sekolah Tinggi Dirsat Islamiyyah/STDI*). The first and second educational institutions were traditional and formal, respectively. This was supported by large financial strength sourced from donors, especially those in the Middle East, because they were able to expand their ideological influence widely in Jember.

Salafi groups also have popular preachers such as Ustadz Syafiq Riza Basalamah and actively performed da'wah offline. Both groups actively used social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and You Tube as a means of *dakwah*. On social media, Ustadz Riza Basalamah uploaded more than 3000 preaching videos on a You Tube account with more than 1 million subscribers. Each upload usually has an average of 100 to 1 million views. In line with the increasing popularity of this Salafi preacher, there was an increase and shift in the authority of the ulama and preachers from traditional Muslims.<sup>17</sup>

Another influential Salafi group is the *Tarbiyah* activists affiliated with PKS. This category of people is very radical in their thoughts and actions, adapting numerous moderate approaches, such as FPI, HTI, and Salafi-Wahhabi. This Salafi *Tarbiyah* group has more comprehensive social, political, and religious influence than HTI, FPI, and Salafi-Wahhabi. They have also succeeded in developing various *majlis* da'wah such as *Majlis Duha* and another religious *halaqah*. Furthermore, political parties are quite successful in developing educational institutions that are in great demand by the people of Jember, such as Integrated Islamic Elementary, Junior, and Vocational High Schools, Tahfidz Qur'an Islamic Boarding School Ibnu Katsir, etc.

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with NU figures, August 29, 2019.

<sup>17</sup> Hamayotsu, K. *The Limits*, p. 658-677.

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**The NU's Turn against Salafi**

The strengthening influence of Salafi groups in utilizing freedom and openness due to democracy prompted a critical reaction from moderate Islamic groups, especially NU. This is because NU appears to be more offensive in responding to the current rise of radical Islamic movements compared to Muhammadiyah and other moderate groups. This condition is reminiscent of old events involving tensions between NU and modernist Islamic groups with Salafism-Wahhabism leanings, including Muhammadiyah, which was initially nicknamed Indonesian Wahhabism.<sup>18</sup>

The NU organization founded in 1926 was established in response to the growing influence of Wahabi conquest of Mecca and the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Netherlands Indies. The group's original purpose was to promote and defend Sunni Muslim traditionalism, which combines adherence to the teachings of the four classical legal traditions with Sufi devotional practice and mysticism, and to challenge the puritanical and other "deviant" groups.<sup>19</sup> NU views itself as a Sunni Islam group and adheres to the concept of *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah* or *Aswaja*, meaning the people of the Prophetic tradition (*sunnah*) and community (*jama'ah*).<sup>20</sup>

However, NU's response to Wahabi is not always carried out in reactive and violent ways. The formation of this organization and the sending of a traditionalist delegation to Mecca is a form of rational and moderate resistance to fight for its agenda, such as protecting the teachings and religious practices of traditionalist Muslims. The mandate brought by the delegation to be handed over to the new king contained a request for "freedom of *madhab*" by enabling the imams to take turns

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<sup>18</sup> Schwartz, S. (2003). *The Two Faces of Islam: Saudi Fundamentalism and Its Role in Terrorism*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Gillespie, P. (2007). Current Issues in Indonesian Islam: Analysing the 2005 Council of Indonesian Ulama Fatwa No. 7 Opposing Pluralism, Liberalism and Secularism. *Journal of Islamic Studies* 18, No. 2, p. 202-40.

<sup>19</sup> Fealy, G. and Barton, G. (1996). *Nahdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia*. Melbourne: Monash Asia Institute.

<sup>20</sup> Woodward, M.R. (2001). Indonesia, Islam and the Prospect for Democracy. *SAIS Review* 21, No. 2, p. 29-37.

during Friday prayers at the Grand Mosque and allowing the entry of books by Imam Ghazali, Imam Sanusi, etc.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, NU's resistance to Salafi groups has strengthened since the collapse of the New Order authoritarianism regime. This is because the main opponents of NU's religious politics are no longer modernist groups such as Muhammadiyah and Al-Irsyad, which initially had close ties with the theological teachings of Wahhabis. Presently, it is associated with Salafi groups such as HTI, FPI, and *Tarbiyah* Activists, which are able to develop rapidly and have the flexibility to carry out puritanization, Arabization, and Islamization movements, especially during the period of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY). They are competitors with the potential to undermine NU's dominance and religious authority at the national and local levels, which in turn makes the traditionalist Islamic organization resistant to their activities.<sup>22</sup>

At the local level, the NU Jember along with its autonomous institutions significantly resist Salafism groups. According to a leader of PCNU Jember, the ideological propaganda continuously carried out by radical groups such as HTI, FPI, Salafi, cannot be ignored rather needs to be taken seriously. In a meeting held by the *Aswaja* Center, the leader stated that the following:

It is important for the *Aswaja* Center to jointly merge with external parties of the NU and attack the *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah* ideology. This is similar to the Salafi-Wahabi, HTI, and Shi'a views whose existence endangers the *nahdliyin* residents in Jember.<sup>23</sup>

One of the PCNU Jember autonomous bodies also showed a strong response, namely the *Ansor* and *Banser* Youth Movement against the FPI group. This case stemmed from Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur that urged the disbandment of the FPI due to the mass beating by the militant organization against members of the National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Belief (AKBB) at Monas, Jakarta, in 2008. The

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<sup>21</sup> Feillard, A. (1999). *NU vis a vis Negara: Pencarian Isi, Bentuk dan Makna*. Yogyakarta: LKiS.

<sup>22</sup> Mietzner, M. *The Myth*, p. 58-84.

<sup>23</sup> PCNU Jember. (2020). *Ra'is Syuriah Ingatkan Peran Penting Aswaja Center*, 8 Maret.

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FPI leader, Habib Rizieq Shihab, called Gus Dur a Jewish stooge by stating the following:

"When Gus Dur became President, he wanted to dissolve FPI, however, FPI the reverse was the case."<sup>24</sup>

Rizieq's statement, which insulted Gus Dur sparked protests from NU circles in various regions. This encouraged Zannuba Arifah Chafsoh, also known as Yenni Wahid (Gus Dur's daughter), to hold an open dialogue with FPI followers all over Indonesia. Furthermore, several NU elements, such as *Ansor*, *Banser*, and *Garda Bangsa PKB Jember* visited the FPI headquarters to meet with the management of the militant organization. During the meeting, the head of FPI, Habib Abu Bakar, urged the pro-Gus Dur group to apologize for the attitude of the central FPI.<sup>25</sup> According to media reports, after several visits by Gus Dur supporters, Habib Abu Bakar finally released an official letter containing the disbandment of FPI and publicly apologized to Gus Dur. During the protest, the supporters also put up a large banner that reads, "FPI is *haram* in Jember".<sup>26</sup>

Subsequently, FPI Jember followers reactivated their organization along with the reduced conflict with NU. In practice, they do not carry out many religious activities that have a lot of contact with NU elements, especially *Ansor* and *Banser*. This organization is mostly engaged in preaching (*dakwah*) activities *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, which calls for good and prevents evil. The re-emergence of FPI has actually received sympathy from several Islamic boarding schools and NU kyai that have a firm *dakwah* style, as shown by the militant group. Several Islamic boarding school *kyai* (religious leader) were even included in the FPI management structure. Furthermore, FPI was involved in religious intolerance actions during important events such as the Islam Defense Action in Jakarta and the anti-Shi'a movement in Puger (Jember, East Java).<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> DetikNews,. (2008). *Habib Rizieq: Kami akan Bubarkan Gus Dur!* 02 Januari.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with a number of administrators of *Ansor* and *Banser*, October 2, 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Kompas.com. (2008). *FPI Jember Membubarkan Diri*. 03 Juni; Tempo.co. (2008). *Didemo Masa Gus Dur, FPI Jember Membubarkan Diri*. 03 Juni.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with one of the FPI Jember administrators, October 11, 2019.



NU Jember strongly responded to the infiltration of religious ideas and movements carried out by HTI. The young people that belonged to NU Youth Association (*Ikatan Pelajar Nahdlatul Ulama/IPNU*), the NU Boys and Girls Association (IPPNU), *Fatayat* and the *Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jama'ah (Aswaja)* Center, were heavily involved in ideological battles with HTI activists. They collaborated with NU activists in different campuses such as Jember University and State Polytechnic to help stop the movement of HTI activists, such as the LDK within the campuses (Campus *Dakwah* Institute). Furthermore, these youths targeted school clergy (*Rohis*) and prevented them from getting involved in the flow of HTI religious thought and understanding. They actively carry out regeneration and training to strengthen *Aswaja* and nationalism understanding among Muslim millennial children to avoid the anti-pluralism, anti-democratic, and anti-Indonesian caliphate ideology.<sup>28</sup>

A crackdown on HTI was also carried out by the *Ansor* Youth Movement and *Banser* citizens. Furthermore, during the HTI Leaders Conference held at the New Sari Utama Jember building on May 1, 2016, hundreds of *Banser* and NU masses came to the location and forcefully prevented them from conducting the meeting. *Ansor* and *Banser's* rejection of the conference activities was based on the consideration that HTI campaigned for the rejection of the democratic system and continued to fight for the caliphate government system, which tends to endanger the integrity of Indonesia.<sup>29</sup> According to *antaranews.com*, the turmoil was finally stopped by the police officers in charge of guarding the conference by 12:30 pm to avoid violent clashes or conflicts between the two groups.<sup>30</sup>

The actions taken by the police in maintaining the religious activities carried out by the HTI group are considered appropriate. This is contrary to other security forces that cannot take a firm stance in dealing with conflicts involving the majority and minority groups, such as the case of the Sunni-Shi'a in Yogyakarta or Sampang, Madura. The

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<sup>28</sup> Muhtadi, B. (2009). The Quest for Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia. *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37, p. 623-645.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with *Ansor* and *Banser* administrators, August 18, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> *Antarnews.com*. (2016). *Kegiatan Mukhtamar Tokoh Umat HTI Jember dihentikan*, 1 Mei.

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decision taken by the Police in securing the HTI *Isra' Mi'raj* commemoration was quite democratic. The following excerpt was stated by the Jember Police Chief, Sabilul Alif:

"I went to the location because I was worried about the possible occurrence of a physical clash between *Banser* and HTI. Police and Army troops were deployed to oversee this activity for fear of undesirable events, such as the one witnessed today."<sup>31</sup>

He further stated that:

"No mass organization can interfere and stop the *Isra' Mi'raj* event. However, the insertion of material on Indonesia shari'ah or the caliphate government leads to resistance and social conflict."<sup>32</sup>

NU Jember indicated a strong and massive reaction towards the development of the Salafi groups led by Lukman Ba'abduh and Umar Jawas. However, a fierce resistance occurred when the two Salafi figures that returned after studying in Yemen established an educational institution called the Salafy Islamic Boarding School in 2002. Massive demonstrations were mobilized by NU and Islamic boarding school elements to thwart the Salafi group's plan to establish an Islamic educational institution. In addition to the demonstration, they also visited the regional parliamentary leadership and local government officials of the Jember regency to stop the establishment of Salafi educational institutions. According to them, the presence of Salafis posed a serious threat to the religious teachings and practices of moderate, tolerant, and inclusive Indonesian Muslims, especially to local traditions. Furthermore, Salafi or Wahhabi religious beliefs were tagged as a serious threat to the integrity of Indonesia. An administrator of the PCNU Jember stated that Wahhabism is an entry point for terrorism.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 1 Mei 2016.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 1 Mei 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with one leader of the PCNU Jember *Tanfidziyah*, October 23, 2019.

NU Jember elements showed tougher resistance after rejecting the STDI management's plan to expand its educational institutions by establishing the Imam Syafi'i Islamic Junior High School. This led to the organization of mass mobilization actions by NU, Islamic boarding school elements, and residents around Sumpalsari to thwart the plan to establish the Junior High School. NU Jember took a similar step by visiting the Regional Parliament, local government leadership elements, the Education Office, and other agencies to strengthen its struggle agenda in stopping the Salafi group project.

The response of some NU Jember elements to these Salafi groups was more intense and offensive than to FPI, HTI, and *Tarbiyah* activists. This attitude was intertwined with the rapid development and expansion of the Salafi group. The Salafi group, especially STDI, was able to buy land owned by the residents of Sumpalsari and its surroundings at a high price for the expansion of their educational institutions due to their financial capacity. However, this posed a serious threat to the existence and development of Islamic boarding schools in the Sumpalsari sub-district area. Furthermore, the increasing development of Salafis also worries NU and principals due to the growing authority and influence of Salafis compared to NU, which has long enjoyed its domination.<sup>34</sup>

Until now, the resistance of NU Jember has not produced encouraging results, especially in thwarting the agenda of the Salafi group to establish and develop Islamic educational institutions. Salafi groups also received permission from the government to establish Salafy Islamic Boarding Schools, STDI, and several educational institutions ranging from Early Childhood Education to Elementary and Junior High Schools. Meanwhile, their resistance in limiting the space for Salafi activists that played an important role in filling recitations and prayer priests in several mosques in government institutions such as those in Regional Hospitals has been quite successful. In this case, NU Jember cooperates with the Ministry of Religion and regional agencies' leadership to organize preachers at mosques in the Jember regency government.

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<sup>34</sup> Mietzner, M. *The Myth*, p. 58-84.

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Furthermore, some NU Jember groups prefer using a non-repressive cultural approach to stem the flow of the Salafism movement. The revival of the NU identity is inseparable from the rise of these Salafi groups. Similarly, the more active NU circles published *Aswaja* related books, conducted *Aswaja*-based religious moderation training, establishing various Centers, and trained NU cadres that directly correlated with the growing development of Salafi groups.

The proliferation of online media owned by autonomous institutions and bodies such as NU and the *Aswaja* center was part of the cyber war waged against Salafi groups. This is in addition to the ability of the NU Jember to balance the incessant Salafi *dakwah* on social media by carrying out the tolerant, friendly, and polite *Aswaja dakwah* on various platforms. In the *Aswaja* Center portal, it was stated that:

“..... the circulation of radical Islamic symbols in social media need to be balanced with a more polite, friendly, and firm *dakwah* model. Therefore, *dakwah* is intensified through this media. “*Aswaja* Center in Jember also tends to prepare a variety of educational media, such as posters, pamphlets, bulletins, and the like.”<sup>35</sup>

A similar activity was also carried out by the NU *Dakwah* Institute (*Lembaga Dakwah Nahdlatul Ulama/LDNU*). In addition to the cadre of preachers, LDNU is also active in performing *dakwah*, especially on social media. According to a Vice-Chairman of NU Jember, the digital era requires every NU member to guard *Aswaja an-Nahdliyah's dakwah* by actively participating in social media. This is because their inability to start adapting to this internet-based technology will leave them far behind compared to Salafist groups that are expertise in utilizing social media in their *dakwah*.<sup>36</sup> LDNU's commitment to strengthening *dakwah* on social media is indicated on the website as follows:

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<sup>35</sup> Aswaja NU Jember. (2020). *Aswaja NU Center Gencarkan Dakwah Melalui Media*. 9 Juli.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, October 12, 2019.

"The use of social media to carry out *dakwah* protects the community and fight negative content." It also enables the public access to credible information and a complete, moderate understanding of Islam (*Wasathiyah*) quickly and accurately.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, the NU Amil Zakat Institution (LAZISNU) is engaged in strengthening the economic base of its residents that have been the targets of *dakwah* for Salafism groups, such as *Tarbiyah* Activists, HTI, FPI, and Salafi-Wahabi. They properly carried out *dakwah* by assisting the Muslim community in Jember with basic needs, business capital, etc. In addition, LAZISNU also assists with basic needs, business capital, job training, etc.

The proliferation of Salafis groups in promoting a new pious identity is by wearing Muslimah clothes with long headscarves and veils. This is in addition to the use of Muslim clothes that feature Middle Eastern designs with high water sizes, black dots on the forehead as part of the prostration mark (*atsar*), and growing beards, which tend to color the Islamic public space in Jember. This is in line with the NU circles that have reinvigorated traditionalist pious identities, such as sarongs, Koko clothes, and skullcaps for men, and Muslim women's clothing with standard clothing headscarves, NU stickers on cars, t-shirts, and other attributes. Since the reformation, identity politics have been strengthened as part of the ideological contestation involving religious groups, especially between moderates and Islamists.

### **The Intolerant Response of Nahdlatul Ulama: Towards A More Illiberal Pluralism?**

Some scholars that adhere to liberalism understand that respecting, appreciating, and accepting differences of opinion and belief is one of the main norms of pluralism. In a liberal democracy, everyone has the same rights and freedoms to be able to express opinions, political interests, and theological beliefs. Therefore, when an individual or group displays an intolerant attitude towards the freedom of others, it is classified as non-pluralist. Liberal scholars use this standard of assessment to categorize individuals and groups into liberal or illiberal. According to studies, when an individual supports the

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<sup>37</sup> LDNU Jember. (2020). *LDNU Siapkan Dakwah bil Medsos*. 14 Juli.

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freedom of others with different political aspirations, theological beliefs, and sexuality choices, such an attitude is considered liberal, and the reverse is known as illiberal. In this context, religious or political intolerance is seen as something that is not tolerated because its impacts are always destructive and detrimental to a plurality.<sup>38</sup>

NU also has several religious doctrines that are compatible with the principles of liberal pluralism, such as being moderate (*tawasuth*), tolerant (*tasamuh*), balanced (*tawazun*), and fair (*i'tidal*) towards religious diversity. This is in accordance with the varying principles of moderation that underlie the way NU members think, behave and act.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, through these principles, NU has shown itself as an organization and community that is practically involved in defending the freedom of opinion and belief for every citizen, especially minority groups such as Christians, Chinese, Ahmadiyya, Shi'a, etc. Since the inception of the UN, it has positioned itself as a defender of religious beliefs, traditions, and practices that are accommodative to the cultural diversity of local communities attacked by Salafi puritanical groups that desire to homogenize or monize theological beliefs.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, NU displayed an accommodative attitude when political Islam groups rejected Indonesia's democratic system based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution to fight for its Islamization agenda in various aspects of life<sup>41</sup>. Based on these inclusive roles, scholars have positioned NU as an agent of progressive and liberal civil Islam in fighting for the agenda of tolerance, pluralism, and democracy.<sup>42</sup>

However, this does not mean that the principles of moderation are always in line with NU's religious practice in all situations and conditions. According to Arifianto,<sup>43</sup> there is a gap between the doctrine

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<sup>38</sup> Baghi SVD, F. (2012). *Pluralisme*, p. 2012.

<sup>39</sup> Arifianto, A.R. (2017). Practicing What It Preaches? Understanding the Contradiction between Pluralist Theology and Religious Intolerance within Indonesia's Nahdlatul Ulama. *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 55 (2), p. 241-264.

<sup>40</sup> Makin, AL. (2017). Homogenizing Indonesian Islam: Percution of the Shia Group in Yogyakarta. *Studia Islamika* 24, No. 1, p. 1-31.

<sup>41</sup> Barton, G. (1999). *Gagasan Islam Liberal di Indonesia*. Jakarta: Paramadina.

<sup>42</sup> Hefner, R.W. (2000). *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. Kurzman, C. (1999). Liberal Islam: Not a Contradiction in Terms. *ISIM Newsletter* 2, No. 1, p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> Arifianto, A. R. *Practicing*, p. 241-264.

of pluralism theology and the practice of religion at NU in empirical reality. An example is strengthening conservative elements that tend to be intolerant in responding to minority groups of LGBT, Ahmadiyya, Shia, Baha'i, Gafatar, non-Muslim public leadership, etc.<sup>44</sup> This makes the image of tolerance, moderation, and pluralism in this traditionalist Islamic organization be questioned. The strengthening of intolerance in some NU circles has also increased the cycle of conservatism, which has a significant impact on the reputation of Islam in Indonesia.<sup>45</sup> Some gave red reports on tolerance and pluralism within NU, especially in the post-reform era with the category of illiberal or mere myth.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, the NU Jember displayed intolerant attitudes towards Salafist groups in the post-reform era, categorized as completely illiberal. In principle, this research agrees with the liberalism perspective, which states that intolerance is an unacceptable attitude.<sup>47</sup> Islam also forbids its followers from carrying out nonesuch attitudes to non-Muslims because diversity and differences are a blessing and not a curse for social life. God created differences in all things, including people from various tribes and nations, for them to know and respect each other and ultimately live in harmony. Islam also promotes dialogue in good and rational ways to avoid conflict<sup>48</sup>

This study criticizes the liberalism perspective, which understands that intolerance needs to be contrary to the norms of tolerance and pluralism. However, the discrimination and persecution carried out by radical-conservative Islamic groups against the Ahmadiyya minority in Parung-West Java (2005), Cianjur-West Java (2005), Kuningan-West Java (2007), Banten (2011), Lombok-West Nusa Tenggara (2005-2006),<sup>49</sup> Shi'a in Sampang-Madura (2011),<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Marshall, P. (2018). The Ambiguities of Religious Freedom in Indonesia. *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 16, no. 1, p. 85-96.

<sup>45</sup> Bruinessen, M. V. (ed.). (2013). *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the "Conservative Turn"*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

<sup>46</sup> Mietzner, M. *The Myth*, p. 58-84. Menchik, J. *Productive*, p. 591-261.

<sup>47</sup> Baghi SVD, F. (2012). *Pluralisme*.

<sup>48</sup> An-Na'im, A. (1990). Human Rights in the Muslim World: Socio-Political Conditions and Scriptural Imperatives. *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 3, No. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Budiwanti, E. (2015). Pluralism Collapses: A Study of the Jama'ah Ahmadiyah Indonesia and its Persecution. *Working Paper*, No. 117. Singapore: NUS.

<sup>50</sup> Bush, R. and Munawar-Rachman, B. (2014). NU and Muhammadiyah: Majority Views

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Fajar Nusantara Movement or Gafatar (2015), were a syncretic community combining elements of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism.<sup>51</sup> These activities do not only contradict the principles of pluralism rather it also contributes to fostering intolerance in Indonesia.<sup>52</sup> Conversely, being intolerant of such religious violent activities is not counterproductive to the norms of tolerance, pluralism, and democracy. In this context, the variety and orientation of intolerance acts by NU elements are key aspects in assessing whether their actions are categorized as illiberal.

The intolerance carried out by traditionalist Islamic organization elements, especially those that take repressive resistance, clearly contradicts liberal pluralism norms and is incompatible with NU's theology of pluralism, namely *tasamuh*, *tawasuth*, *tawazun*, and *tidal*. The angry Gus Dur's supporters and the *nahdliyin* were against the violent acts by FPI members at the national level. Therefore, the diversity group at Monas and Habib Rizieq were against the humiliation carried out on Gus Dur by FPI Jember. They were also not involved in religious violence carried out by members of the national FPI. The actions of *Ansor*, *Banser*, and the National Guard for the National Awakening Party (PKB) in demanding the leadership of the Jember FPI to dissolve their organization were not the result of open, equal dialogue.<sup>53</sup>

The civil society that works to bring order and disband a mass organization, such as the State or government, is also not fully justified. Meanwhile, the State authorized to carry out various actions legally is considered to endanger the nation-state's existence. The dissolution carried out by the State in the case of HTI and FPI has been criticized by many scholars as a form of repressive pluralist action,<sup>54</sup> populist authoritarianism (Power, 2018), and dictatorial government.<sup>55</sup> It is also

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on Religious Minorities in Indonesia. in *Religious* ed. by Bernhard Platzdasch and Johan Saravanamuttu. Singapore: ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute.

<sup>51</sup> Marshall, "The Ambiguities", 85-96.

<sup>52</sup> Menchik, J. *Productive*, p. 591-261.

<sup>53</sup> An-Naim, A. (2008). *Islam and the Secular State*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.

<sup>54</sup> Fealy, G. (2020). Jokowi in the Covid-19 Era: Repressive Pluralism, Dynasticism and the Overbearing State. *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 56, No. 3, p. 301-323.

<sup>55</sup> Komnas HAM Ikut Tolak Perppu Ormas', 2017.



considered illiberal repression from the Jokowi regime due to its ability to reduce freedom of speech, expression, belief, and association.<sup>56</sup>

This process is similar to the actions carried out by Banser and Ansor in disbanding the HTI event held at the New Sari Utama Hall. The government has institutionally dissolved HTI. However, that does not mean elements of civil society, such as *Ansor* and *Banser*, have the right to disband religious activities in commemoration with the *Isra' Mi'raj* of the Prophet Muhammad or held by HTI members. A similar process was carried out by elements of the Jember PCNU in protesting the establishment of Salafy Islamic Boarding School and Imam Syafi Islamic Junior High School by Salafi groups. Every citizen has the right and freedom to express their aspirations and disagreements with the interests of others. However, when channeled through intolerant mobilization aimed at influencing government policies in prohibiting the rights of other citizens, such actions are clearly contrary to the norms of pluralism and religious freedom.<sup>57</sup> The actions taken by ex-HTI and Salafi groups are still limited to endangering Indonesia's moderate Islam associated with the inability to commit violence or violate the law.<sup>58</sup>

Some members of the NU Jember actually avoid violence and prefer moderate approaches in responding to the Salafism movement. They understand that violence such as the disbandment of FPI and HTI will not solve the problem but rather create tension or an endless spiral of violence. Therefore, they still respect and appreciate the existence of these Islamist groups despite being involved in ideological struggles. This is because their resistance is not aimed at delegitimizing the existence of these Islamist groups but their ideology, attitudes, and acts of intolerance, which are contrary to the principles of pluralism including religious freedom.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Mietzner, M. (2018). Fighting Illiberalism with Illiberalism: Islamist Populism and Democratic Deconsolidation in Indonesia. *Pacific Affairs* 91, No. 2, p. 261-282.

<sup>57</sup> Marshall. *The Ambiguities*, p. 85-96.

<sup>58</sup> Mietzner, M. *Fighting*, p. 261-282.

<sup>59</sup> Mukharrom, T. and Abdi, S. (2023). Harmonizing Islam and Human Rights Through the Reconstruction of Classical Islamic Tradition. *Samarah: Jurnal Hukum Keluarga dan Hukum Islam*, vol. 7, No. 1.

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Meanwhile, the *Aswaja* Center is an element of NU Jember that prioritizes cultural resistance by producing religious discourse based on *Aswaja An-Nahdliyah*. This process is carried out by organizing training for NU cadres and strengthening the *Daurah Aswaja* or *halaqah* at the village level to balance Salafism's expansion *dakwah*. However, the cultural resistance of this element cannot be categorized as a form of intolerance that has a destructive impact on *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) with the Salafi minority. According to Baghi, the contestation of religious discourse between the two does not lead to consensus or synthesis as a core idea of liberalism and is accompanied by violence.<sup>60</sup>

LDNU Jember activists also prefer a cultural approach to repressive measures in responding to the Salafism movement, which often justifies the religious understanding and practice of *nahdliyin* residents as heterodox. This organization is very active in conducting regeneration and training for *Aswaja dakwah*, especially through online media. The goal is to enable NU preacher cadres to balance the *dakwah* activism of Salafi groups that dominate the virtual public space. Furthermore, LDNU's *dakwah* activities are also projected to counter various Salafist movements that homogenize Indonesian Islam. Therefore, this organization actively advocates for the existence of local rituals and the Indonesian Islamic religion to counter this motive. This finding also confirms that the religious attitude of this NU Jember element tends to be tolerant and pluralist. Menchik and Mietzner & Muhtadi stated that NU followers are intolerant because they lack liberalism.<sup>61</sup>

One of the processes used to balance the economic activism of Salafi groups is by distributing potential attributes sourced from *zakat*, *infaq*, and *sadaqah* of NU residents to empower the poor that are mostly *nahdliyin*. The economic empowerment of the people is important for LAZISNU activists in order to strengthen the NU community. The economic vulnerability of NU residents has often been an easy target for Salafi groups that focused on *da'wah bi-lisan* (oratory) and *dakwah bil-hal* (praxis) in carrying out various concrete activities related to the needs of the community, such as providing business capital assistance,

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<sup>60</sup> Baghi SVD, F. (2012). *Pluralisme*.

<sup>61</sup> Mietzner, M. *The Myth*, p. 58-84. Menchik, J. *Productive*, p. 591-261.

job training, etc. In this context, the resistance of LAZISNU Jember activists in countering the *dakwah* process of the Salafi group, which also uses an economic approach, is a form of illiberal religious attitudes. This is because violence is not portrayed during *dakwah* and does not intend to delegitimize the existence of Salafi groups.

The cultural resistance chosen by some of the NU Jember administrators and their institutional elements cannot be positioned as a form of intolerance. Similarly, their cultural resistance is also inappropriate, assuming it is a form of moderate Muslim religious activism with an illiberalism pattern, as some Indonesian social, political, and Islamic scholars criticized.

### **Conclusion**

The descriptions and analysis outlined above suggest that the NU Jember displays its resistance behavior in responding to fundamentalist Islamic movements. At least, there are two forms of resistance, hard and soft resistance. In this case, hard resistance led to acts of violence as seen in the incidents of NU mass mobilization in rejecting the establishment of the Salafi Islamic Boarding School (2002) and in demanding the dissolution of local FPI in Jember (2008), and forced disbandment of a religious ceremony of HTI members in New Sari Utama (2016). However, this type of resistance doesn't contribute to upholding rights to religious freedom. In the perspective of democratic pluralism, fighting intolerance with intolerance cannot be justified whatever the reason.

Meanwhile, soft resistance refers to non-violent response by NU Jember members in opposing the expansion of global Islamic movements. Actually, they do not reject the presence of Islamic fundamentalist groups, but rather their intolerant *dakwah* activities. As known, Islamic fundamentalists are the most active proponent in propagating puritanical Islam. They call on Muslim to return to the original ways of Islam by emulating the Prophet and the early Muslim generations. They also criticize local Muslim practices that they regard as "unlawful innovation" (*bid'ah*). Even though they don't like intolerant groups, they respect their religious belief. In short, supporters of the second type of resistance prefer to use democratic trajectory in their constellation with fundamentalist groups such as HTI, FPI and Salafi.

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