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## **Sunni School of Thought in Southeast Asia: Muslim Intellectual Responses to New Ideological Trends**

### **Fahaman Ahlussunnah wa al Jama'ah di Asia Tenggara: Pemahaman dan Tanggapan Golongan Cerdik Pandai Muslim terhadap Ideologi-Ideologi Baharu**

Zubaidi Wahyono\* & Alizaman D. Gamon\*\*

#### **Abstract**

The study explores various definition of *Ahl al-sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* and its main principles as understood by Muslim scholars in Southeast Asia as well as the controversies that had taken place over the years. The study highlights the responses of Muslim scholars and religious authorities in resolving the controversies within the Muslim communities. The controversies started when the authority of the Sunni school of thought in ASEAN Muslim communities had been tested with the emergence of the rationalist Muslim group and Salafism as advocated by Wahabism. On the other hand, the influence of Shi'ism and other foreign ideologies such as pluralism and liberalism had augmented the complexity of the issue. The study employed qualitative research methodology studying both the literature and the people to ensure the validity of the source. Given the scarcity of literature written by Muslim scholars, this study relies on primary sources such as unpublished works, interviews, and fieldwork in addition to library research. Among the important findings of the study is that there are various interpretations of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* due to various methods adopted in interpreting the theological stance of Islam. These differences somehow had caused the Muslims in the region and their scholars divided and disunited. The new ideologies and philosophies had contributed to the complexity of the issue and challenged the Muslim scholars to come up with an uninformed opinion to solve the problems. It is therefore recommended in this study that a unified system of thought is crucial to attaining the socio-religious agenda of ASEAN Muslim communities.

**Keywords:** Sunni, South East Asia, Muslim response, theological and ideological stance, controversies.

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### Abstrak

Kajian ini mencuba untuk menerokai polemik mengenai pemahaman dan penafsiran istilah Ahlu al Sunnah wa al Jama'ah serta ciri-cirinya seperti yang difahami oleh para Ulama di Asia Tenggara sejak mutaakhir ini. Kajian ini menyerlahkan tindak balas ulamak Islam dan pihak berkuasa agama dalam menjelaskan kontroversi dalam masyarakat Islam mengenai takrif Ahlu al Sunnah wa al Jamaah dan prinsip-prinsip utamanya seperti yang difahami oleh ulamak Nusantara dan percanggahan yang berlaku sejak kebelakangan ini. Percanggahan pemahaman Ahlu al Sunnah wa al Jamaah bermula apabila masyarakat Islam ASEAN mula diuji dengan kemunculan kumpulan Islam rasionalis dan Salafi seperti fahaman Wahabi. Tambahan lagi pengaruh Syi'ah dan ideologi asing lain seperti Pluralisme dan Liberalisme telah menambah kerumitan isu tersebut. Kajian ini melibatkan kedua-dua kaedah kajian perpustakaan dan pemerhatian bagi memastikan kesahihan sumber maklumat. Memandangkan kurangnya rujukan yang ditulis oleh ulama Islam, kajian ini juga merujuk kepada sumber lain seperti kertas kerja yang tidak diterbitkan, temubual, dan kerja lapangan di samping penyelidikan Perpustakaan. Antara temuan daripada kajian itu, didapati bahawa perbezaan penafsiran mengenai pengertian Ahl Al-Sunnah wa Al-jama'ah adalah kerana perbezaan sumber dan kaedah dalam memahami beberapa isu mengenai akidah Islam. Ini telah menyebabkan umat Islam di rantau ini dan ulama berbelah bagi dan terpecah belah. Ideologi dan falsafah baru telah menyumbang kepada kerumitan isu tersebut dan mencabar ulama Islam untuk memberikan pandangan yang terpadu untuk menyelesaikan masalah tersebut. Oleh itu, adalah disyorkan menerusi kajian ini satu kajian pemikiran terpadu oleh ulamak di Nusantara adalah penting untuk mengelakkan kecelaruan dalam memahami isu-isu akidah Islam dalam mencapai agenda meningkatkan sosio-ekonomi masyarakat Islam ASEAN.

**Kata Kunci:** Akidah, Ahulussunnah, Pemikiran Islam, Muslim Asean, Tindak balas.

### Introduction

Sunni school of thought is the mainstream Islam in South East Asia since the advent of Islam in the early 10th century ago. However, over time, the interpretation and understanding of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* have developed extensively to be more complex. This is due to circumstances and the challenges that Muslims face compared to the time of Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'ari (d. 935 AH)<sup>1</sup> who introduced the Sunni school of thought in the 7<sup>th</sup> century AH. The circumstances that the Muslims in South East Asia live now have changed rapidly be it socially, economically, ideologically as well as politically. These changes have had caused the differences or divergences of understanding and interrelating of the term 'Sunni' or '*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah*' be it in the region especially and in the Muslim world widely. These differences had caused confusion among the Muslims and even it may cause tension if

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<sup>1</sup> Imam Abū al Ḥasan Al Ash'arī (260AH-330 AH/935 AD)

not a conflict between the Muslims in the region. The situation gets worse with the emergence of new ideologies and philosophies that challenged the Muslims and the scholars especially to draw a standard definition and characteristics of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* in order to uniform the interpretation as well as to unify the Muslims in the region.

Based on earlier reading, there are no books or writings discussing the issue of the interpretation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* in the context of Southeast Asia. Most of the earlier writing discussed the definition locally and there are various definitions and interpretation. Such as *Risalah ahl Al-Sunnah wa al jama'ah* written by Team Aswaja East Java that discussed the interpretation of the term according to the understanding of Nahdatul Ulama, Indonesia. The book however is regarded the most complete writing on the interpretation of *Ahl al- Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* so far. The book was written based on the writing of the founder of Nahdhatul Ulama organization Sheikh Hasyim Asy'ari to draw the principles of Nahdhatul Ulama as the defender of *Ahl al- Sunnah wa al Jamā'ah* ideology. It also discussed some other ideologies like Shi'ah, Wahhabiah etc.

Another book is *Āqīdah Ahl al- Sunnah wa al jama'ah* written by Haji Said Hj Ibrahim the former Mufti of Sabah. It discussed the necessity of Religion, the right and wrong creed, the six pillars of faith/Īman and the invalidation of *aqidah* according to *Ahl al- Sunnah wa al jama'ah*. The book is a complete reference for the common Muslims and as a manual for their belief. The book however does not discuss the interpretation of *Ahl Sunnah* in detail as well as the current issues on Islamic creed in reference to Southeast Asia.

Looking at this gap, the study aims to analyze the current connotation and the interpretation of the term Sunni and *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* as understood by different scholars, organizations and institutions in the region especially in the three major Sunni Muslim countries, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. Apart from that, the study also tries to look into different interpretations of the term 'Sunni' as the Muslims face a lot of issues ideologically, socially and politically that challenged them to solve them based on this ideology. In addition to that, the emergence of new sects or ideologies such as Wahabism, Shi'ism as well as Liberalism had made the issue more complicated. This study also tries to identify different responses of the scholars and Islamic organizations as well as the religious institutions to that issues that confused the Muslims. In the end, the study tries to conclude on these opinions and offering criticism and some suggestions on the matter.

### **Definition**

#### ***Literal meaning***

The term *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* has been interpreted and reinterpreted by the Muslim scholars in the region as well in the Muslim world in different ways. It is because the Muslims faced different issues and challenges from time to time ideologically and socially. As it is known that Sunni ideological thought was developed by the Sunni founders *Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'ari* and *Imām al-Māturīdī* as a response to certain circumstances that they encountered then.

Literally, the term *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* consists of three words, namely: 1) *Ahl*, meaning family, group, or followers, 2) *al-sunnah*, that derived from the word "*Sanna*" means way/course or method. In the legal aspect (*fiqh*), the word *Sunnah* means "something that is recommended to be done, but not mandatory. Whilst according to the hadith scholars, the word "Sunnah" means '*sīrah*' or biography or course or method<sup>2</sup>.

*Al-Sunnah* denotes: "something which was instructed by the Prophet PBUH and what was prohibited and recommended by him verbally or practically who was considered as a second source of the Islamic law.<sup>3</sup>

In a broader meaning, the meaning of *al-Sunnah* also includes actions, edicts, and traditions constructed by the Companions (*al-Āthār al-Ṣahābi*) or the *sunnah* is the trail/method left by the Messenger of God and the first four caliphs. While the term *al-Jamā'ah* literally means the community, group or congregation. It is referring to the Muslims' early generation of the companions, *tabi'in* and *tabi' tabi'in*. It also means the majority of the Muslims as mentioned by Syeikh 'Abdullah al-Ḥarārī it means *al-(SAW)ād al-a'ḍam* or the majority of the Muslims.<sup>4</sup>

Briefly the literal meaning of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* is the people who follow the *Sunnah* or the way of the Prophet and those who form the majority of the *ummah* or those who follow the majority or the consensus of the early Muslim generation.

#### ***Technical meaning***

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<sup>2</sup> *Mustafā al 'Ajjāj, Uṣūl al Ḥadīth: 'Ulūmuhu wa Mustalāḥuhu'*, (Beirtu: Dār al Fikr, 1989) p.17.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Syeikh 'Abdullah al-Ḥarārī, *Izhār al 'aqīdah al-Sunniyyah bi- sharḥ al-āqīdah al-Ṭahāwiyyah*, (Beirut, Dār al-Mashārī', 1997) p.14.

Technically *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* is defined by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, is those who follow the Qur'an, *Sunnah*/way of the Prophet (SAW) and what was reported from the *sahābah*/companions, *tabi'in* (successors) and the pioneers of the hadith (may Allah please them) and holding what was said by *Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal RA*<sup>5</sup>.

The ideological thought of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* historically, which forms around 80 percent of the Muslims today was founded by the two scholars namely Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī (260AH-330 AH/935 AD.) and Imām Abū Mansūr al Māturīdi (d. 944 AD.).

This ideological sect was developed due to the circumstances that led them to redefine the teaching of Islam as a response to the emergence of various sects/ideologies that deviated from the original teaching of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his companions (*sahābah*).

These sects included the ideologies of Mu'tazilite, Kharijite, Jabarite as well as Qadarite and Murji'ite groups which tend to interpret Islam extremely in one way or another. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī who was the disciple of Imam al-Jubā'i was originally a Mu'tazilite scholar who seceded from his circle due to his disagreement with his teacher on the issue of the grave sin.<sup>6</sup> He later founded the new circle which was named as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* that most of the Muslims affiliated to until today.<sup>7</sup>

The meaning of the word '*jamā'ah*' here is referring to the consensus of the companions or what has been agreed upon by the companions of the Messenger (SAW) during the four caliphs namely Abū Bakr (d.634 AD), 'Umar ibn al Khattāb (d.644 AD), Uthman ibn al-'Affān (d.656 AD), and 'Ali ibn Abī Ṭālib R.A (d.661 AD.). It is based on the famous hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):

"The beloved Messenger of Allah, (peace and blessings of Allah be eternally upon him), said, "There was disagreement amongst Jews and they split into 72 groups. In the same way, there will be disagreement and divisions in my Ummah. It will split into 73 groups. Except for one of these groups, all the remaining will be thrown into hell, when asked about which group that will be on the right path, the

<sup>5</sup> Abu al-Ḥasan 'Ali bin Isma'il bin Abū Bashār al -Ash'arī, *Kitāb al- Ibānah 'an Uṣūl al Diyānah*, ( NSW, Australia: Islamic Centre for Research and Development,2009), p. 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 43-44

<sup>7</sup> See Muḥammad Abū Zahrah, *Tārīkh al-Mazāhib al-Islāmiyyah*, (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr al 'Arabī, 1996) p.163

Beloved Messenger of Allah replied, “The group on the right path, which will enter Paradise, will be the group which follows my ‘*Sunnah*’ and my companions’.”<sup>8</sup>

This is one of the hadiths that reported on the division of the Muslims into 73 groups, while some other reports mention 72 and 71 groups<sup>9</sup> and the only one group will be safe, that is the group of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā’ah*.

However, the understanding and the interpretation of the term *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā’ah* has developed broadly to be more complex especially when the Muslims had to respond to contemporary issues or local issues. In Indonesia as an example, there are different interpretations of the term and the connotation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā’ah* even though the majority of the Muslims are of Sunni sect. Nahdhatul Ulama as the pioneer of Islamic organization claimed to be the champion of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā’ah* and makes it as its organization marque. While other Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah, Persis, Hizbul Waton, etc. are principally of the Sunni sect despite having different understanding and interpretation of the term.

Among the debatable issues in this region such as the interpretation of who are the genuine followers of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā’ah*, what are the characteristics of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā’ah* and how is the approach on the issues of ‘*aqidah*, *fiqh*, and *tasawuf*’.

Nahdhatul Ulama is one of the biggest Islamic organizations in Indonesia with a membership of more than 60 million<sup>10</sup> which is concerned with the ideology of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā’ah* and makes it as its trademark.

Historically Nahdhatul Ulama was founded by K.H. Hasyim Asy’ari<sup>11</sup> the grandfather of the late president of Indonesia Abdurrahman Wahid. It was established to defend the ideology of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa*

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<sup>8</sup> Reported by Al Tirmidzi, no 2641, Aḥmad and Abū Dāwud.

<sup>9</sup> The status of the hadith is *ṣahīh* based on the different reports that support the meaning despite the different text and narration reported.

<sup>10</sup>. There is no fixed number of NU members due to lack of membership system and there are different figures suggested by the scholars, this number is based on the minimum estimation of NU secretariat @lphi-nu.org/tentang-lphi-nu/profit-lphinu.html

<sup>11</sup> Muhammad Hashim Ash’ari is the grandfather of the late president of Indonesia Abdurrahman Wahid, he was born in 1871 in Jombang, East Java and established an Islamic organization called Nahdhatul ‘Ulama in 1926. His name was Muhammad Hashim and attached to his father’s name Ash’ari the well-known Muslim scholar of East Java.



*al-jamā'ah* and to respond to the emergence of the Wahabism<sup>12</sup> sect that restricted the Muslims to believe in the saint,<sup>13</sup> to visit the grave, to practice *tahlil*,<sup>14</sup> reading *barzanji*,<sup>15</sup> etc. which were commonly practiced by the Muslims in Indonesia and South East Asia in general.

This organization had spread widely owing to the influence of the *Kiai*/ Muslim clerics in Muslim society especially among the Muslims in the rural areas and amidst the religious boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia.

According to NU (Nahdhatul Ulama), *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* is further defined as follow:

They referred to the definition of Shaykh 'Abd al-Qādir Jaylānī (471-561 AH.) as follow<sup>16</sup>

“*Al-Sunnah* is what had been authorized by the Prophet (SAW). while '*jamā'ah*' is what had been agreed upon by the four guided Caliphs (may Allah bless them)”.

The word *As-Sunnah* is further explained by the founder of Nahdhatul Ulama as follows:

“*Al-sunnah* is the term refers to the approved and the practiced way/method of this religion that the Prophet and the prominent figures after him practiced it such as the companions of the Prophet (may Allah bless them) as he said:” Follow my *Sunnah* (way) and the way of the four guided Caliphs after me”.<sup>17</sup>”

While *jamā'ah* derived from the word *jamā'ah* which means to gather, to collect, to congregate, and to assemble. It also means to unite

<sup>12</sup> Wahabism is the 18<sup>th</sup> AD Islamic reformation led by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, a Hanbali scholar in Arabia peninsula. His popular movement is the purification of Tawhid from heresies and superstition. Formed an alliance with Muhammad ibn Sa'ud in 1747 to establish the present day kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (d. 1792 AD.)

<sup>13</sup> It is known also as *ziyārah al-qubūr*, or visiting the grave of 'Ulama or *walī* (saint) to get blessing and to be a lesson for the living ones (see M.Hasyim Asy'ari, *Risalah Aswaja* (Jogjakarta, ArRuz Medi, 2015), p. 243.

<sup>14</sup> Reading surah *Yāsīn* and *lā ilā ha illā allāh* repeatedly in congregation when one person passed away or at certain occasion.

<sup>15</sup> Reading the biography of the Prophet Muhammad at his birthday or at certain occasion in congregation.

<sup>16</sup> see: Sheikh 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jaylānī, *Al Ghunyah li Ṭālibī, Tarīq al -Ḥaq*, vol. 1. (Beirut, *Dār al-Turāth al- 'Arabī*, 1996), p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Muhammad Hashim Ash'ari, *Risalah Ahlu as-Sunnah wa al Jama'ah*, Tim Aswaja NU Jawa Timur, Surabaya, p. 5

or to consolidate or to agree with others in certain matters (*ijmā'*)<sup>18</sup>. This is specifically referring to the *ijmā'* of the *ṣaḥābah* (companions) in religious issues.

Technically, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* is defined by Muhammad Hashim Asy'ari:<sup>19</sup>

“Are those experts of *Tafsir*, *Hadith*, and *Fiqh*, they are the guided ones because they follow the Sunnah of the Prophet (SAW) and the guided Caliphs after him. They are the salvaged group. They are those who joined the four ‘*madhhab*’ namely al Ḥanafiyah, al Shafī'iyah, al Mālikiyyah, and al Ḥanabilah.”

From the above definition it can be concluded that *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* is not a new group rather it developed as a response to the emergence of new groups that deviated from the original teaching of Islam. There is no founder of it, but there were scholars who had defined the meaning of Islam after the emergence of various religious streams and thought that overshadows the original teaching of the Prophet and his companions<sup>20</sup>.

This is the interpretation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* according to Shaykh Muhammad Hashim Ash'ari, the founder of the biggest Islamic organization in Indonesia and perhaps in the world today. The definition of the term originally derived from the common interpretation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah*. However, in particular issues, we find a certain interpretation which might be different from the others.

The principles of Aswaja<sup>21</sup> had been defined by Nahdhatul Ulama as mentioned in its acts (khitah) no. 3:

1. Nahdhatul Ulama' is founded its religious principles on the sources of Al Qur'an, As-Sunnah, *al-Ijmā'*, and *al-Qiyās*.
2. To interpret Islam from its sources, Nahdhatul ulama follows the ideology of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* and manifested as follows:
  - a. In Islamic creed (‘*aqīdah*’), Nahdhatul Ulama follows the ideology of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* which was pioneered by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī (260AH-330 AH/935 AD.) and Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdi (944 AD.).

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Muhammad Hashim Ash'ari, *Ziyadat al Ta'liqat*, p. 23-24.

<sup>20</sup> Hasyim Ash'ari, *Rislalah Ahlu Al-sunnah*, chapter 1, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Aswaja is a shortform of *Ahl Al –Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* and it has been as a tagline of Nahdhatul Ulama organization and its phiposophy.

- b. In Islamic law (*fiqh*) Nahdhatul Ulama follows the approach of any one of the four madhhab namely Ḥanafī, Mālikī, Shafī'ī and Ḥanbalī. However, Nahdhatul ulama specifically follows Shafī'ī madhhab in *fiqh*.
- c. In *taṣawuf*, Nahdhatul Ulama practices the teaching of Imām al-Ghazālī, Imām al-Junayd al-Baghdādī as well as other Sunni Imams.

Such interpretation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* is also shared more or less by the definition of JAKIM (Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia) in its workshop on Aqidah dated 28 December 2010,<sup>22</sup> which is: it is the group who uphold the understanding of Al Qur'an and *al-Sunnah* through the companions (*saḥābah*), *tabi'īn* (successor) and *tābi'-tābi'īn* (successor of the successors) who are committed to their principles of *aqīdah* (creed), *sharī'ah* (law) and *akhlāq* (morality). It can be elaborated in the 3 important points:

1. They are the group that interprets and uphold the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet as well as the method and principles of *Salaf* and *Khalaf* i.e. *Ash'ariyyah* and *Mātūrīdiyyah*.
2. They are those who hold moderate understanding neither excessive (*ifrāt*) nor loose (*tafrīt*) that excludes the ideology of

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<sup>22</sup> Panel Kajian Aqidah JAKIM bertarikh 28 Disember 2010 di Institut Latihan Islam Malaysia (ILIM) Bangi

Kharijite<sup>23</sup>, Shi'ah Rafidhah<sup>24</sup>, Qadarites<sup>25</sup>, Jabarites<sup>26</sup>, Muk-tazilite<sup>27</sup>, Anti-hadith, liberalism, pluralism, etc.

3. They are those who preferred unity and brotherhood neither enmity nor conflict and not to glorify the leader as well as not to be fanatically attributing infidel to a Muslim<sup>28</sup>.

In more particular, what is meant by *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* here is the doctrines outlined by the two scholars namely Abū Ḥasan al Ash'ari (d.334 AH) and Abū Maṣū'ūr al Māturīdī (d.333AH), and following *madhhab* of Imām al Shāfi'ī in *fiqh* as well as Imām Al Ghazālī in ethics.<sup>29</sup>

Based on the above definition, any other sect other than *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* is considered deviant, and consequently, it is prohibited to practice or spread in Malaysia. This standpoint was endorsed by the National Fatwa of Malaysia in its meeting held in May 1996 that declared *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al -jamā'ah* as the only acceptable Islamic

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<sup>23</sup> Literally means seceders. It is the early sectarian group in Islam, who originally supported Ali's leadership on the basis of his wisdom and piety. They turned against Ali when he agreed to submit his quarrel with Muawiyah to arbitration; a group of his followers accused him of rejecting the Quran. Ali was forced to fight them in 658 AD. In revenge, Ali was murdered at the mosque in Kufa in 661 AD.

<sup>24</sup> Rafidah is one sect of Shi'ite that believe in Ali's succession after the Prophet. They believe that Muhammad's religious leadership, spiritual authority, and divine guidance were passed on to his descendants, beginning from Ali ibn Abi Talib, his daughter, Fatimah, and their sons Hasan and Husayn and his descendants. They refused the leadership of Abu Bakar and 'Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb. It developed to be fanatical political sect especially in the issue of imamate /leadership (see Abū Zahrah, (Cairo, Dār al-Fikr al-'Arabī) p. 48.

<sup>25</sup> It is known also as 'free will' the early philosophy of Islam that believes in the absolute freedom of action of man. The philosophy was introduced in Islam by Ma'bad al-Juhanī as a response to Jabarite's doctrine of 'fatalism' that believes in the opposite doctrine. (*Ibid*)

<sup>26</sup> *ibid*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125. Another Islamic theology founded by Wāṣil bin 'Āṭa at Basra, in the first half of the 2nd/8th century by Wasil b. 'Ata' (d. 131/748 AD.). The name was given due to his split from Ḥasan al-Baṣrī circle on the issue of grievous sinner whether he is a Muslim or Non-Muslim. He disagreed with his teacher and opted to have his own opinion known as '*al-manzilah bayn al-manzilatain*' or the intermediate state and later on established its own theology popularly known with its 'five principles'.

<sup>28</sup> Mohd. Aizam bin Mas'ud, *Diskusi Isu Akidah dan Pemikiran semasa*, (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia, 2013), p. 19

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

doctrine in Malaysia while other sects or groups are considered deviant and consequently its practice and propagation is prohibited<sup>30</sup>.

Whereas Brunei Darussalam declared that the official religion of the Nation is Islam of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah*.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, any other theology which is against it will be considered wrong and banned from being practiced in the country such as Shi'ah,<sup>32</sup> Bātiniyah,<sup>33</sup> Khawarij,<sup>34</sup> Murji'ah,<sup>35</sup> Qadiyaniyyah, Bahai,<sup>36</sup> etc.<sup>37</sup>

The theology of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* was also approved by the Religious Council of South East Asia as an acceptable Islamic doctrine in its declaration in 1994.<sup>38</sup> It agreed also to define the deviant teaching as any teachings or practices brought by Muslim or non-Muslim and claims to be the teaching of Islam but in fact, it is against the Qur'an and the Sunnah as well as the theology of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah*.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.137

<sup>31</sup> Hj.Ismail bin Omar Abdul Aziz, *Ringkasan Akidah Ahlu Sunnah wa al jama'ah*, (Brunei: Pusat Dakwah Islam, 1994), p.1

<sup>32</sup> Shi'ah or Shi'ism, it refers to the sect which developed in the end of Othman ibn 'Affan period to support 'Ali as the next caliph. It grew further during Umayyad period due to the sympathy to Ali and his family and formed new sect which is called Shi'ah later. See M. Abu Zahrah; *Tarikh al Madhahib al Islamiyyah* (Cairo, Dar al Fikr al Arabi, 1996), p. 32.

<sup>33</sup> Batiniyah is a religious sect that believes in the inner meaning is more important than the physical or literal meaning. It has its origin in Shi'ism (Ibadhiyah) and it has influenced the teaching of syncretism, pluralism and abortion of Shari'ah obligation. It tends to deny the literal meaning of Qur'an and Hadith.

<sup>34</sup> The earliest Islamic sect that developed from 'Ali due to their disagreement with 'Ali's concession to accept arbitration. It grew up to be a fanatical and puritanian sect by using the theme of no judge but God and they tend to interpret the text literally and fight those who are against its doctrine. (see Muhammad Abū Zahrah, *ibid*. pp58-59)

<sup>35</sup> Murji'ah (Murjites) means those who postpone. It is one of the earliest Islamic sect that believe in the postponement of judgment on those who commit serious sins and believe that God alone who will decide on the person whether to be Muslim or not (lost his faith) no human being to judge.

<sup>36</sup> The Bahā'i sect was originally a Shi'ite sect that developed to be semi-independent religion. It was founded in 1844 by Mirza 'Ali Muhammad of Shiraz in Iran. He proclaimed a spiritual doctrine emphasizing the coming of a new prophet of God who will bring a new religion to overturn all beliefs and customs and to unite all faith and religions.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> MABIMS (Majlis Agama Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapura), *Kriteria-kriteria Ajaran Sesat* (Brunei: Kementerian Hal Ehwal Uagama, 1994), p.8

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*.

*The interpretation of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah according to Nahdhatul-Ulama' (NU)*

As a response to the current issues of the Muslims in Indonesia, Nahdhatul Ulama has re-formulated its ideology by describing its characteristics as follows:

1. *Al-Tawassuṭ* (Moderation) or *tawazun* (balanced) or *i'tidal* (middle-path) in its approach to new issues and problems.
2. *Al-Tasāmuh* (tolerance) in its dealing with the differences be it in *aqidah*, thought and culture.
3. *Al-Isłāḥ* (reformation) is to keep on working for the betterment of society.
4. *Al-Taṭawwuriyyah* (dynamism) or to be contextual in responding to new issues.
5. *Al-Manhajiyyah* (methodological) in its judgment and reasoning.<sup>40</sup>

Above all the formulas, according to Dr. Aqil Siroj,<sup>41</sup> Nahdhatul Ulama has to shift from the *mazhabī* (sectarian) based ideology to the *manhajī* (methodological) based ideology.

As for '*aqidah*', Nahdhatul Ulama refers to the opinion of *Al-Zābidī* as follow:

Hāfiḍ al-Murtaṣa Al-Zābidī in his book *Sharḥ Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*<sup>42</sup> said:

"If the term *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* is used broadly, it refers to the people who took the knowledge from the route of al-Ash'arī named *al-Ash'ariyyah*, or the people who took their knowledge from the route of *al-Māṭuridī* named *al-Māṭurīdiyyah*.<sup>43</sup>"

<sup>40</sup> Yusuf Hashim MA, *Aswaja an Nahdiyah dari Madhhabi ke Manhaji*, <https://aswajacenterpati.wordpress.com/2012/04/02/aswaja-annahdiyah-dari-madhhabi-menuju-manhaji/>

<sup>41</sup> The former chief of NU and the member of NU scholars.

<sup>42</sup> Muḥammad al-Ḥusayni al-Zabīdī (al-Murtaṣā), *Iḥāf al-Sādah al-Muttaqīn bi Sharḥ Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Beirut, Dār al-Fikr, n.d.), vol.2, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> Founded by Abū Maṣṣūr Muḥammad ibn Maḥmūd al-Māṭurīdī, born in Samarkand (d.944 AD.) He was another founder of the Sunni theology together with Imam Ḥasan Ash'ari despite the differences that they have. Al-Māṭurīdī was known for his reliance on reason more than Ash'arī in his arguments in theological issues such as knowing God, knowing good and bad etc. He was more influenced by *Imām Abū Ḥanīfah* rather than *Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* as compared to Ash'arī. See Abū Zahrah, pp. 179-181.

While in political life NU translates the ideology of Aswaja as outlined in the Basic Principles of Social life of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) based on the 5 principles above namely; *I'tidāl, al-tawassuṭ; al-tawāzun ; al-tasāmuh and maṣlahah 'āmah*. However in defining *al-tasāmuh* (tolerance) politically, it is to give a chance to other parties as a basic human right and for the strong party both the leader and people will to make a sacrifice to support the right of poor people and minorities. Furthermore, for the last principle that is *maṣlahah 'āmmah* (general welfare) it is defined as to guarantee the 5 objectives of Islam namely preservation of religion, life, intellect, dignity, and property.<sup>44</sup>

Organizationally, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* has been institutionalized by the Muslims in the archipelago since the presence of KH. Hasyim Ash'ari. Together with his colleagues KH. Hasyim successfully pioneered the establishment of the Islamic organization named Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) which formally claimed to be the followers of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. In its statute on the results of the third conference in 1928, article 2 *Qanun Asasi* of NU it is expressed that NU aims to fortify the articulation of the four schools of Islamic jurisprudence namely Shafi'i, Mālikī, Ḥanbalī, and Ḥanafī and continuously work for the benefit of Islam.

Meanwhile, in some critical issues such as on the issues of sin, government, and the methodology of *dakwah*, Nahdhatul Ulama has its approach as follow:<sup>45</sup>

On the issue of attributing or judging someone as an infidel (*takfir*) for his sin, this issue is crucial since many Muslims in Indonesia are not practicing the main duties of Islam such as *solah, zakah*, fasting, etc. hence the opinion on the case is important to respond.

Nahdhatul Ulama holds the opinion of *Imām al- Ghazālī* as follow:<sup>46</sup>

"It is necessary to find ways to avoid judging or labeling others infidel. Shading the blood of a Muslim who pronounced *shahādah* is a big mistake. A mistake to leave a thousand infidels alive is better than a mistake to take the life of a Muslim."

<sup>44</sup> Andi Purnomo, Organisasi Keagamaan dan Keamanan International: Beberapa Prinsip dan Praktik Diplomasi Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Indonesia, *Jurnal Politik Profetik Volume 2 Nomor 2 Tahun 2013*.

<sup>45</sup> Nu Online, <http://www.n.or.id/post/read/85152/ini-cara-membedakan-penceramah-aswaja-dan-non-aswaja>

<sup>46</sup> Abu Hamid al Ghazali, ( n.d.), *Al iqtisād fi al I'tiqād*, p. 81

It had been elaborated further by Syekh Nawawi bin Umar Al-Bantani<sup>47</sup> as follows:

“Don’t judge by your own view your Muslim brothers to be infidel or idolator, because it is the most difficult case. The one who knows about the heart is only God that is why don’t interfere with God’s matter. The Prophet said: "Don't judge someone as infidel but it will return to one of them. If the testimony is true the man is truly infidel otherwise the allegation will return to him because he accused his brother falsely.”<sup>48</sup>

As for the relation with the authority, they hold the opinion that it is forbidden (*haram*) to renegade the unjust or evil leader. It is based on the opinion of Imam Nawawi al-Bantani on his statement:

“And to rebel against the leader and to fight them is *harām* (forbidden) by the consensus (*ijmā’*) of the Muslims even if they are evil (*fāsiq*) or unjust (*zālim*).<sup>49</sup>

They follow the stance that had been taken by the ‘ulama/scholars of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā’ah* such as Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Imām Al-Bukhārī, etc. in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AH during the rule of Mu’tazilite leaders i.e. Al-Makmūn (833 AD), Al-Mu’taṣim (842 AD), and Al-Wāthiq Billah (d. 847 AD).

It is further said that it is permissible to deal with the rulers and to obey them as well as to fight with them as it is the ethics of the *Salaf* (early generation) with whom they disagreed.<sup>50</sup>

This opinion of Nahdhatul Ulama had somehow influenced the political stand of this organization in the history of Indonesia. That is by having a more accommodative approach to the government or even sup-

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<sup>47</sup> Sheikh Nawawi al Bantani was born in Banten, West Java in 1813 from ‘ulama family and at 15<sup>th</sup> years old he was sent to Mecca to learn Islam. He managed to learn various knowledge from prominent ‘ulama of Mecca such as Sheikh Muḥammad Khatīb Ḥanbali. He wrote numerous books on *fiqh*, *tasawwuf* and *tafsir* and his popular book is *Tafsir al Munir fi Ma’alim al-Tanzil* or known as *Tafsir Marāḥ Labīb*.

<sup>48</sup> Syekh Nawawi Al-Bantani, *Maraqil ‘Ubūdiyyah*, (Surabaya, Al-Hidayah, n.d.), p 69.

<sup>49</sup> *Al-Minhaj Syarh Shahih Muslim bin Al-Hajjaj*, Beirut, Dār Iḥyā’it Turāth, 1392 H, vol. XXII, p 229).

<sup>50</sup> See Shaykh Abdul Fattah Qudais Al-Yafi’i, *Al-Manhajiyah Al-‘Ammah fi al Aqīdah* (Shan’a, Maktabah al-Jayl al-jadīd, 1<sup>st</sup>. ed, 2007 AD), pp. 32-33.



porting or joining it rather than opposing it even if the ruling government is not that Islamic.<sup>51</sup>

On the issue of having different opinions with others on minor issues (*furū'iyah*) such as on the issue of the ruling/*hukm* of halal or haram, NU never accused others of an infidel or defiant. This is based on the opinion of Shaykh 'Abdul Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429 AH):<sup>52</sup>

“when they have difference opinions on the issue of *halāl* and *harām* of the Islamic ruling (*hukm*), they don't blame each other or ascribe the other as deviant or *fāsiq* and they are the saved group.”<sup>53</sup>

This opinion is also in line with the opinion of Yusuf al-Qaraḍawi as adopted by the Malaysian fatwa council that divided *takfīr* (infidelity) into two types, *takfīr mutlaq* (absolute infidelity) and *takfīr mu'ayyan* (definite infidelity). *Takfīr mutlaq* is the general statement without referring to anybody but to describe the general characteristic of *Kāfir* while *takfīr mu'ayyan* is referring to admitting someone as *kāfir*/infidel due to his/her faith or action that indicates *kāfir* without a doubt. However, it depends on some conditions such as having knowledge of Islam, not a new convert, or not insane as well as not living in an isolated area where there is no Muslim scholar who can guide him.<sup>54</sup> In short, it is not easy to judge someone infidel (*kāfir*) unless it fulfills these criteria.

In the approach of propagation (*da'wah*), they rely on the gentle and friendly approach. It should be done by wisdom and by gradual process. Calling to goodness (*Amr bi al-makrūf*) and prohibiting the evil (*nahy 'an al-munkar*) should be done with mercy and gentleness. Restraining from blaming them for not fulfilling the duties of Islam and to advise them to fulfill the more important duties before others. While in

<sup>51</sup> This tendency was shown by supporting Sukarno's (first president of Indonesia) idea of Nasakom (Nationality, religion, and Communism) and by joining PDI's government after the fall of Suharto.

<sup>52</sup> 'Abd al-Qāhir ibn Ṭāhir ibn Muhammad, Abū Maṣṣūr al-Naysabūri al-Tamīmi al-Baghdādī al-Shāfi'i al-Ash'arī (d. 429). He was known as al-faqīh of the Shafi'i madhhab and theologian of the Sunni doctrine who fiercely defended the Sunni creed in his book against Mu'tazilah and Shi'ah ideology such as *Fadhaih al Mu'tazilah* and his major book is *al-Farq Bayn al-Firāq*.

<sup>53</sup> See, Shaykh Abdul Qahir Al-Baghdadi, *Al-Farq Bayn al Firāq* (Beirut: Dārul Āfāq Al-Jadīdah, 1977), p. 20).

<sup>54</sup> See Mohd. Aizam bin Mas'ud, *Diskusi Isu Akidah dan Pemikiran Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: JAKIM, 2013). p. 63.

prohibiting the evil (*al-nahy 'an al-munkar*) if it cannot be stopped completely at least part of it which is possible.<sup>55</sup>

### **The Interpretation of Muhammadiyah Organization**

Apart from NU, the other big Islamic organization is Muhammadiyah with more than 35 million members and probably the largest Islamic organization with its private education institutions and community service centers.<sup>56</sup>

This organization is ideologically of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah*, but it is not used as a trademark of the organization. Instead, they preferred to use the theme of Reformation and Purification as their main mission. It is contrary to Nahdhatul Ulama main objective that is to harmonize the local culture with Islam.

As mentioned in its philosophy, Muhammadiyah is an Islamic movement organization to promote virtues and eliminate the evils. It is based on the following principles:

The organization is founded based on Islamic creed (aqidah) which sourced from the Qur'an and As-Sunnah. It aims at creating a good, just, prosper society and pleased by Allah SWT to fulfill the role and the mission of man as a servant and the agent /caliphs of God on earth.

Muhammadiyah believes that Islam is the religion sent down by Allah to all Prophets beginning from Adam to Muhammad as guidance and blessing for the human being at all times and to guarantee good life in both worlds spiritually and physically.

However, in practicing Islam Muhammadiyah approach is based on the following principles:

- a. Al Qur'an: the holy book of Allah which was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW).
- b. The Sunnah of the Prophet: that is the explanation and the implementation of the Qur'an by the Prophet (SAW) by using his reason according to the spirit of Islamic teaching.

Muhammadiyah works to implement the teaching of Islam in various aspects on its philosophies as the following:

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<sup>55</sup> Habib Zain bin Smith, *Al-Manhaj al-Sāwi*, (Jakarta, Darul 'Ulum Al-Islamiyyah, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2008), p. 311-312.

<sup>56</sup> [www.suaramerdeka.com/harian/0707/06/opi03.htm](http://www.suaramerdeka.com/harian/0707/06/opi03.htm)

- a. In Aqidah (creed) Muhammadiyah works to establish the Islamic creed and to purify it from any elements of *shirk*, *bid'ah* (innovation) and *khurāfah* (heresy) without neglecting the principle of tolerance.
- b. In ethics/ morality, it works to establish good morality based on the principles of al-Qur'an and Sunnah and not on man-made values.
- c. In *'ibādah* (worship), Muhammadiyah works to establish the concept of worship as guided by the Prophet (SAW) without any addition and alteration by man.
- d. Worldly matters, Muhammadiyah works to realize the worldly activities based on the guidance of Islam as a manifestation of *'ibādah* to God.

Based on the above philosophy, Muhammadiyah called all Indonesians to appreciate the blessing of God who granted independence based on the Pancasila<sup>57</sup> and Nation constitution of 1945 and to work together to realize the aim to create just and prosper society and pleased by God.<sup>58</sup>

By observing the principles of Muhammadiyah we find some differences in its vision and mission as well as the principle of creed (*aqidah*). Despite being a Sunni Muslim organization, the “branding” of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* is not the main concern, instead, it focuses on the revitalization or rejuvenation of Islam. That is by purifying its teachings from any elements of non-Islamic ones be it *shirk* (idolatry), *bid'ah* (innovation) or *khurāfat* (idolatry). In its *aqidah* /creed, the main objective is to purify it from non-Islamic elements such as the assimilation of local cultures and beliefs which are against the Islamic creed. This movement could be associated with Ibn al-Taymiyyah and Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb's movement to purify Islamic *'aqidah* (creed) from non-Islamic elements.

This movement, however, had created some discords if not a conflict with the other groups especially Nahdhatul Ulama due to some differences between both in creed, *fiqh* or morality (*akhlāq*). This disagree-

<sup>57</sup> The national ideology of Indonesia based on 1945 constitution is introduced by Sukarno. It consists of 5 principles namely; belief in One God, humanism, unity of nation, democracy and social prosperity.

<sup>58</sup> *Keputusan Tanwir Muhammadiyah 1969 di Ponorogo*. <http://www.muhammadiyah.or.id/id/content-175-det-matan-keyakinan-dan-citacita-hidup.html>

ment has led to a continuous polemic on who is the true *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah*.

Based on the philosophy of the organization, we find some distinctions that lead to continuous polemic with other organizations especially Nahdhatul Ulama. The main issues such as the issue of *tawhīd* and '*aqidah, fiqh, and madhhab* as well as the issue of *tasawuf* and *bid'ah* (heresies). Another issue is the approach of *da'wah* embraced by Muhammadiyah which is by eliminating the local practices which are non-Islamic. This approach is considered by NU as an extreme method and not considered as the approach of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* as mentioned in its principles above.

On the issue of *tasawuf*, compared to NU, Muhammadiyah has its own stance and opinion on it. It seems that Muhammadiyah does not encourage the practices of *tasawuf* as it had been associated with heresies and innovation (*bid'ah*) and even *shirk* (idolatry). However, Muhammadiyah developed its concept of *tasawuf* that is more on *tasawuf akhlāqī* (morality), *Ihsān* (excellent performance of ibadah) and *tazkiyyah al-nafs* or purification of the soul. Muhammadiyah practices modern Sufism by focusing on *zikr* (remembering God), Qur'anic reading, *tafakkur* and *tadabbur* (learning the signs of God) which are based on the guidance and the practices of the Prophet (SAW). This view could be observed in the *tafsir* methodology of Hamka<sup>59</sup> named as *Tafsīr Al-Azhar*<sup>60</sup> and his book *Tasawuf Modern (Modern Sufism)* which is widely used in the Malay world today.

This idea of reformation somehow was inspired by the reformation movement led by Imam Ibn al-Taymiyyah (d.1328 AD), Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhab (d.1791 AD) as well as Muḥammad 'Abduh (d.1905 AD.) and Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī (d.1897 AD.).

Furthermore, a new polemic took place when the NU introduced a new brand of Islam named '*Islam Nusantara*'. The brand of *Islam*

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<sup>59</sup> Hamka is a short of Haji Abdul Malik Karīm Amrullah, a well-known scholar who was born in Padang Sumatera in 1908 (d. 1981). He was an Indonesian religious scholar and author of more than a hundred works of fiction, politics, history, biography, Islamic doctrine, ethics, mysticism, and *tafsir*. He was most famous religious scholar in Malay-speaking world. Among his legacy on *tafsir* book named as *Tafsīr al-Azhār* is named after the famous Islamic University in Cairo.

<sup>60</sup> This *tafsir* is the monumental writing of Hamka in Malay language. He completed writing the *tafsir* in 1964 during his detention by Sukarno regime. The methodology of his *tafsir* is inspired more by *tafsir al-Mannār* written by Muḥammad 'Abduh of Egypt by combining several aspects of '*aqidah, fiqh, tasawuf* and science. The book is widely used in Malay world until today.

*Nusantara* aims to maintain and harmonize local culture and local approach of *da'wah* and Islamic teaching which they claim to be different from the Arab one. This idea was mainly introduced by NU scholars in response to the current issues of extremism and terrorism that spread throughout the world and Indonesia recently.

Despite the support of the government,<sup>61</sup> the '*Islam Nusantara*' has sparked another debate among Muslim scholars as well as among the lay Muslims. In one case the new melodious reading of Al-Qur'an in Javanese melody recited in an official gathering had been connected to Islam Nusantara by localizing the ritual of Qur'anic reading.

These differences had led to other 'conflicts' even in the political arena such as the removal of Abdurrahman Wahid<sup>62</sup> from the Presidential position led by Amin Rais<sup>63</sup> in 2001.<sup>64</sup> The conflict occurred due to the different stance between the followers of NU who defended Abdurrahman Wahid as the legal President and Amin Rais backed by the Muhammadiyah followers who led the demonstration to remove Abdurrahman Wahid from the number 1 position who was viewed as unable to lead the country after only 2 years in the power.<sup>65</sup>

Whilst NU is known with its brand of *Islam Nusantara* (Islam of Archipelago), Muhammadiyah also introduced the theme of *Islam berkemajuan* (Progressive Islam) recently. This brand was introduced to respond to the current issues and to revitalize its movement and to show another aspect of Islam that is progressive, moderate, excellent, and to be a blessing of humankind. "Islam should be presented to the world today as a 'problem solver' not as a 'problem maker' as the world today looks at Islam" according to Prof. Din Syamsuddin<sup>66</sup> concerning the concept of progressive Islam (*Islam berkemajuan*).

<sup>61</sup>This support is due to the political coalition between PDI (Democratic Party of Indonesia) and PKB (the Political wing of Nahdhatul Ulama) which won the election in 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Abdurrahman Wahid was a leader of Nahdhatul 'Ulama who was replaced by Megawati as a president due to his weakness to govern the country.

<sup>63</sup> Prof. Amin Rais was a leader of Muhammadiyah and considered as a leader of political reformation that led to the removal of Suharto in 1998 and plays an important role again in removing Abdurrahman Wahid from the presidential position.

<sup>64</sup> Fana Supartman Ma, Berita satu, *Meluruskan fakta sejarah Lengsernya Gus Dur*, 12 January 2016. [www.beritasatu.com/nasional/34033](http://www.beritasatu.com/nasional/34033)

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>66</sup> Prof. Din Syamsuddin, the former Chief of Muhammadiyah (2005-2-15) in his speech on Friday 2/6/2017. In Ramadhan 1438H at Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta (UMY). <http://www.umm.ac.id/id/muhammadiyah/10851.html>

Nevertheless, the ideology of Muhammadiyah is not easily accepted by the Muslims in Indonesia, especially in rural areas whereby Nahdhatul Ulama ideology is more acceptable to them. In the recent case, the new mosque built by Muhammadiyah members in Beirun, Aceh, was burned down by the local Muslim villagers. It is said the motive of the incident was ignited by the misunderstanding that the Muhammadiyah ideology practiced by the local people is against the doctrine of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah*.<sup>67</sup> This incident had been reported as a police case by the chief of Muhammadiyah youth wing, Dahnil Azhar Simanjuntak despite getting approval from the Local Authority. This case witnessed in Aceh recently was not the sole case in Indonesia.

Such cases show the complexity of the interpretation of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-jamā'ah* which sparks the conflict between the Muslims in Indonesia which are mainly of the Sunni sect.

It seems that the issue lies in the characteristics of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* which may differ from one to another. Such an issue is related to the Wahabi issue which generates different opinions among the Muslims in the world. Muhammadiyah organization, in particular, is associated with the Wahabi ideology due to some characteristics that they may share. Among the characteristics that they shared are *anti-bid'ah* (innovation) principle that they uphold. It also stressed on the purification of *tawhīd* (unity of God) from any elements of *shirk* (idolatry), *bid'ah* (innovation) and *khurāfāt* (heresies). In term of *'ibādah* they share the same mission that is to purify it from any element of *bid'ah* and to refer more to the Qur'an and Sunnah instead of the opinions of 'ulama.<sup>68</sup>

Likewise, in the field of morality (*akhlaq*), it doesn't accept *tasawuf* as a discipline of *'ibādah* for they believed that a lot of deviation takes place in its practice as well as in its philosophy. This principle is adopted by the *Wahābī*<sup>69</sup> ideology. However, Muhammadiyah denied the allegation of being a copycat of *Wahābī* ideology. According to Dr. Bahtiar Nasir in his speech at the Muhammadiyah anniversary, he said that Muhammadiyah is not *Wahābī* but it has its own philosophy of be-

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<sup>67</sup> CNN Indonesia news, Wednesday 18/10/2017.

<sup>68</sup> Zainal Abidin bin Syamsudin, *Membedah Akar Fitnah Wahabi*, (Jakarta: Pustaka Imam Bonjol, 2015), p.122

<sup>69</sup> Wahabism is the 18<sup>th</sup> AD Islamic reformation led by Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, a Hanbali scholar in Arabia peninsula. His popular movement is the purification of Tawhid from heresies and superstition. Formed an alliance with Muhammad ibn Sa'ud in 1747 to establish the present day kingdom of Saudi Arabia. (d. 1792 AD.)

ing an Indonesian organization.<sup>70</sup> This statement came out as a response to the accusation that Muhammadiyah is an agent of *Wahābī* ideology that threatens the survival of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah* and Nahdhatul Ulama ideology and even considered it as dangerous as Shi'ah sect.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Challenges of the Current Ideologies *Salafy* and *Wahabism***

Wahabism or Salafi issue becomes a controversial issue among the Muslims in South East Asia in general. Wahabism literally derived from the word *Wahab* or in complete form 'Abd al-Wahhāb is given that relates the theology with the 18<sup>th</sup> century AD. Saudi reformer of Imām Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (1701 AD.). The term has been attached to him due to his reformation movement of purifying Islamic theology from any elements of idolatry and innovation.<sup>72</sup> This theology had spread out in Saudi as well as gulf countries and some other parts of the Muslim world. It gains momentum with the support of the *al-Saud* family in the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward that ruled the Arabia peninsula. Wahabism which claimed to follow the path of Salafis grows further and spread among some Muslims in different parts of the Muslim world from west to east. Nonetheless, it also receives insurgency in many parts of the Muslim world for its strict adherence to the Qur'an and Sunnah and its literal interpretation of the texts.<sup>73</sup> In its course, the term *Salafī* had been used that refers to the movement and it got more popular rather than Wahabism for the reason that Wahabism is more identical with an individual name rather than its ideology.

The term Salafī derived from the word *salafa* or *salaf* which means the early one. Technically it means it is the method/way of understanding and practicing Islam according to the earliest generation of the Muslims especially the first three generations. However, the term developed further to connote different meaning and interpretations. It is more

<sup>70</sup> Dr. Haidar Nasir, Milad Muhammadiyah 105, published on Nov. 12, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IHHhR1uA3A>

<sup>71</sup> Dr. Khalil Nafis, *Menyikapi Konflik Sunni Shi'ah dalam bingkai NKRI*, (PWNU Surabaya, 2014) <http://www.muslimmedianews.com/2014/12/mui-pusat-wahabi-dan-syiah-targetkan.html>

<sup>72</sup> See Muhammad Ābū Zahrah, *Tārīkh al-Mazahib al-Islāmiyyah* (Cairo, Dār al-Fikr al-Ārabī, 1996) p.213.

<sup>73</sup> See Muhammad Hasyim Asy'ari, *Risalah Aswaja* (Yogyakarta, Ar-ruz Media, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., 2015), p. 82-85.

synonymous with the theology based on the teaching and the movement brought by Imām Ibn Taymiyyah and Imām ‘Abd al-Wahhāb.<sup>74</sup>

The *Salafī* term has been used widely since 90<sup>th</sup> with the emergence of the Salafī group along with the influence of the Wahabism in Indonesia. Salafī theology had been brought to this region in 90<sup>th</sup> from Saudi Arabia through the students graduating from Saudi's high learning institutions. Other ways are by having training of *da'wah* in Saudi Arabia as well as by the establishment of Saudi's institutions in this region such as Rābiṭah al-‘Ālam al-Islāmi and LIPIA (Institute of Islamic Studies and Arabic language). Apart from that the establishment of various Islamic schools sponsored by Saudi's fund contributed to the spread of Salafism or Wahabism.<sup>75</sup> Interestingly, the term *Salafī* has been used also by the local organization Nahdhatul Ulama but with a different interpretation.

Nahdhatul Ulama as the biggest organization that claims to be the defender of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* also believes to be the Salafī followers.<sup>76</sup> They believe that Abū Ḥasan al-Ash'ari the founder of Sunni thought is adopting the *Salafī* method after departing from the Mu'tazilah school of thought as reflected in his book of *Al-Ibanah*.<sup>77</sup> The brand is also used for the traditional boarding school which commonly built by NU organization by the name of '*Pesantren Salafiah*'. However, they interpreted the term differently from the *Wahabi* one. Due to this different interpretation, these two '*Salafis*' are always caught in polemics of various issues. The main issue is about *tawhīd* and the purification of Islamic teaching from *shirk* and *bid'ah* which are promoted by the Salafis but regarded by the NU as too extreme. Another issue is the textual interpretation of al- Qur'an and al-Sunnah contrary to NU which denied such interpretation because it needs further interpretation/allegorical meaning of the 'ulama (*takwīl*) rather than taking it literally. Hence the Salafis is also called the *Ahl al-hadīth*<sup>78</sup> group for their direct reference to the hadith rather than Ulama's opinion.<sup>79</sup>

Another important issue is *bid'ah* (innovation) which has separated the two groups wider. According to the Wahabi (Salafis) *bid'ah* is un-

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp. 78-80

<sup>75</sup> Tim Aswaja NU center, *Risalah Ahl al-Sunnah wa al Jama'ah*, (Surabaya: Khalista, 2013), p. 79.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Imām ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' al Fatāwā*, vol. 3, pp. 347-348.

<sup>79</sup> See Muhammad Abū Zahrah, p.192.



derstood as all innovation which was not practiced or done by the Prophet or companions while according to NU *bid'ah* is not necessarily blameworthy and it could be divided into two; good and bad ones. The hadith that mentioned *bid'ah* should not be applied to all actions generally but it should be looked at its criteria and if it is in line with *shari'ah* then it would be acceptable while those are against *shari'ah* should be rejected.<sup>80</sup>

This opinion is based on the opinion of the scholars like Imam al-Nawawi (d. 676 AH.), 'Izz al-Dīn 'Abd al-Salām (d. 660 AH), Ibn Ḥajar al-'Aṣqalānī (d. 852 AH), etc.

On the other hand, according to Salafi Wahabi, the hadith on *bid'ah* had been taken literally that is by considering any activities not mentioned or practiced by the Prophet and sahabah should be considered as *bid'ah* and should be eliminated. This understanding implicates various issues such as *zikh* in a congregation (*wirid*), reciting du'a for the dead (*tahlīl*), celebrating the birthday of the Prophet (*al-maulid al-nabawi*), etc.<sup>81</sup>

Another controversial issue is on the approach *da'wah* which is considered by the NU as strict and intolerant. That is by rejecting any activities related to *shirk*, *khurāfāt*, *local culture* and the status of the non-practicing Muslims.<sup>82</sup> This is the turning point that separates the two groups; the *Wahabī* and the NU. Furthermore, NU has introduced a new brand named as '*Islam Nusantara*' to preserve local culture and wisdom instead of abolishing it for the sake of Islamization as mentioned earlier.<sup>83</sup>

The polemics goes further to the extent that NU has declared *Wahabism* out of Sunni ideology. It is due to the strict and harsh approach of *da'wah* used by the Wahabis and the literal interpretation of the text of al-Qur'an and As-Sunnah.<sup>84</sup>

This issue has affected other Muslim countries in South East Asia in general which is Sunni dominant and of Shafi'i *madhhab* such as Malaysia and Brunei. In Malaysia, the Wahabi issue has been in existence since 80<sup>th</sup> whereby the Wahabism has influenced somehow the Muslims

<sup>80</sup> Kh. Mud. Hashim Ash'ari (trans.), *Risalah Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah*, (Jogja: Ar-ruz Media, 2015), p. 52.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45

<sup>82</sup> Tim Aswaja NU center, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

<sup>83</sup> Ahmad Sahal, ed., *Islam Nusantara: Dari Ushul Fiqh hingga konsep Historis*, (Bandung: Mizan, 2015), p. 175.

<sup>84</sup> Tim Aswaja NU center, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

in Malaysia, especially in Perlis.<sup>85</sup> It has caused disputes among the scholars in Malaysia whether it should be legalized or not. However according to the Fatwa Council of Malaysia, Dr. Shukor Husin, Wahabism is not haram here, but it has no place in the country because its followers are fond of labeling non-committed Muslims as apostates. Since religion is a state matter, it would be up to the respective states to decide whether to ban it or not. Some states like Johor, Kedah, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, Perak, and Selangor have banned Wahhabism/Salafism.<sup>86</sup>

Wahabism in Malaysia is a sensitive issue, according to Prof. Abdul Shukor Husin, he said that in Malaysian society the ideology of Ash'ariyyah is identical with *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* while other doctrines such as Salafiah or Wahabism is not considered as *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah*. That is why to talk about Wahabism seems to be strange to the common people whether it is in a seminar or talk even if it is for academic purpose.<sup>87</sup>

In the latest issue regarding to the candidates of the Mufti of Kuala Lumpur territory, it has been argued by many for the reason that candidates graduated from Madinah University with the Wahabi doctrine.<sup>88</sup>

Even Wahabism or Salafism has been accused of being a root of extremism and radicalization according to the Aswaja<sup>89</sup> leader Dr. Zamihan.<sup>90</sup> This opinion is shared by Dr. Tengku Ahmad Fadhil<sup>91</sup> who concluded that radicalization has its root in Wahhabism/Salafism and suggested that the National Islamic curriculum should be revised for containing the elements of such ideology.<sup>92</sup>

However according to the JAKIM panel of 'aqīdah in its 14<sup>th</sup> meeting in 2000 decided and declared the Wahabism doctrine which is attached to the doctrine of 'Abd al-Wahhāb is not out of Sunni sect. The

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<sup>85</sup> Pertembungan fahaman melatari isu calon Mufti Wilayah Persekutuan, Malaysiakini, 18 April 2020,

<sup>86</sup> Star online, 28 Aug 2016.

<sup>87</sup> Abdul Shukor Husin, *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah: Pemahaman Semula*, (Bangi: UKM, 1998).

<sup>88</sup> Free Malaysia today, 16<sup>th</sup> April 2020.

<sup>89</sup> Aswaja is a non-government organization that support the effort to defend the theology of *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah in Malaysia*.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Senior Fellow of Islamic Strategic Research of Malaysia (Iksim).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

controversial issues trivial in nature which people time to time try to stir up.<sup>93</sup>

### *Shi'ism*

On the other hand, Shi'ite is another issue faced by the Muslims in Indonesia and this region in general due to the fact that the majority of the Muslims in Indonesia and South East Asia are of the Sunni theology. The emergence of Shi'ite is considered late and alien in the Sunni dominant region. The emergence of Shi'ite started in 1970<sup>th</sup> after the success of the Iran revolution. The victory of the revolutionists had attracted the Muslims in the region to learn about Shi'ite especially among the youth at the higher institutions.<sup>94</sup>

The Shi'ite in Indonesia grew further during the rule of Abdurrahman Wahid due to his democratic vision by giving more freedom to all social, political and religious groups.<sup>95</sup> Apart from that the improvement of bilateral relations between Indonesia and Iran government more students were dispatched to Qom, Iran to further their study.

However, there is no precise number of Shi'ite followers in Indonesia and other countries in South East Asia due to the sensitivity of the issue. The estimation of Shi'ite followers in Indonesia is about 200 thousand while the Indonesian Intelligence Agency (BIN) estimates higher up to 6 million.<sup>96</sup> While in Malaysia it is said there are approximately 300,000 Shi'ite followers nevertheless according to Jakim researcher Mohd. Aizam Mas'od it is only around 3000 people.<sup>97</sup>

The Shi'ite issue is a complicated issue in South East Asia due to its religious and political implications. The existence of Shi'ite as one of the Islamic sects that emerged early along with the Sunni school of thought couldn't be denied historically and Shi'ite population could be found in almost all Muslim countries.

This issue has sparked the debate on whether Shi'ites could be recognized as another sect of Islam or otherwise. Moreover, the era of political democratization that swayed the world and particularly this re-

<sup>93</sup> Mohd. Aizam Mas'od, JAKIM, *Isu Wahabiyah; Menanganinya secara Realiti* (Kuala Lumpur, Jakim, Jurnal Penyelidikan Islam, n.d.), p. 113.

<sup>94</sup> Dr. Zulkifli, *Forum Silaturrahmi Ilmiah*, (UIN Jakarta, 25 Jan 2012). [www.uinjkt.ac.id/id/syiah-bukan-fahaman-baru-di-Indonesia](http://www.uinjkt.ac.id/id/syiah-bukan-fahaman-baru-di-Indonesia).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Nahdhatul Ulama Online, *Syiah Indonesia seperti Apa*, (15 October 2017). [www.nu.or.id/post/read/82128/syiah-di-Indonesia](http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/82128/syiah-di-Indonesia).

<sup>97</sup> *Bharian*, Khamis 21 April 2016.

gion has increased the pressure to protect any elements of the society, be it social or religious group. This trend has motivated the minority group such as Shi'ites to surface and to demand their rights in the region. Shi'ite community in Indonesia initially declared its existence only in the last decade especially after the reformation era with the downfall of 32 years of Suharto's regime. Along with the era of democratization and human rights issues, the Shi'ite community seized the chance to openly declare its existence and demanded its rights and the protection from the government.<sup>98</sup>

This situation dragged the Muslims in general and the scholars as well as the Muslim authority into polemic. As for the government and the religious authority such as Majelis Ulama Indonesia, they stand to protect all religions and religious groups to exist and to live *at par* by the state's law. Under Indonesia's constitution, the government gives the freedom for all religions to be practiced and the government does not interfere with the individual rights.<sup>99</sup> It is not stated clearly which school of thought or madhhab to be practiced in Indonesia. It is different from the case of Malaysian law which stated clearly that the formal school of thought to follow is *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah*. Hence, any other Islamic sects are considered illegal and its practice is consequently illegal.<sup>100</sup> However, the 1996 decree on the deviation of Shi'ism had received different responses from the public and there is voice of demand to review it. The review is to avoid other parties to take the chance to exploit the differences among Muslim society. "Shi'ism can be practiced but not to spread it out," said Pulau Pinang Mufti Datuk Dr. Wan Salim. He also argued that the opinion on Shi'ism as deviant from Islam doesn't represent the opinion of the majority of Sunni scholars. It is based on the fact that the practice of the Shi'ites is still within the boundary of Islam. The decision could be reviewed and to consider Shi'ites as Muslims. However, he suggested that Shi'ism should be practiced privately because it could create confusion among the Sunni Muslims due to its different

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<sup>98</sup> Dr. Zulkifli, *Forum Silaturrahmi Ilmiah*, UIN Jakarta, 25 Jan 2012. [www.uinjkt.ac.id/id/syiah-bukan-fahaman-baru-di-Indonesia](http://www.uinjkt.ac.id/id/syiah-bukan-fahaman-baru-di-Indonesia).

<sup>99</sup> According to the state's law known as UUD 45, article 28E article 29 point 2.

<sup>100</sup> According to National Fatwa Council of Malaysia 1996, Fadli Adam, *Shi'ah di Malaysia: Perbandingan Antara Ithna 'Ashriyyah dan Daudi Bukhara*, INSPIRE, Unisza.

teachings.<sup>101</sup> This statement came as a response to the demand for reviewing the 1996 decree saying that Shi'ite is deviant from Islam.

On the other hand, some academicians voiced out their opinion on the issue of minority such as Shi'ite community.

It is said that Malaysia has become an intolerant Muslim nation and they are urging Malaysian Muslims to speak up as a response to the ongoing persecution against the minority Shi'ah Muslims in the country, said Syed Farid Al Atas, a professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore. Shi'ah Muslims were banned in Malaysia as they were seen as deviant, he added.

In contrast, according to MUI (Indonesia Muslim scholar Council), Shi'ah sect is not considered illegal in Indonesia but the Muslims should be alert of this sect.<sup>102</sup> The Council could only issue the verdict that Shi'ah ideology is contradicting to the Sunni sect. Among the doctrines highlighted by the Council is the doctrine of '*Imamah*' or leadership which differed from the Sunni school of thought. However, the Council could only come up with the recommendation to the Muslims to be alert of the Shi'ah movement.

Due to the demand of the Muslims, the MUI council issued another *fatwa* to declare that *Shi'ah Imāmiyyah*<sup>103</sup> (Twelver) as a deviant group from the teachings of Islam. However the Council could not ban any activities of Shi'ah community in Indonesia as mentioned by Muhyidin Junaidi to BBC news agency concerning the incident of one Officer of Bogor district who tried to ban '*Ashura* celebration'<sup>104</sup> by the Ahlul Bayt<sup>105</sup> community in his area.<sup>106</sup> He stressed that MUI has no power to

<sup>101</sup> Berita Harian Online 19/11/2019, retrieved from <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2018/11/499710/fatwa-terhadap-syiah-boleh-disemak-semula-mufti-pulau-pinang>

<sup>102</sup> Fatwa council, Rapat Kerja National Majelis Ulama Indonesia, issued on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1984.

<sup>103</sup> The Shi'ah Imamiyah or the twelver is the name given to the Shi'ahs who follow the 12 Imams. It is the most prevalent Shi'ah sect with about 80 percent of Shi'ah followers. They are active in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon.

<sup>104</sup> 'Ashura is celebrated annually by Muslims especially by the Shi'ite followers. It falls on 10<sup>th</sup> of Muharram the first month of Muslim lunar calendar to commemorate the martyrdom of Husain the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad in 680 AD. For Shi'ah Muslims it is a solemn day of mourning the martyrdom of Husain at Karbala, Iraq. It is marked by Muslims with a voluntary day of fasting which commemorates the day Noah left the Ark, and the day that Moses was saved from the Pharaoh by God.

<sup>105</sup> Ahl al-Bayt Indonesia is a community of Shi'ah in Indonesia, it was established in July 2010 in Jakarta registered as an NGO in Indonesia. Currently the organization is

ban such activity and criticized the officer for issuing such a letter for not allowing the Shi'ah community to hold their religious activities. "Such prohibition should not take place in this democratic country whereby religious activities are guaranteed by the law," said the speaker of Ahl al-Bayt community Ahmad Hidayat.<sup>107</sup>

As released by the MUI council in March 1984, Shi'ah sect had been in existence a long time ago along with the emergence of other sects in Islam. However, he clarified that Shi'ah differed from the Sunni in the following issues:

1. Shi'ah doesn't accept hadith which was not narrated by the *Ahl al-bayt* (family of the Prophet) while Sunni accepts any hadith reported by the reliable reporters according to the science of hadith.
2. Shi'ah believes in the infallibility (*ma'sūm*) of *Imam* while Sunni believes that the Imam is not safe from mistakes or sin.
3. Shi'ah doesn't accept *ijmā'* (consensus) without *Imam*, while *Ahl al-Sunnah* accepts it even without the participation of the *Imam*.
4. Shi'ah believes that establishing *Imāmah* is part of the pillars of faith while the Sunni disregards.
5. Shi'ah doesn't recognize the first three Caliphs Abū Bakr (634 AD.), 'Umar ibn al Khaṭṭāb (644 AD.), and Uthmān ibn al Āffān (656 AD.) while the Sunni recognizes all of them.

These are the main differences between Shi'ah and Sunni that Council issued to the Muslims in Indonesia to be alert of.<sup>108</sup>

This verdict has been emphasized again in point 97 related to *Mut'ah* (temporary) marriage. The Council issued a fatwa that Shi'ah belief in general and *mut'ah* marriage, in particular, is prohibited according to Sunni schools.

Another verdict was also issued in 2006 and 2007 declaring that Shi'ah belief and teaching are unacceptable in Islam and Shi'ah sect especially Shi'ah Imāmiyyah is considered deviant teaching. This verdict is in line with the fatwa of MUI of East Java that declared Shi'ah teaching

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active with various activities including religious, social and educational led by Umar Shahab and its office is in Jakarta.

<sup>106</sup> BBC Indonesia news, Shia di Indonesia.  
[https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita\\_indonesia/2015/10/151025\\_indonesia\\_syiah\\_bogor](https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2015/10/151025_indonesia_syiah_bogor)

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Fatwa Commission, MUI, Jakarta, 7<sup>th</sup> March 1984.

as deviant.<sup>109</sup> The verdict of the Ulama Council of East Java has triggered several violent incidents such as in Sampang, Madura Island whereby hundreds of Shi'ah followers were attacked and rampaged by the Muslims (Sunni) due to their effort to spread Shi'ah ideology in the tiny Island.

The tension between the Shi'ah and the Sunni followers did not occur only in that area but it took place also in other areas in Indonesia but in different scales.

These incidents indicate that Shi'ah ideology is peculiar to the Sunny majority in Indonesia due to its ideological controversies to the Sunni and it is potential to create more tension among the Muslims in Indonesia as well as in other countries in South East Asia.

As a response to the Shi'ah issue, the Minister of Religions of Indonesia, Luqman Hakim Syaifuddin said in an interview that Shi'ah has been in existence since the early time of Islam. This ideological dispute could not be settled yet, the only way for the Muslims is to respect each other and to live in peace and harmony despite these differences because Islam is the religion of peace (*salam*).<sup>110</sup>

Concerning the status of Shi'ah in Indonesia, he said that the ideological and religious differences are natural (*sunnatullah*) hence it is up to people to deal with it. These differences should not lead to negate each other or worse to fight each other as what has happened in Syria, Iraq, etc. When he was asked about the status of Shi'ah to be Muslim or otherwise he said that it is not in his capacity to judge, it should be referred to MUI (Ulama Council), Nahdhatul Ulama or Muhammadiyah scholars to voice out. He reiterated the decision of the OIC meeting in 2005 and 2006 that among the Shi'ah sects there are moderate ones such as *Zaydiyyah*<sup>111</sup> and *Ja'fari*<sup>112</sup> which are not far from the Sunni ideology.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> In the interview with *VIVA.co.id* dalam wawancara khusus di ruang kerja Menag, Kantor Kementerian Agama, Jakarta Pusat, Senin, 27 April 2015.

<sup>111</sup> Zaydis is a group of Shi'ah sect named after the grandson of Husain Zayd bin 'Ali. It is considered the most moderate Shi'ah groups to Sunni belief in *Imāmate* issue and the acceptance of other companion's succession. It is practiced in Yemen, India and Pakistan.

<sup>112</sup> This sect of Shi'ism was named after their Imām Ja'far al Šādiq (d.748 AD.). It is the closest Shi'ite group to Sunni in its legal methodology and sources. Since 1959 the Ja'fari school of jurisprudence has been accorded the status of "fifth school" along with the four Sunni schools by Azhar University in Cairo. The other two legal schools that share the Ja'fari origin are the Zaydī and the Musta'li Fatimid Isma'īlī jurisprudences. These two are closer to Sunnism in their derivation of religious practice.

On the other hand, Muhammadiyah as a Sunni organization formally issued the verdict on the deviation of Shi'ah teaching which is basically in line with the MUI council above. Therefore, Muhammadiyah reminds all its members as well as all Muslims of Indonesia to be alert of the danger of Shi'ah they differ from the Sunni ones. However, the opinion of Dr. Din Syamsuddin the Chief of the Muhammadiyah organization might be different from the above statement.<sup>114</sup> However, his individual opinion is different from the above by saying that the Shi'ah especially Zaydī and Ja'farī are not out of Islam as stated by *Majma' Fiqh Dawlī* (International Fiqh Academy) and he said that Sunni and Shi'ah should work together to embrace dialogue and not simply ascribe each other as infidel.<sup>115</sup>

This opinion is shared by other scholars such as Dr. Aqil Siraj (chief of NU) and Dr. Qomaruddin Hidayat as well as Dr. Syafi'i Ma'arif (former chief of Muhammadiyah). They said that Shi'ah is part of the Islamic sect and not to be regarded as an infidel.<sup>116</sup>

Based on the above opinions it can be concluded that Shi'ah issue is a delicate issue due to social, historical and political reasons. It can be deduced from the above discussion that the existence of Shi'ah could not be denied and banned completely in Indonesia and perhaps in other countries as well. However, it is different from the case of Malaysia and Brunei whereby its National verdict stated that the official Islamic theology of the country is Sunni. Hence any other sect could be considered as deviant and illegal.<sup>117</sup>

### ***Liberalism and Pluralism***

Another issue that widely engages Muslim scholars in Southeast Asia is the ideology of Liberalism. The issue appeared in 90th along with the era of political democratization and human right issue. Although the ideology originally developed in the West since the 19<sup>th</sup> century it spread in the Muslim world only at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The ideology

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> See, *Majalah Tabligh* No. 7/IX/ Jumadal Awal-Jumadil Akhir 1433 H, hal 5.

<sup>115</sup> Hidayatullah,

<https://www.hidayatullah.com/berita/nasional/read/2015/08/26/76711/anggota-mui-desak-bahas-syiah-ini-jawaban-din-syamsuddin.html>

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> State gazette 1997, Ahmad Hidayat Buang, *Kertas Kerja Seminar Pemikiran Islam*, (Kuala Lumpur: PIUM, January 2003).



emerged as a response to the renaissance that called for rationalization and liberalism from any religious doctrines and practices.<sup>118</sup>

The new trend called for the freedom of thinking and to rationalize as well as to liberalize the way of understanding religion and its teaching.<sup>119</sup> It developed to be an extreme rationalist such as the idea that to be moralist and humanist is not necessarily to be religious but it can be developed by using reason and common ethics.<sup>120</sup>

In a different definition, Liberalism is an ideology that tries to free the Muslim from the bound of Sharī'ah by interpreting, twisting and denying the textual evidence to suit it with reason based on Western philosophy. It includes all aspects educational, religion and social.<sup>121</sup>

As concluded by Zakaria Stapa and Ahmad Munawar Ismail liberalism could be identified as the following:

1. Liberal thought is a way of thinking that truth is relative and subjective. The truth could not be claimed by any individual or group and the moral values of right and wrong depends on personal perception and his/her culture and society.
2. In religious matter, the liberalist denies the religious authority to be the only source of verdict instead the individual should be given freedom to do *ijtihad* (reasoning) in all religious issues.
3. The liberalist believes that the Qur'an should be re-interpreted again without being bound with various disciplines of knowledge such as *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, *Nāshikh wa manshūkh* or by referring to neither hadith nor *āthār al-ṣahābah*.<sup>122</sup>

Basing on these two scholars it can be concluded that in the context of Malaysia so far there is no individual or organization who openly claimed to support liberalism but it doesn't mean that this trend of thought doesn't exist in Malaysia.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>118</sup> *Encyclopedia of Britannica*, "classical liberalism."

<sup>119</sup> According to MUI (Ulama Council of Indonesia issued a verdict on the deviation of the ideologies secularism, pluralism and liberalism. According to its statement based on National meeting no. 7, year 2005.

<sup>120</sup> *Voice of Islam*, 30 July 2012.

<sup>121</sup> Wan Adli Wan Ramli. *Bahaya liberalisme dan pluralisme agama terhadap akidah belia muslim* (Johor Bahru: Master Gift Sdn. Bhd., 2012).

<sup>122</sup> Ahmad Munawar & Ismail Zakaria Stapa, Liberalism and the Muslim thought in Malaysia, journal *Islamiyyat* 41(2) 2019: 39 - 49 (<https://doi.org/10.17576/islamiyyat-2019-4001-05>)

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

While pluralism<sup>124</sup> called for equality of all religions and to deny exclusivism of truth to a certain religion. As mentioned by Sukidi one of the Liberalist member of Muhammadiyah youth wing, he claimed that there should be no exclusivism of claiming the truth because the truth is one and it depends on the human being to express it in his way.<sup>125</sup>

This trend seems to be attractive to young Muslims especially among university students who are very keen to learn new things and to change the conventional way of practicing religion.

This ideology had influenced many youngsters even among the members of the Muslim organization such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdhatul Ulama. They promoted the freedom of thinking without being bound with the old paradigm of understanding religion as well as in interpreting the texts of the Qur'an. During the 45<sup>th</sup> Muhammadiyah National congress, this faction has been defeated by the 'puritan' group who calls for the refinement of this organization from these ideologies due to its contradiction to the foundation of Islam.<sup>126</sup>

This new trend of thought among the youth had been addressed by the chief of Muhammadiyah organization Dr. Din Syamsuddin that Muhammadiyah is committed to its principle and ideology of maintaining the *Tawhid* and to maintain its characteristic of being moderate in its faith and practices, hence it doesn't agree with the extreme ideology of rationalism which is brought by the liberalist and he criticized the ideology because it is contrary to the moderation character of Islam.<sup>127</sup>

On the other hand Nahdhatul Ulama the biggest Muslim organization is facing the more challenging trend of Liberalism and Pluralism. This is because the youth wing of this organization has been affected gravely by these ideologies. This trend somehow has been motivated by the former President of Indonesia Abdurrahman Wahid whose background was NU. He was known for promoting freedom of thought and tolerance to non-Muslims and labeled as the father of Pluralism in Indo-

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<sup>124</sup> Pluralism developed from political ideology that protects and respects the rights of every members of society. It eventually affects the other aspects such as cultural and religious aspects. In religious aspects it has been debated by the scholars from the meaning of mutual respect between all religions and up to the idea that all religions are the same in relativeness and no religion should claim to uniqueness of truth and salvation. (See Anis Malik Toha, Discourse of religious Pluralism in Indonesia, *Journal Islam in Asia*, vol 2 no 2 Dec. 2005)p.112

<sup>125</sup> Hidayatullah, *Nasib Islam Liberal Pasca Muktamar Muhammadiyah*, 17<sup>th</sup> Juli 2005

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

nesia by some. He was involved in the dialogue with non-Muslims as well as with Israel and even he had suggested that Indonesia supposedly has to open the bilateral relation with Israel.<sup>128</sup> This statement had raised strong criticism among the Muslims in Indonesia due to the Palestinian issue and consequently, Indonesia restrained to open diplomatic relations with Israel since the 70's. He also promoted the freedom of faith to all including the religious sects which were not recognized by the government such as Shi'ah and Ahmadiyah to be practiced in Indonesia.<sup>129</sup> This movement had received criticism from many and considered as a symbol of Liberalism and even he introduced the practice of praying together with other beliefs on some occasions including priests, monks, and nuns.

However, Nahdhatul Ulama has its own opinion as a response to the new trend. Hashim Muzadi the former leader of NU said that pluralism what NU means is more on the sociological aspect rather than theological because each religion has its own doctrines and beliefs and it could never be uninformed altogether. No one can accept it even the non-Muslims because each religion has its own fanaticism and the only way is to respect other's belief.<sup>130</sup>

This trend was also rectified by Dr. Aqil Siraj,<sup>131</sup> by imparting that pluralism that NU promoted is more to social diversity rather than a theological aspect. However he reiterated that all religions promoted virtues and good deeds, therefore we should respect each religion.<sup>132</sup>

This ideology also spread in other Muslim countries such as Malaysia but in a lesser degree due to the early detection and precautionary measures taken by the Islamic authority such as National Islamic council<sup>133</sup> and the state's religious authority to deter its spreading among the Muslims. Selangor as an example has issued the decision<sup>134</sup> to ban any activities that promote or spread the ideology.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>128</sup> BBC News (11/06/2018), *Pro kontra tokoh NU jadi pembicara di Israel*. <https://www.bbc.com/Indonesia/Indonesia-44430682>

<sup>129</sup> The Jakarta Post (7<sup>th</sup> January 2014), Alissa Wahid; Realizing Gus Dur's Dreams.

<sup>130</sup> NU online (3<sup>rd</sup> January 2010), Hasyim Muzadi; *luruskan konsep Pluralisme*.

<sup>131</sup> He was the chief of NU organization and a well-known NU scholar.

<sup>132</sup> NU online, (2<sup>nd</sup> Sept 2010), *Aqil: Pluralisme satu Anugerah*. <http://www.nu.or.id/post/read/24478/said-aqil-pluralisme-itu-anugerah>.

<sup>133</sup> The decision to ban the ideology was taken in its 74<sup>th</sup> meeting on 27 July 2006.

<sup>134</sup> Selangor Islamic council issued a fatwa on 10 Oct 2013.

<sup>135</sup> *Berita Harian* (10 March 2018), Pluralisme, liberal ancam institusi Islam. <https://www.bharian.com.my/rencana/muka10/2018/03/397782/pluralisme-liberal-ancam-institusi-islam>.

The ideology of Liberalism is considered an extreme ideology and against the Sunni approach for using reason more than textual revelation as it was practiced by the Mu'tazilites. The Indonesian ulama' council, however, has issued fatwa on the misleading of the ideology.<sup>136</sup>

### Conclusion

Based on the above discussion it could be concluded that the theological issue of

*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al jamā'ah* is an everlasting issue that need to be addressed and discussed regularly by the Muslim scholars. It is due to rapid changes of religious and socio-politic and economic circumstances facing the Muslim Ummah, it is inevitable for Muslim scholars to re-define and re-interpret the concept of *Ahl al- Sunnah* to maintain the purity and integrity of the Islamic belief system.

The differences emanate mainly from the disagreement in interpreting the term of *Ahl al- Sunnah wa al Jamā'ah* and the method that they used to respond to the current issues. Hence it is necessary for the Muslim scholars to have regular discussion to address the current issues and to respond to it to synchronize their views and to avoid confusion among the Muslims as well as to unite the voice of the Muslims.

Terminologically the differences given by the Muslim scholars may not be that serious however, when it comes to the interpretation and the principles it could be observed that more serious polarization took place among the Muslims as well as among the scholars.

In responding to the current issues the opinions of the Muslim scholars and the religious authorities also divers from one to another. For the case of Wahabism, the theology could be accepted by some but not by others despite the fact that Wahabism developed from the Sunni theology.

Moreover, the issue of Shi'ism is more serious that divided the Muslims further. This differences did not occur only among the Muslim scholars in the region only but it happened somehow to the Muslim scholars in the Muslim world. Such issue had created intense debate lest a conflict among the Muslim society since the early time of Islam until today. However, due to the democratization and human rights reason, Shi'ah existence could not be simply denied despite the controversies that arouse.

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<sup>136</sup> Keputusan Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia Nomor: 7/Munas VII/MUI/11/2005 Tentang Pluralisme, Liberalisme, dan Sekulerisme Agama.

Lastly on the ideology of liberalism and pluralism, despite its lesser impact on the Muslims in the region yet it has to be addressed properly to avoid confusion among the lay Muslims.

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