

Constructing Indonesian Religious Pluralism: The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Countering Violent Religious Extremism

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia, in advocating and practicing religious pluralism. It examines the organisation's commitment to fostering religious pluralism and the institutionalisation of the principle of religious pluralism by interviewing and observing a number of NU administrators and/or activists from the national to the village level, and by reviewing official documents of the NU and articles in media published in East Java and Central Java. The article argues that the NU's commitment to fostering religious pluralism develops through the organisation's denunciation of various forms of religious violence and through mainstreaming moderate Islam. The article also contends that the NU's notion of pluralism and its practices are not monolithic for there has been a spectrum of pluralism within the NU, ranging from the communal to liberal types of tolerance.

Keywords: religious pluralism, civil Islam, moderate Islam, conservatism.

Introduction

No discussion of Islam in Indonesia can be complete without mentioning the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest traditionalist Muslim organisation in Indonesia. Despite its traditional characters for using the classical Islamic thoughts, mainly through classical Islamic books written by classical *ulama*/Muslim scholars, the organisation is able to creatively and progressively respond to the challenges of modernity. The NU's intellectuals not only engage in, but they also promote many modern ideas such as nationalism, democracy, gender

equity, human rights, citizenship, and pluralism combined with Islam rooted in the classical tradition of Islamic thoughts.¹

There were many studies on the NU, but apparently it started to emerge only in the 1970s. Influenced by a strong wave of modern ideologies. Most studies in this period seemed to be unfriendly to the NU. In 1970, study on the NU by Benedict Anderson, for instance, criticised the dominant views of Indonesian political observers describing the NU as completely corrupt and opportunistic organisation in Indonesian politics.² A later study in this period was by a Japanese anthropologist Nakamura who defines the NU as a ‘traditionalist-radical’ Indonesian Muslim organisation. In contrast to the opportunistic thesis, the term “traditionalist-radical” means that the NU is a traditionalist Muslim organisation but its political attitudes and actions towards the country is indeed radical for criticising the New Order government.³ Fealy and Barton in their study of the relationship between NU and the New Order regime also use the term “traditionalism-radical” to examine the NU politics during the New Order.⁴

In the course of the 1980s and 1990s, there were more studies on the NU. These studies particularly discuss the historical aspects and the development of Islam traditionalism and the NU politics. We witnessed not only Western observers but also some Indonesian authors such as an NU intellectual and activist, Choirul Anam, who wrote *Pertumbuhan & Perkembangan NU (NU's Growth and Development)* in 1985.⁵ Meanwhile, other studies on the socio-political roles of NU

¹ Abdurrahman Wahid, *Pergulatan Agama, Negara, dan Kebudayaan* (Jakarta: Desantara, 2001); Idem, *Islam Kosmopolitan, Nilai-nilai Indonesia & Transformasi Kebudayaan* (Jakarta: The Wahid Institute, 2007).

² Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, “Religion and Politics in Indonesia Since Independence,” Benedict R. O’G. Anderson, Mitsuo Nakamura, Mohammad Slamet (eds), *Religion and Social Change in Indonesia* (Clayton: Monash University Center of Southeast Asian Studies, 1977).

³ Mitsuo Nakamura, “The Radical Traditionalism of the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia: A Personal Account of the 26th National Congress, June 1979, Semarang,” *Southeast Asian Studies* 19, 2 (1981).

⁴ Greg Fealy & Greg Barton, *Tradisionalisme Radikal: Persinggungan Nahdlatul Ulama-Negara*, trans. A. Suaedy (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1997).

⁵ Choirul Anam, *Pertumbuhan & Perkembangan NU* (Surabaya: Duta Aksara Mulia, 2010). See also Faisal Islami, “The Nahdlatul Ulama: Its Early History and Contribution to the Establishment of Indonesian State,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 5, 2 (2011).

also emerged, written by authors affiliated with the NU and by Western authors.⁶ These studies particularly examine the NU's contribution to democratisation, civic rights and religious pluralism.⁷ For instance, the most influential book on the dynamics of NU since its birth until the end of the New Order regime is by a French author Andree Feillard. He sees the NU as the organisational backbone for the emergence of progressive Islamic thoughts in Indonesia.⁸ The premise that the NU is the backbone for progressive Muslims in Indonesia continues following the fall of the New Order in 1998.

However, along with the rising incidents of religious intolerance and communal conflicts post-New Order, some scholars started to question the NU's roles in building a democratic and pluralistic Indonesian. Menchick argues that the NU frequently created alliance with anti-democracy Islamic groups.⁹ Martin van Bruinessen also finds that the pendulum swing of the so-called NU's way of thinking has not been always moderate or progressive because since 2010 the pendulum has swung to conservatism.¹⁰ The latest criticism to the NU came from Meitzner and Muhtadi who refute the optimistic point of view proposed by some Indonesianists who argue that the NU is the main pillar of democracy and religious pluralism. In contrast to tolerance

⁶ M. Ali Haidar, *Nahdlatul Ulama dan Islam di Indonesia: Pendekatan Fikih dalam Politik* (Jakarta: Gramedia, 1994); Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2009).

⁷ Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2000); Robert W. Hefner, "Muslim Democrats and Islamist Violence in Post-Soeharto Indonesia," Robert W. Hefner (ed.). *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005); Greg Barton, *Abdurrahman Wahid: Muslim Democrat, Indonesian President: A View from the Inside* (Honolulu, Hawai: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002); A.L. Freedman, "Civil Society, Moderate Islam, and Politics in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Journal of Civil Society* 5, 2 (2009), p. 108; Douglas Ramage, *Politics in Indonesia: Democracy, Islam, and the Ideology of Tolerance* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 187.

⁸ Andree Feillard, *NU vis-a-vis Negara: Pencarian Isi, Bentuk dan Makna* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2008).

⁹ Jeremy Menchik, "Moderate Muslims and Democratic Breakdown in Indonesia," *Asian Studies Review* 43, 3 (2019), p. 14.

¹⁰ Martin van Bruinessen, "What Happened to the Smiling Face of Indonesia Islam? Muslim Intellectualism and the Conservative Turn in Post-Suharto Indonesia," <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/48321726> (2011), pp. 2-3; A.Z. Hamdi, "Radicalising the Traditionaist: Contemporary Dynamics of NU in Sampang Madura," *Episteme: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 15, 1 (2020).

and pluralism narratives that are dominant and promoted by the NU leaders, at the grass-root level, the NU tolerance level is not different from that of the intolerance groups. Furthermore, Muhtadi and Mietzner argue that the NU's campaign for tolerance and pluralism is indeed a political move rather than a sign of the dominant progressive Islamic thoughts within the organisation. Both authors see the paradigmatic figure for pluralism within the NU circle, namely Abdurrahman Wahid, as a political actor who struggled for political and economic gains. Moreover, the history of the NU, both argue, demonstrates that the NU's politics aims to access political resources instead of being sincerely committed to the values of "pluralism". Hence, pluralism within the NU is just a myth, not a fact.¹¹

Mietzner and Muhtadi's point of view mirrors that of Anderson proposed forty four years ago that tends to simplify the NU from its political manoeuvring. Mietzner and Muhtadi's view later elicited a response from an NU scholar Supriyansyah who highlights Mietzner and Muhtadi's failure to see the internal diversity within the NU. Supriyansyah argues that Mietzner and Muhtadi were mistaken for focusing their research finding on the views of the elite and NU members at the "grass-root" level while the actual power of narratives and pluralistic practices implemented by NU masses excluded from their survey was neglected.¹²

This article aims to examine the roles of the NU in countering intolerance, religious violence, and extremism in Indonesia. This study is based on a series of field research conducted in February to August 2019 in which the author observed NU religious activities at the grass-roots level, interviewed the NU's administrators and/or activists from central to village administrator levels, and reviewed the NU's official documents as well as articles published by the media. There were 52 *Nahdlatul Ulama* administrators and/or activists have been interviewed. This research was conducted in two areas known as the NU strongholds, namely East Java and Central Java provinces. It is also worth noting that when this research mentions "the NU elite", it does

¹¹ Marcus Mietzner & Burhanuddin Muhtadi, "The Myth of Pluralism: Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics of Religious Tolerance in Indonesia," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, 1 (2020).

¹² Supriyansyah, "Revisiting the Myth of Pluralism in Nahdlatul Ulama," <https://www.newmandala.org/revisiting-the-myth-of-pluralism-in-the-nahdlatul-ulama/>, 24 August, 2020.

not only refer to the NU administrators at the national or provincial levels, but also those who serve as local leaders of the NU at the village level. Each level has its own elite who play different roles and functions. The selection of informants from the levels of central to village administrators in this study methodologically serves as a data triangulation to see the relationships of basic normative values for of the NU as a modern organisation. That way, organisational policies created by the upper elite could be confirmed with the data gathered from the lower elite, and vice versa.

This article is divided into four parts. The first part will explain the NU's religious views and its commitment to Indonesian-ness, which serves as an important pillar of moderate Islam in Indonesia. The next parts will explain NU's resistance to religious violence through institutionalization of moderate Islam, practices of religious tolerance and its resistance to the narratives of religious violence. The discussion particularly delves into the NU's construction of religious tolerance from religious pluralism point of view. This issue is worth examining because as a religious political discourse, religious toleration and pluralism are both contextual and contested. The article further argues that both the traditionalists in the NU, along with the liberal pluralists in the organisation, reject Islamic conservatism that hinders modern ideas such as the discourse of religious freedom. However, this is not to say that the NU is liberal or otherwise argues the NU is conservative, similar to the allegation by Islamist groups. Instead, the NU conservative character particularly appears in the issue of religious truth claim which later affects the NU's conservative construction of limited religious freedom for denouncing non-mainstream Muslim minority groups. Despite its conservative characters, the NU is strongly against religious violence. Looking at the practical level, socio-political dynamics often force the NU to act in the socio-political domain and the diversity of NU's voices with regard to the issue of tolerance is a testament to this domain. This pragmatic stance however does not mean that the NU tolerates narratives of religious intolerance. The NU is still at the front of democracy and civic pluralism.

NU as a Moderate Face of Indonesian Islam

Established on 31 January 1926 in Surabaya, East Java, there are three important rationales for the establishment of this traditionalist Muslim organisation, i.e., advancing *da'wah* (religious calling),

defending the nation, and maintaining the Islamic teachings of Sunni *Ablu al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah*, abbreviated as *Aswaja*.¹³ The *Aswaja* is a generic term which emphasizes Islamic understanding as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad, his companions, and the earliest generations of *ulamas* (*salaf as-sholih*). The NU's version of *Aswaja* has a local dimension as it is inspired by the early Islamic scholars in Java, called the Nine Saints (*Wali Songo*), to whom the principles of Islamic moderation are often attributed. The lore says that the *Wali Songo* reconciled the local and universal principles of Islam and peacefully disseminated Islam based on Islamic moderation and its refusal to violence.¹⁴ The contemporary NU scholars or *kyais* inherit these moderation principles. The *kyais* are the backbones of the NU as reflected by its very name the Nahdlatul Ulama or the "revival of *Ulamas*". These *kyais* are particularly Islamic scholars who usually have graduated from Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), experts on classical Islamic scholarship, and leaders in their community for playing the key roles in social transformation.¹⁵

In addition to the *Aswaja* ideology, the NU is a Muslim organisation essential to the statecraft in the early twentieth century Indonesia. Hence, nationalism was an important issue for the establishment of this organisation as we witnessed through the figure Kyai Abdul Wahab Hasbullah, one of the NU founders, who established the Nahdlatul Wathan (The Rise of the Homeland). Following the Indonesian independence in 1945, the NU defended the state ideology of Pancasila while many Muslim organisations in first two decades after the independence had questioned it. The NU officially accepted Pancasila through its 27th National Congress in 1984 in Situbondo.¹⁶ An important basis for the acceptance of Pancasila within the NU circle is an article entitled "Pancasila Norms According to Islam" by an NU scholar who was also the chairman of the consultative board (*Rais Am Syuriah*) of the NU, Kiai Ahmad Siddiq.¹⁷

¹³ Anam, *Pertumbuhan & Perkembangan NU*, pp. 19-63.

¹⁴ Abdurrahman Mas'ud, *Dari Haramain ke Nusantara, Jejak Intelektual Arsitek Pesantren* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2006).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹⁶ Masdar Hilmy, "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism? A Reexamination on the Moderate Vision of Muhammadiyah and NU," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 7, 1 (2013), p. 38.

¹⁷ Achmad Siddik, *Norma-Norma Pancasila Menurut Pandangan Islam*, Unpublished paper.

As a matter of fact, the NU accepted Pancasila in 1983 through its National Conference for Islamic Scholars (*Munas Alim Ulama*) held in Situbondo. In this conference, the document entitled “Declaration on the Relationship between Pancasila and Islam” was formulated and it clearly says that Pancasila is not contrary to Islam at all and that accepting and practicing Pancasila is part of practicing the teachings of Islam itself.¹⁸ A leading figure for the NU 1983 conference was Kiai As'ad Syamsul Arifin who urged that “If Pancasila were destroyed, the NU must be held accountable! Muslims must defend Pancasila! This is *mujma' alaih* (ulama consensus)! Muslims must accept Pancasila and it is *haram* (religiously forbidden) to refuse it.”¹⁹ The NU's commitment to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia and Pancasila has been strongly and continuously strengthened. At the Alim Ulama National Conference in Kempek Cirebon, West Java in 2012, Pancasila State according to Islam was discussed again.²⁰

The nationalistic voice of the NU is well-reflected at the grass-roots level. According to Imron Rosyidi, the vice secretary of the consultative board of the local *Nahdlatul Ulama* in Panji, Situbondo, East Java, Pancasila is a final ideology of the state. He said that, “Anyone who wants to change Pancasila and the form of the country must be opposed and the authorities must take a firm action, because it is a very dangerous act of treason.”²¹ Zaini Shonhaji, the chairman of the local NU of Situbondo in East Java, said that Pancasila was similar to *Mitsaqi Medina* (The Medina Charter) in the Prophet Muhammad era. According to Shonhaji, accepting Pancasila was a clear example of following the Prophet Muhammad in accepting the diversity of the people of Medina at that time.²² As a consequence, it is not necessary to replace Pancasila with Islamic sharia law. In the NU administrators' point of view, the laws in Indonesia are not literally and directly derived from Islamic sharia law, but are substantially in line with it.

¹⁸ Abdul Mun'im DZ, *Piagam Perjuangan Kebangsaan* (Jakarta: PBNU-NU Online, 2011).

¹⁹ <http://www.muslimoderat.net/2017/04/kh-asad-syamsul-arifin-umat-islam-wajib-menerima-pancasila.html>, accessed on March 22, 2019.

²⁰ Ulil Abshar Hadrawy (ed.), *Hasil Keputusan Munas Alim Ulama dan Konbes NU* (Jakarta: LTN PBNU, 2012), pp. 3-5.

²¹ Interview with Imron Rosyidi (Vice Secretary of Syuriyah Nahdlatul Ulama of sub-District Panji, Situbondo, East Java). May 17, 2019.

²² Interview with Zaini Shonhaji (Head of Nahdlatul Ulama of Situbondo, East Java). May 9, 2019.

Therefore, in their opinion, it would be unreasonable if there were Muslim groups still keen to struggle for the formalisation of Islamic sharia law.²³ The formalisation of Islamic sharia law was also considered to be harmful to the plurality of the country. The formalisation of Islamic sharia laws in the pluralistic life of a nation would lead to the discrimination against non-Muslim groups²⁴ and would violate the common good (*al-maslahah al-ammah*), and thus would clearly contradict Islam.²⁵

This nationalistic vision of the NU comprehends that the organisation's stance against transnational Islamist movements, such as the *Hizb al-Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI). Because the HTI continuously campaigned for a global *khilafah*, whilst the Indonesian government officially announced the HTI as a forbidden organisation (*organisasi terlarang*).²⁶ The NU's stance against transnational Islamist movements was articulated through the National Congress of Muslim Scholars in Jakarta on 13-15 June 2014. The congress officially declared that the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*/NKRI) was unquestionable and was a supreme agreement among various groups in Indonesia. Hence, the idea of replacing the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia with an Islamic caliphate system, as the HTI offered, must absolutely be rejected. The NU in dealing with the HTI received an overwhelming support from its members. All informants in this study expressed their support for the disbanding of the HTI, reflecting the government's policy on the HTI.

In addition to the nationalistic vision of the NU, we must also consider the NU from the perspective of Sunni traditionalism through the slogan *Ahlu al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (*Aswaja*). The doctrine of

²³ Interview with Ubaidullah Shodaqoh (the chairman of the consultative board of Central Java Provincial Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama). May 21, 2019.

²⁴ Interview with Tazkiyatul Muthmainnah (Head of Central Java Provincial Committee of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama). May 18, 2019.

²⁵ Interview with Marzuki Mustamar (Head of East Java Provincial Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama). May 9, 2019.

²⁶ The HTI was officially disbanded by the government on 10 July 2017 when Government Regulation in Lieu of Law Number 2/2017 was signed by the President replacing Law Number 17 Year 2013. However, HTI tried to sue through the Jakarta State Administrative Court (PTUN), but on 7 May 2018, the Jakarta State Administrative Court rejected the lawsuit filed by the HTI. <http://mediain-donesia.com/read/detail/104506-nu-pembubaran-hti-bukan-pembatasan-dakwah-islam>, accessed on April 2, 2019.

Aswaja is the root of the NU moderation. It is worth noting that the *Aswaja* ideology does not exclusively resonate with the NU only because some organisations, including the radical ones, also embrace this *Aswaja* ideology. *Aswaja* simply refers to various thoughts and movements, including those embraced by Islamic groups that can be identified as extremist groups. To distance itself from the extremist organisation, the NU defines its *Aswaja* through the umbrella of *Aswaja al-Nahdliyyah* referring to the version of *Aswaja* that respects and protects pluralities and local genius.²⁷ The NU defines *Aswaja al-Nahdliyyah* through the lens of Islamic moderation theology which appears in three important principles: *tawassuth* (moderate), *i'tidal* (middle way), and *tawazun* (balanced). The concept of *tawassuth* is derived from Quran chapter Al-Baqarah verse 143; *i'tidal* is taken from Quran chapter Al-Maidah verse 8; and *tawazun* is derived from Quran chapter Al-Hadid verse 25. These three principles entirely place NU in the position of a moderate Islamic organisation. Then the manifestation of these principles is applied in the whole social-religious life aspects, from *da'wah* to politics.²⁸

The NU's moderate stance is also applied in the ways the NU sees the sources of Islam, i.e., the Quran and the *sunnah* (Prophet's tradition). That way, the NU takes a middle way balancing the use of the revelation (*naqliyah*) and the ratio (*'aqliyah*). In the domain of Islamic law, the NU relies on *ushul al-fiqh* (principles of Islamic law), *al-maslahah* (common good), *istihsan* (goodness), and so on.²⁹ The use of these methodological tools provides opportunities for various experiments and articulation of thoughts that can bring creativity and freedom of thinking. The NU's intellectual traditions have been mainly shaped by these ways of thinking, especially in responding to contemporary issues which exemplify the progressive Islamic thought. For example, one of the decisions in the 29th NU Congress at Cipasung Islamic Boarding School, Singaparna, Tasikmalaya, West Java, 1-5 December 1994, was that Islam provides its guarantees and tolerance in maintaining mutual relations by placing universal values such as justice, solidarity, and honesty. In the 30th NU Congress at the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School, Kediri, East Java, 21-27 November

²⁷ Hilmy, "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism?," p. 38.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ahmad Zahro, *Tradisi Intelektual NU: Lajnah Bahtsul Masa'il 1926-1999* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2004), p. 170.

1999, the NU decided that democracy was an ideal political system and was not contrary to Islam.³⁰ These instances demonstrate that the NU builds a progressive Islamic thought.

Institutionalising Moderate Islam as a Strategic Way to Fight Against Violent Religious Extremism

The NU's Islamic moderation is the starting point from which NU's rejection towards every form of religious violence expression was created. On various occasions, NU leaders have repeatedly stated that violence in religion is against Islamic teachings. For example, in responding to the bombings of several churches in Surabaya in 2019, Said Aqil Siradj, the chairman of NU, stated, "All forms of violence, specifically those in the name of religion by spreading terror, hatred, and violence, are not the typical Islamic teachings, which are *rahmat li al-'alamin* (blessing for all humans and nature). Islam condemns all forms of violence. In fact, not even a single religion in this world justifies violence in life. No matter what the motive is, violence, radicalism, and terrorism cannot be tolerated, or even be allowed, because they destroy humanity."³¹ Likewise, the *Rais Am Syuriyah* (the chairman of the consultative board) of Nahdlatul Ulama, Ma'ruf Amien (currently the Vice President of the Republic of Indonesia), firmly stated that radicalism must not grow in Indonesia.³²

The attitude of the NU in fighting against religious violence is also found in its administrators at lower levels. The example of the NU's response to religious violence under the pretext of *da'wa* comes from Kyai Ubaidullah Shodaqoh, the *Rais Syuriyah* (the chairman of the consultative board) of Central Java Provincial Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama, who emphasised that Islamic *da'wa* should be in the context of realising *al-maslahah* (the common good). If there is an Islamic *da'wa* that uses violence and causes human value destruction, it is contrary to

³⁰ Mun'im DZ, *Piagam Perjuangan Kebangsaan*.

³¹ <https://infonawacita.com/pasca-ledakan-gereja-di-surabaya-ketum-pbnu-instruksikan-ini-kepada-nahdliyin/>, accessed on March 20, 2019.

³² <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/maruf-amin-radikalisme-jangan-sampai-tumbuh-dan-berkembang-di-indonesia.html>, accessed on March 20, 2019; <https://news-detik.com/berita/4307280/maruf-amin-masjid-terpapar-radikalisme-harus-dibersihkan> accessed on March 20, 2019; <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/871809/ketua-pbnu-lebih-ringan-pornografi-dibanding-radikalisme/full&view=ok>, accessed on March 20, 2019.

Islamic teachings.³³ Marzuki Mustamar, Head of East Java Provincial Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama, expressed the same view that Islamic *da'wa* by means of violence would only lead to greater evil.³⁴

This attitude of the NU is not only narrated by its elite in unofficial statements, but is also expressed in various organisational policies that have been well documented until now. The NU's attitude towards violent religious extremism can be seen from the policy documents created by the National Committee of the NU. For example, at the 32nd NU Congress in Makassar, 22-28 March 2010, the NU explicitly showed its opposition to Islamic groups which they called “radical conservatives”, who have intolerant attitudes and commit violence. These groups are also recognised as wanting to change the Republic of Indonesia into an Islamic state.³⁵

After the NU Congress in Makassar, various policies on facing violent religious extremism continuously emerge. The NU National Plenary Meeting in Yogyakarta, 27-28 March 2011, decided to organise cadre training for all NU administrators. It is important to pay attention to this cadre training. If we take a look at the materials, this training aims to build NU cadre militancy. The applied strategy is to position NU among various current Islamic understandings and movements in Indonesia. In this case, the NU places itself as a moderate Islamic group between Islamic-radical and Islamic progressive-liberal groups.³⁶ This “positioning” might be risky as it could dwarfs the progressive-liberal wing within the NU. However, pragmatically, this positioning gives a very clear direction to NU cadres in dealing with religious violence phenomena.

Actually, this strategy is an old trick in building in-group solidity by creating common enemies. Determining Islamic-radical groups as the NU's enemies is clearly strategic because since the beginning, even one of the motives of NU's establishment is to respond to the attacks by the puritanical Muslim groups who mocked various traditionalist

³³ Interview with Ubaidullah Shodaqoh (the chairman of the consultative board of Central Java Provincial Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama). May 21, 2019.

³⁴ Interview with KH Marzuki Mustamar (Head of East Java Provincial Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama). May 9, 2019.

³⁵ Abdul Mun'im DZ (ed.), *Hasil-hasil Mukhtamar 32 Nahdlatul Ulama* (Jakarta: PBNU, 2011), p. 120.

³⁶ “Seri MKNU Buku Kesatu-Kelima, Madrasah Kader Nahdlatul Ulama,” (Jakarta: PBNU, 2019).

Muslim Islamic rituals as mere superstitions, *bid'ah* (baseless innovation), and *khurafat* (unfounded belief). These attacks are a theological position that is also practiced in more vulgar ways by the Islamic-radical groups.³⁷

If Muhammadiyah, the biggest modernist-moderate Islamic organisation in Indonesia, opposes Islamic-radical groups because it does not agree with their tendency to commit violence and extremisms, NU opposes them due to two reasons: their puritanism and violence. By considering these, it is understandable why NU's response to the phenomenon of violent religious extremism seems very harsh. Violent religious extremism is believed to not only threaten the foundations of the nation and the state, but also poses a direct threat to NU's Islamic understandings and practices. The NU's position in opposing these groups became clearer in the 33rd NU Congress on 1-5 August 2015 in Jombang, East Java, when violent religious extremism received considerable attention again.³⁸ If in the 32nd Congress these groups were only called as "conservative-radical", in the 33rd Congress NU began to detail which groups identified as radical, *takfiri*, *jihadi*, *siyasi*, and *salafi*.

The term *takfiri* practically refers to the *Wahabi* groups. One of the characteristics of Wahabism is its fanatic, intolerant attitudes that easily label other groups as *kafir* (disbeliever), and usually uses violence in its *da'wa*.³⁹ *Jihadi* refers to the extremist Muslims who commit various violence to express hostility towards the Westerners or their allies. The *jihadists* can commit terrorism both inside and outside of their countries because these groups have a global network. *Al-Qaeda* and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) are two organisations included in this category.⁴⁰ *Siyasi* refers to the Islamist groups that strive to build a religious political project which places Islam not only represented in the country, but also become the ideology and comprehensive system that regulates all aspects of social and state life.⁴¹ Meanwhile, *salafi*

³⁷ Anam, *Pertumbuhan & Perkembangan NU*, pp. 38-63.

³⁸ Rumadi, et.al (eds), *Hasil-hasil Mukhtamar ke-33 NU* (Jakarta: LTN PBNU, 2016), pp. 314-317.

³⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, trans. Ahsin Muhammad (Bandung: Mizan, 1992), pp. 289-290.

⁴⁰ Abdullah Saeed, "Trends in Contemporary Islam: A Preliminary Attempts at a Classification," *The Muslim World* 97, 3 (2007), p. 399.

⁴¹ Anthony Bubalo & Greg Fealy, *Joining Caravan? The Middle East, Islamism, and Indonesia* (Alexandria, New South Wales: Lowy Institute, 2005), p. xx; Noorhaidi

refers to fundamentalist Muslims who are ideologically followers of Wahabism. Just like *Wahabis*, they are literalists in understanding Islam, theologically puritanical, intolerant, and tend to commit violence in *da'wa*.⁴² It should be noted that not all *salafis* are Islamist and jihadist, but it is almost certain that every Islamist and jihadist are *salafists* whose puritanical rigidity makes them intolerant and easily call other different groups *kafir* (*takfir*).⁴³

The Secretary General of NU National Committee, Faishal Zaini, promised that the organisation's official decisions related to violent religious extremism would be followed up in various programs. Autonomous bodies and various *lajnah* (institutions) under the NU were encouraged to develop countering violent religious extremism programs.⁴⁴ It should be explained here that the institutions or *lajnah* serve as the technical implementers of the policies made by the National Committee of the NU (PBNU/*Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama*). The PBNU form their management and their tenure ends in accordance with the PBNU management period. Meanwhile, autonomous bodies are community organisations under the NU that are managed autonomously. Autonomous bodies choose their own management. In contrast to the institutions directly under the PBNU, the management of the autonomous bodies are responsible to their members.

Almost all autonomous bodies and institutions under the NU have programs that contain countering violent religious extremism. For instance, the *Nahdlatul Ulama* Institute of Study and Development of Human Resources (*Lakpesdam/Lajnah Kajian dan Pengembangan Sumberdaya Manusia NU*) has cooperated with the Ministry of State Apparatus Empowerment and Bureaucratic Reform of the Republic of Indonesia to hold a program of strengthening the resilience of the Indonesian civil servants through the creation of the Tolerance and Pluralism Awareness and Attitude Test (TEPAT) instrument. Through

Hasan, *Laskar Jihad: Islam, Militansi, dan Pencarian Identitas di Indonesia Pasca-Orde Baru* (Jakarta: LP3ES & KITLV-Jakarta, 2008), p. 18.

⁴² Bubalo & Fealy, *Joining Caravan?*, p. xxi.

⁴³ Oliver Roy, "Who the New Jihadist?", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/apr/13/who-are-the-new-jihadis>, accessed on July 3, 2019; M. Kholid Syeirazi, *Wasathiyah Islam: Anatomi, Narasi, dan Kontestasi Gerakan Islam* (Jakarta: alif.id, 2020), Chapter I.

⁴⁴ Interview with Faishal Zaini (General Secretary of National Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama), May 8, 2019.

this instrument, the state can prevent civil servant recruitments from being infiltrated by the radical candidates. Meanwhile, the NU's Islamic boarding school organisation, or *Rabithah Ma'ahid Islamiyah Nabdhlatul Ulama* (RMI NU) in 2010-2015 became the executor of PBNU's cooperation with the National Agency for Countering Terrorism (BNPT/*Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme*) to prevent radicalism. In 2019, the NU's women organisation or *Muslimat* NU formed a team of prevention and advocacy towards the danger of radicalism. In 2017, the NU's young women organisation *Fatayat* NU cooperated with the BNPT to hold an antiradicalism workshop.⁴⁵ Various efforts of fighting against violent religious extremism cannot be mentioned one by one if we were to include all the activities performed by *nabdhliyyin* groups outside the formal NU organisation, such as the Network of Gusdurian, The Wahid Foundation, and so forth.

Tolerance in Practice

After all the policies and programs of countering violent religious extremism are executed, the important question for the NU itself is how strong are those policies in influencing the point of view and tolerant attitude of NU's members? This question is important to ask because in the end, the claim of NU being moderate which places NU as a strength of Islam in fighting against violent religious extremism and being a supporter of tolerance will be examined. This is the actual criticism stated by Mietzner and Muhtadi that NU members are not more tolerant than those of other groups, and that NU's attitude to pluralism issues is more likely based on political pragmatism motives rather than genuine commitment to it.⁴⁶

As I have mentioned previously, there are many who objected to Mietzner and Muhtadi's conclusions. that in the case of pluralism, the NU is similar to the Islamists, and who asserted that it is impossible for the NU to become a strategic partner of the Islamists. These two Islamist groups actually have irreconcilable enmity, especially related to the *bid'ah* accusation thrown by the Islamists at NU's Islamic practices, as well as the Islamists' degradation towards traditionalist ulamas that they consider as not understanding the problems of contemporary Muslims. On the other hand, the traditionalists think that the Islamists

⁴⁵ "Laporan Banom dan Lembaga PBNU 2019" (Jakarta: PBNU, 2019).

⁴⁶ See Mietzner & Muhtadi, "The Myth of Pluralism."

do not understand Islam properly enough, thus they are not authoritative in speaking about Islam.⁴⁷

The data in this study portrays a very different picture from Mietzner and Muhtadi's allegations. All the informants in this research stated that there is an organisational protection mechanism in the circle of the administrators so that they would not be infiltrated by violent extremism ideology. There are two mechanisms applied: cadre training and dismissal. All the administrators must join the cadre training to make sure that they properly understand the organisation's ideology and policies. Additionally, there are sanctions for the administrators who are considered not obeying the organisation's ideology and policies. Has there been already a case of an administrator being dismissed because of being influenced by extremism ideology? According to the Head of the East Java Provincial Committee of NU, he requested the Head of PCNU in one of the districts in East Java to fire one of the administrators who allegedly had an extremism ideology.⁴⁸

Nevertheless, the informants who are mostly NU's administrators admitted that some NU members support intolerant and radical Islamic ideas is a fact. There are *kiai*s of NU who became administrators of the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), an Islamic organisation that has been known for its violence in the name of *amr ma'ruf nahy munkar* (enjoining good deeds and forbidding wrong deeds). In fact, several students in NU schools who support the HTI's caliphate ideology can be found.⁴⁹ However, it would be unfair if we judge the NU as not different from the FPI just because some NU *kiai*s become FPI's administrators; or, not different from HTI just because some NU citizens support the caliphate ideology. If the NU is the same as the FPI, considering how big NU's strength is, one could imagine how destructive the religious violence would be in Indonesia.

Meanwhile, from media perspective, the NU's official Twitter account mentioned that the number of NU citizens in 2019 was

⁴⁷ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, "Pluralism, Democracy, and the Ulama," Robert W. Hefner (ed.), *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 68-69.

⁴⁸ Interview with Marzuki Mustamar (Head of East Java Provincial Committee of Nahdlatul Ulama). May 9, 2019.

⁴⁹ Interview with Z. Arifin Junaedi (Head of National Committee of Ma'arif Nahdlatul Ulama). July 3, 2019.

around 91,2 million.⁵⁰ According to the survey of Indonesian Political Indicators in the 2019 Presidential Election, from 107,2 million (87.2% of total population) Muslims in Indonesia, 52.8% of them identified themselves as affiliated with the NU.⁵¹ It means there are approximately 122.040.800 Indonesian Muslims who identify themselves as affiliated with the NU. According to Denny J.A. of the Indonesian Survey Circle (LSI/*Lembaga Survei Indonesia*), from the survey held in early 2019, the people who felt like they were part of the NU were 49.5%.⁵² If the total number of Indonesian citizens in 2019 was approximately 250 million and about 87% of them were Muslims, it means the NU has a mass base of around 108 million people. If we compare this amount with the population of Saudi Arabia in the same year, which was only 33.699.947,⁵³ we can see how big the NU is as an Islamic organisation in Indonesia. Therefore, if most NU citizens do not have tolerance for other religions, one can imagine how chaotic the inter-religious relationships in Indonesia would be.

The same perspective also applies to those who dismissed the tolerant attitude of NU citizens towards people of other religions just because some NU administrators prohibited Christmas greetings to Christians.⁵⁴ It was as if the refusal to say 'Merry Christmas' invalidated the fact that the *Banser/Barisan Ansor Serbaguna* (Multipurpose Ansor Front), the paramilitary wing of Ansor, the youth organisation of NU, protected the churches when Christians were celebrating Christmas. When the Chairman of the PBNU, Said Aqil Siradj, stated that NU members must promote religious tolerance,⁵⁵ his voice was heard clearly. This practice of tolerance is carried out with enthusiasm, especially by the educated NU youths. Among these youths, whether

⁵⁰ <https://twitter.com/nahdlatululama/status/1081824464461914117>, accessed on February 08, 2019.

⁵¹ "Indikator Politik: NU Kunci Kemenangan Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin di Pilpres 2019," <https://nasional.sindonews.com/read/1421990/12/indikator-politik-nu-kunci-kemenangan-jokowi-maruf-amin-di-pilpres-2019-1563550867>, accessed on July 22, 2019.

⁵² Mihrob, Hasil Survei LSI: NU Tak Tertandingi, <https://www.laduni.id/post/-read/67440/hasil-survei-lsi-nu-tak-tertandingi>, accessed on February 08, 2019.

⁵³ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=SA>, accessed on February 08, 2019.

⁵⁴ Interview with Adib Sulhi Makki (Village administrator of Nahdlatul Ulama, Sletreng, Kapongan, Situbondo, East Java), June 30, 2019.

⁵⁵ <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/di-haul-pendiri-nu-kiai-said-pesan-soal-pentingnya-toleransi.html>, accessed on March 25, 2019.

they are NU administrators or mere sympathisers, the tolerance towards other religions is not something foreign. In many areas in Indonesia, these youths become the important agents in various interfaith activities. Saying 'Merry Christmas' and such is completely not a problematic for them. As a matter fact, it is normal for them to attend invitations of other religions' events. They are the ones who have been dealing with Islamist groups who still question pluralism, refuse to live next to people of different faiths, destroy other religions' places of worship, and persecute people of other religions.⁵⁶

Measuring the agreement between pluralism discourses developed by the NU elite and the practice by the NU grass-roots to see how genuine the NU commitment to the values of pluralism, as Mietzner and Muhtadi did, is indeed important. However, this method can be misleading because it confuses insincerity with failure. It means that a leader may not or has not succeeded in leading the members to walk on a certain guiding principle, but that does not indicate his level of sincerity at all. However, this perspective is exactly what Mietzner and Muhtadi used in viewing the NU, so that individuals such as Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) were also judged to have no sincerity towards pluralism simply because many NU members hold views contrary to the values of pluralism. This argument is built on the allegation that there is no institutionalisation of pluralism values within the NU, and that pluralism is only a political rhetoric to get rid of competitors and fulfill political and economic interests.⁵⁷

However, there is a gap in Mietzner and Muhtadi's arguments about the myth of pluralism being embraced by NU when they questioned how serious is NU in fighting against all forms of violence and religious intolerance, and how consistent NU's efforts are in institutionalising the practice of pluralism. It is precisely these parts that are very determining, thus even though there are intolerance attitudes and practices by NU members, as indicated by Mietzner and Muhtadi, it should not be the only basis for measuring NU's commitment to pluralism and tolerance.

⁵⁶ Interview with Mushonifin (Head of Central Java Provincial Committee of GP Ansor). May 25, 2019; Interview with Anggia Erma Rini (Head of National Committee of Fatayat Nahdlatul Ulama). May 15, 2019; Interview with Savic Ali (Chief Executive Officer of NU Online). May 23, 2019.

⁵⁷ See Mietzner & Muhtadi, "The Myth of Pluralism."

Non-Violence as a Commitment to Religious Pluralism

To define something is not merely to abstract the reality, but also to construct it. Likewise, the definition of religious pluralism is not only a value-free academic effort to abstract what can be called religious pluralism, but eventually it is also constructive by placing who deserves to be put into the pluralist box and who should be removed from it. Therefore, having a single definition of pluralism is basically an imposition of a certain perspective on the diversity of views and ways of life of a group.

The criticisms of religious pluralism is often launched. This criticism is appropriately accepted by Knitter who admits that, after all, pluralism is a project born of the European Enlightenment philosophy. Pluralism carries a particular ideology. Pluralism is not a universal teaching that transcends its context. Therefore, if religious pluralism is a response to religious diversity and how this diversity is managed,⁵⁸ then, according to Knitter, it should not be formulated in a single language and definition by ignoring the diversity of each religion's beliefs.⁵⁹

In their study about the debate on religious pluralism involving various groups in Italy, Ozzano and Giorgi reveal that religious pluralism never has a single definition at all times, but is always constructed in certain situations and needs.⁶⁰ Each group frames religious diversity in different ways and proposes different meanings of it. The same groups are not always in the same position in viewing religious pluralism all the time. Even though all groups agree on the importance of religious pluralism, the actual meaning of religious pluralism always differs between various groups because indeed each definition politically implies other issues, which may be related to the matters of faith or benefits.

Separating religious pluralism debate from its various implications is not only denying pluralism itself, but also a naive point of view. As has been mentioned previously, religious pluralism is not an empty

⁵⁸ David Miller, "Complex Equility," David Miller & Michael Walzer (eds.), *Pluralism, Justice, and Equity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996),

⁵⁹ Paul F. Knitter, "Is the Pluralist Model Western Imposition? A Response in Five Voices," Paul F. Knitter (ed.), *The Myth of Religious Superiority, Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), pp. 28-30.

⁶⁰ Luca Ozzano & Alberta Giorgi, "Italy and Controversies around Religion-Related Issues: Overemphasizing Differencea," Aurelia Bardon, et.al. (Eds.), *Religious Pluralism: A Resource Book* (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 2015), p. 26.

concept without any ideology. It was born in a certain political context and has a specific purpose. Discourses on religious pluralism are always influenced by the political dynamics and power relations between various actors.⁶¹

Religious pluralism has at least four meanings: theological, sociological, philosophical, and political aspects. Theological pluralism is defined as recognition that other religions have the same truth, hence other religions also have a potential as a way of salvation. Sociological pluralism can simply be defined as religious diversity. In other words, sociological pluralism is synonymous with plurality. Philosophical pluralism refers to a school of thought in philosophy saying that the values considered as good are never singular. What is considered good, to which a person or a group refers as guidelines to behave, is never single-faced. In this definition, pluralism is the opposite of monism. Meanwhile, political pluralism refers to how diversity is managed politically so that interactions between religious groups run peacefully, including between believers and non-believers.⁶²

Each definition, however, is not always acceptable. For example, in 2005, the MUI/*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Council of Ulama) released a *fatwa* (religious edict) against pluralism. Although many people considered this fatwa as the victory of conservative Islam over progressive Islam, it is clear that what the MUI means by pluralism in this matter is theological pluralism. The MUI distinguishes pluralism from plurality. Pluralism is defined by the MUI solely as theological pluralism, while religious diversity is fully recognised.⁶³ The MUI rejects theological pluralism because it implies that a Muslim will only be considered a pluralist if he believes that other religions can also be a way of salvation. Following this theological pluralism definition, if a Muslim claims that only Islam guarantees salvation, he immediately will be accused of an anti-pluralist. Unfortunately, the MUI treats theological pluralism as if it were the only type of pluralism.

Since the MUI released the fatwa in 2005, many Muslims, including the NU's *kiai*s, have rejected pluralism based on that definition. However, not all NU key figures followed this path. For

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁶² Élise Rouméas, "What is Religious Pluralism?," Aurelia Bardon, et. al. (eds), *Religious Pluralism: A Resource Book* (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 2015), p. 11.

⁶³ See Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia Nomor: 7/MUNAS VII/MUI/11/2005 on Pluralisme, Liberalisme dan Sekularisme Agama.

example, Abdurrahman Wahid, commonly called Gus Dur, an important NU figure, was very vocal about pluralism in a very progressive sense. For Wahid, tolerance or mutual respect among religious believers is not enough. What is needed is mutual understanding, even a sense of belonging among religious groups.⁶⁴

Does the very progressive religious pluralism proposed by Wahid represent the single face of pluralism within the NU? It certainly does not. However, Wahid was a highly respected figure until his passing in December 2009. In fact, the commemoration of his passing every year is not only a conventional ritual, but has turned into a cross-faith and cross-ethnic social movement in voicing issues of pluralism. The followers of Wahid's teachings (called *Gusdurian*), who are from almost all cities in Indonesia, have made it a moment to voice the values of pluralism. This commemoration is usually attended by various social groups, including the minorities and the vulnerable. The same thing is also organised by NU members in various regions.⁶⁵

Regarding the controversy of saying “Merry Christmas”, the debate is actually a new phenomenon in Indonesia. This controversy started at the beginning of the New Order under President Suharto in 1968. This controversy began when several ministers suggested the government to celebrate Eid al-Fitr and Christmas together in the name of tolerance.⁶⁶ Hamka as the Chairman of the MUI (1975-1981) opposed the suggestion, even releasing a fatwa that celebrating Christmas and Eid together was *haram*. Unwilling to be under pressure, Hamka eventually resigned from his position.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, this controversy has never become a religious discourse among NU members. There has been no open debate on saying “Merry Christmas” being *haram* either. This discourse became a public controversy following the strong growth of intolerant groups

⁶⁴ Wahid, *Pergulatan Negara, Agama, dan Kebudayaan*; Wahid, *Islam Kosmopolitan*, p. 326; Abdurrahman Wahid, “Islam dan Hubungan Antarumat Beragama di Indonesia,” Frans M. Perera & T. Jakob Koekerits (eds). *Gus Dur Menjawab Perubahan Zaman* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2010), p. 16; Salambanu, “Mangkatnya Wali Pluralisme dan Demokrasi,” Anita Wahid (ed.). *Gus Dur Bertabta di Sanubari* (Jakarta: The Wahid Institute, 2010), pp. 27-31.

⁶⁵ Ahmad Suaedy, “Kematian Gus Dur dan Lahirnya Habitus Baru Kebhinnekaan Indonesia,” *Maarif* 11, 2 (2016).

⁶⁶ Hamka, *Dari Hati ke Hati tentang Agama, Sosial-Budaya, Politik* (Jakarta: Pustaka Panjimas, 2002), p. 208.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

after the post-Reformation in 1998. These intolerant groups have a very strong negative sentiment towards non-Muslim groups, especially Christians. These groups very aggressively called for Muslims not to say “Merry Christmas” to Christians. These groups even destroyed various Christmas attributes in many places. This movement was strengthened by the massive *da’wa* by the salafi-puritanist Muslim groups through their widely-distributed media. The ban on Christmas greetings by the salafi-intolerant groups was worded as if it were the official decree of the MUI, although the Central MUI management has stated repeatedly that MUI has never issued a ban on Christmas greetings.⁶⁸

In addition, the MUI’s fatwa about Pluralism, Liberalism and Religious Secularism being *haram*, that was announced in July 2005, was used widely by intolerant Muslim groups to delegitimise and attack the ideas of progressive Muslim groups who have been promoting the ideas of pluralism relentlessly.⁶⁹ By abusing the MUI fatwa, intolerant groups constantly declare their opposition to progressive Muslim ideas, such as pluralism, by banning “Merry Christmas” greeting by Muslims to Christians. Since 2005, the religious life in Indonesia has seemed to be under the control of the intolerant groups, and at the same time, the progressive Muslim groups began to lose their leadership on the agenda of Indonesian Muslims’ public life. This is where the rejection to say “Merry Christmas” was born among the Nahdliyyin.⁷⁰ It is not surprising, then, that the MUI fatwa was branded as a victory for conservative Muslims in Indonesia.⁷¹

Some people maintained that the real face of the NU is conservative and intolerant. This allegation is not fair because the rejection by several NU *kiais* towards religious pluralism does not

⁶⁸ “MUI: Tak Ada Fatwa Melarang Ucapan Selamat Natal,” <https://nasional.tempo.co/read/1286832/mui-tak-ada-fatwa-melarang-ucapan-selamat-natal/full&view=ok>, accessed on October 12, 2019.

⁶⁹ Ahmad Bunyan Wahib, “Questioning Liberal Islam in Indonesia: Response and Critique to Jaringan Islam Liberal,” *Al-Jami’ah* 44, 1 (2006).

⁷⁰ The situation of Indonesian religious life from 2005 to 2008, see “Laporan Tahunan The Wahid Institute 2008, Pluralisme Beragama/Berkeyakinan di Indonesia 2008, Menapaki Bangsa yang Kian Retak” (Jakarta: The Wahid Institute, 2008).

⁷¹ Martin van Bruinessen, “Introduction: Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam and the ‘Conservative Turn’ of the Early 21st Century,” Martin van Bruinessen (ed.), *Contemporary Developments in Indonesian Islam: Explaining the ‘Conservative Turn’* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2013).

transform the NU into a group of violence perpetrators in solving the tensions in inter-religion relationships. However, it must be admitted that there were several violence cases that involved NU members and figures. For example, the case of Shia people expulsion in Sampang, Madura, East Java.⁷² However, at the same time civil society groups advocating the rights of religious and belief freedom of the Shia community also composed of many NU communities, including the *Lakpesdam* (Institute of Study and Human Resources Development), which is an official NU institution.⁷³

Several experts distinguish tolerance from pluralism, where the former is considered as merely holding back from doing any action towards religious plurality, while the latter is an enthusiastic approval of diversity.⁷⁴ I prefer to put tolerance and pluralism as a line that shows the degree of positive response to diversity. As Michael Walzer has said, there are various attitudes that can be placed under the umbrella of tolerance, from mere non-interfering (passive) to being enthusiastic for diversity (active).⁷⁵ Cohen states that what is defined as tolerance is an intentional action and becomes the principle of a person to hold back from interfering with other people with different views or behaviour in situations of diversity although that person has the power to interfere.⁷⁶

Despite the differences between some experts on the definition of tolerance and pluralism, all of them underline the importance of “peaceful coexistence”. Roumeas, who has a negative view of tolerance, also admits that tolerance can build a life with mutual peaceful interactions.⁷⁷ This is the definition proposed by Banchof et

⁷² A.Z. Hamdi, “Klaim Religious Authority dalam Konflik Sunni-Sy'i Sampang Madura,” *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 6, 2 (2012), pp. 215-231; M. Afdillah, *Dari Masjid ke Panggung Politik, Melacak Akar-akar Kekerasan Agama antara Komunitas Sunni dan Syiah di Sampang, Jawa Timur* (Yogyakarta: CRCs 2016).

⁷³ Document of “Laporan Program Peduli Lakpesdam Nahdlatul Ulama 2015”. Peduli program is a program which aims to building post-conflict social intergation between Sunni and Shia in Sampang, Madura, East Java, by using local culture revitalization approach.

⁷⁴ Rouméas, “What is Religious Pluralism?”, p. 15; Diana L. Eck, “What is Pluralism,” <http://pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism/>, accessed on October 11, 2020.

⁷⁵ Michael Walzer, *On Toleration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 10-11.

⁷⁶ Andrew Jason Cohen, “What Toleration Is,” *Ethics* 115 (2004), pp. 94–95.

⁷⁷ Rouméas, “What is Religious Pluralism?”, pp. 15-16.

al.: religious pluralism refers to peaceful interactions between people of different religions.⁷⁸

This is where we can view the NU clearly. The NU's very strong rejection towards all forms of religious violence must be seen as a part of actual realisation from their commitment to pluralism values. We can easily find NU grass-roots members, or even some of its big figures, who refuse to say "Merry Christmas" to Christians because it is considered as agreeing to the Christian's faith, a narrative which can be easily heard from the anti-pluralist, hard-line Islamic groups, but this does not make the NU pro-violence. When the *Banser* members guard churches to secure Christmas worship and celebration, this action is known and permitted by the NU leaders, i.e. the *kiais* who have followers at the grass-roots level. There may be some *kiais* who do not agree to this, but they do not prohibit it. Just because there are some *kiais* who refuse to say "Merry Christmas", it does not mean NU is similar to the terrorists who bombed the churches on the Christmas day.

Traditional Muslims, who are characterised by their obedience to their leaders, can avert the NU from the trap of conservatism. In the hands of leaders with moderate and progressive thoughts, the NU masses can be transformed into a strong civil society that creates a tolerant religious life. This tolerance surely is not always defined from the liberal-pluralism perspective. It is very difficult to find *kiais* in Islamic boarding schools who can accept heterodox Islamic sects with the reason of faith and religious freedom. The phenomenon of tolerance by these *kiais* is what Menchik called by the term *communal tolerance* or tolerance without liberalism.⁷⁹ However, this communal tolerance is not a single face of tolerance at all within the NU. Inside the administrators, academics, activists, and youth groups of the NU, we can find strong tolerance in the form of enthusiastic respect, recognition, and acceptance without any condition towards diversity, whether it is for non-Muslims or non-mainstream minority Muslims such as the Ahmadiyah and Shia. In fact, because of this pluralism

⁷⁸ Tomas F. Banchof, *Religious Pluralism, Globalization, and World Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 4.

⁷⁹ Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 124.

perspective and attitude, the NU members are often labelled as liberal Muslims by many.⁸⁰

Whether NU members are in the *communal tolerant* side or the *liberal tolerant* side, they are bound by one common view, which is the rejection towards violence as an expression of practicing Islam. Maybe both of these groups do not have a shared opinion in several issues, even the former group might feel like they are on the same path as the Islamists. However, both of these groups are bound by one Islamic understanding that they call *Aswaja* (*Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*)

Between these two groups, there is a big space inhabited by NU masses that are mostly passive and follow everything said by the local *kiai*s as their role models. In this big space, we can also find NU masses who are passive because their NU identity is only determined by their religious rituals. No matter what the diversity of these NU masses looks like, they always have to face the puritan Muslims. This is the theological position which makes it difficult for them to face the *salafi-jihadists* that are hard-line and puritan theologically.

The NU's total rejection towards violence needs to be underlined when we talk about tolerance issues. The NU has a clear attitude when facing the groups with a violent extremism ideology. These groups are characterized by their intolerance behaviour, violence, and rejection of Indonesia's existence as a legitimate state. This attitude of the NU is based on its theological base built on Islamic moderate values and the balance of the middle way.⁸¹

The NU's commitment to moderate Islam, defined as Islam that does not allow any violent means in *da'wa*,⁸² must be seen as part of the commitment to pluralism. This is because putting peaceful coexistence and interaction as a core part of pluralism means making a firm rejection towards any religious violence. As what Banchof said, religious pluralism will end when violence starts.⁸³

Conclusion

⁸⁰ Wahib, "Questioning Liberal Islam in Indonesia, p. 24.

⁸¹ Hilmy, "Whither Indonesia's Islamic Moderatism?, p. 38.

⁸² John L. Esposito, "Muslim Moderat: Arus Utama Kelompok Modernis, Islamis, Konservatif, dan Tradisionalis," Suaidi Asyari (ed.), *Siapakah Muslim Moderat?* (Jakarta: Kultura, 2008), pp. 78-79.

⁸³ Banchof, *Religious Pluralism*, p. 5.

The discourse and practice of pluralism within the NU are built on its rejection towards every kind of religious violence. This rejection is the most concrete embodiment of moderate Islamic spirit that was born from the *Aswaja* ideology. Nevertheless, the views and practices of pluralism within the NU are not monolithic. The views and practices of pluralism within the NU vary: from those of the communal tolerant and liberal tolerant attitudes. In some issues, both of these poles might never unite, or they might face each another, but both of them are bound by the spirit of Islamic moderatism and their rejection towards religious violence.

The NU's most consolidated efforts are safeguarding the organisation from the infiltration of extremist movement through the cadre training programs and the dismissal of administrators who are considered going off the path of the NU's moderate ideology. In addition, various programs to counter violent religious extremists have also been conducted by the NU and its many institutions and autonomous bodies. These NU's efforts are well consolidated from the top to the lowest levels.

As is the case in various parts of the world, there is no single society that has no records of intolerance towards different groups. The same thing applies to the NU. It is always easy to find practices that are considered contrary to pluralism principles. However, in general, the NU's masses at the grass-roots level are passive masses dependent on the local *kiais* as their role models. The passivity of NU's masses at the grass-roots level is also because most of them build their NU identity solely from their ways of religious rituals. These masses probably form a tactical alliance with Islamist-radical groups who violate the principles of pluralism. However, NU's masses will find it difficult to build a permanent alliance with Islamist-radical groups because both sides have contrasting theological views, making these two groups to be in an almost constant feud.[]

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