# Why Do Religious Ideas Matter?
# The Multidimensionality of the Indonesian Public Sphere

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## Abstract

In this paper, I challenge the claim of the universalistic public sphere by providing contextual complexity of the national and local public sphere in Indonesia. Within such complexity, this paper deliberates on how the local and national contexts in Indonesia shed light on the multidimensionality of the public sphere. This paper analyses the challenges of the digital divide in the local public sphere of *pondok pesantren* (Indonesian Islamic boarding schools). With a lack of digital access and democratic practices in day-to-day *pondok pesantren* life, communalistic religious practices have dominated the public sphere of these boarding schools.

**Keywords:** Habermas; religious identity; multidimensionality; public sphere; Indonesia

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## Introduction

This paper is a part of my doctoral research, which was inspired by my transition as a student at a *pondok pesantren* (Indonesian Islamic boarding school) to Gadjah Mada University (UGM), a top secular Indonesian university. The culture shock of moving from a religious-communalistic to a secular-individualistic educational system left me in awe. Most fundamentally, during my six years of education in *pondok pesantren* (2000-2006), access to the internet was severely limited, predominantly due to the religious interpretation that perceived the internet as a suspiciously Western weapon. Meanwhile, in my first year as a university student in 2006, the internet became accessible through *warnet* (internet cafés) which was normally open 24 hours. It was the sense of freedom, of expressing my desire as a digital self, that left me with deep questions about the multidimensionality of the public sphere. These questions were becoming more complicated with the existence of Islamic political wings at the secular campus (UGM), in the middle of a myriad of options in defining my identity as a student. The experience as an undergraduate student was the beginning of my endeavour to understand the overlap and the intersection between various ideas in the public sphere.

The quest to understand the public sphere has gotten stronger upon my journey of becoming a master's and doctoral student in the United Kingdom. Living and studying in a purely secular university, for the first time I experienced living in mixed-sex student accommodation. I also felt the nuances of becoming a Muslim minority, performing my prayers amidst tight lecture schedules in a tiny prayer room through constantly changing prayer times across four seasons. The constant transition from the local to national to the global context of society opened me to the multidimensionality of the public sphere as a research agenda. For this research, I combine auto-ethnography and case studies as research methods to understand the multidimensionality of the public sphere.

Through the term 'multidimensionality of the public sphere', I emphasize the distinction between the public sphere at the global, national, and local levels of *pondok pesantren.* I argue that secular ideas have been fundamental in the Western public sphere, which, to some extent, dominates the global public sphere. In the national public sphere of Indonesia, secular and religious ideas compete with each other, particularly as Indonesia was established as a multi-religious nation. Consequently, there is a constant tension and transformation between secularism and religiosity, as well as between communalism and individualism. The current trend of religious revival in Indonesia lies right at the intersection between capitalism, religiosity, and individualism. Meanwhile, in the context of *pondok pesantren,* religiosity and communalism dominate the public sphere. Consequently, it is difficult for the individualistic practice of religious revival to mushroom in *pondok pesantren.* Amidst the current geopolitical crises and the decolonization of global knowledge, we need to situate the notion of the public sphere within the national and local complexities.

## Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere

If we follow Habermasian logic, it is evident that the public sphere should be secular. The secular status of the public sphere enables individuals to express their interests freely without any constraints from religious authority. In Habermas's perspective, "the assumption of a common human reason forms the basis of justification for a secular state that no longer depends on religious legitimation".[2] Considering the potential conflict of interests between religious and secular citizens, Habermas argues that "the institutional precondition for guaranteeing equal freedom of religion for all is that state remains neutral towards competing world views".[3] For Habermas, the absence of religious

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[2] Habermas 2006b: p. 4.
[3] Habermas 2006b: p. 9.

intervention from state apparatus is the primary precondition for a secular public sphere to thrive.

To maintain a balance between secular and religious interests, Habermas suggested that religious language should be accessible to all populations, including secular ones. Through the concept of theo-ethical equilibrium, "religiously-grounded moral beliefs that lack any secular rationale, so are not within theo-ethical equilibrium, should be doubted".[4] Billingham further emphasises that "abiding by that duty is itself a way to conform one's political actions to one's religious beliefs".[5] In managing the balance between these two conflicting agendas, Habermas imagines that both religious and secular citizens could learn together and try to understand the similarities and differences between these conflicting ideologies. Habermas relies on the maturity of citizens to resolve the potential conflict of interests between secularism and religion. The maturity of citizens is the fundamental principle of the secular public sphere in Western society.

However, mediatisation has challenged the concept of theo-ethical equilibrium. Within the process of mediatisation, there is a tendency of secular institutions to dominate religious ideas in the public sphere. In Hjarvard's perspective, the mediatisation of religion "may be considered part of a gradual process of secularization in late modern society: it is the historical process by which media have adopted many of the social forms that were previously performed by religious institutions".[6] In particular, we cannot deny the historical mass mediatisation of the Bible within the Protestant Church in the early era of the invention of the printing machine. The secular tendency of the media industry, leaving its religious history behind, has shown systematic domination by secular forces to uphold its mainstream agenda against religious citizens.

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[4] Billingham 2017: p. 676.
[5] Billingham 2017: p. 679.
[6] Hjarvard 2013.

Furthermore, the concept of theo-ethical equilibrium has been further challenged by the growing trend of religious revival on the internet. As Hjarvard argues, "the global spread of the internet may not only foster globalization but also bring a greater degree of individualization and segmentation".[7] For Hjarvard, "the media enable a continuous dynamic of dis-embedding social interaction from local and traditional contexts and re-embedding social interaction into larger and more modern settings".[8] Yet, Hjarvard also contends that "the presence of religion in various media reflects a much more multi-faceted development in which religion is evoked, contested, and subject to transformation".[9] Here, the internet has helped a systematic shift of religious interest to a more individualised and digitalised self that challenges the control of the secular state.

The emerging global religious revival in the digital age has shown that the secular public sphere is hardly universalised. Outside the Western context, the notion of theo-ethical equilibrium is barely achieved. In this paper, the case of Indonesia provides an important example of the constant tension and transformation between secularism and religiosity. In contrast to other Muslim-majority countries, nationalism in Indonesia put secularism and religious pluralism as the mainstream ideology. However, at the grassroots level, religious interest has never completely disappeared from the public sphere. State-sponsored secularism and nationalism have always been challenged by the religious interests of citizens, most evidently in the current trend of religious revival. Therefore, it is critical that we trace the tensions and amalgamations of secular and religious ideas in the Indonesian public sphere.

Furthermore, with digitalisation permeating across the public sphere, the digital divide has further challenged the concept of theo-ethical equilibrium and the maturity of citizens. In the national public sphere of Indonesia, the purchasing power of middle-class Muslims is the

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[7] Hjarvard 2013.
[8] Hjarvard 2016: p. 9.
[9] Hjarvard 2016: p. 15.

key driver of the current religious revival. Their financial and educational credentials have enabled them to situate their religious agenda amidst the constant changes of the capitalistic society. To some extent, the pendulum swing of the theo-ethical equilibrium has always been in a constant dynamic in Indonesia's national public sphere. Meanwhile, in *pondok pesantren,* the lack of access to capitalistic resources, including digital technology and modern education, has consistently strengthened its religious agenda. The tension and the intersection between local, national and global contexts is the key to understanding the multidimensionality of the Indonesian public sphere.

## Democratisation, Islamisation, and Digitalisation in Indonesia

Before the proclamation of Indonesia's independence on 17 August 1945, some Muslim leaders proposed the idea that Indonesia should be an Islamic state, considering that the majority of the population was Muslim.[10] The proposal was popular; it became known as the Jakarta Charter, where the first of five principles contained the enforcement for Muslim people to adhere to Islamic law.[11] The five principles – the *Pancasila*, which remains Indonesia's guiding principles until today – include the doctrines of "monotheism, humanitarianism, national unity, representative democracy by consensus, and social justice".[12] The five principles emphasise the fact that "Indonesia has neither a secular nor an Islamic state" but with a philosophical foundation that respected a "belief in a singular God, as well as ideas of social justice and harmony".[13] These principles are relevant to understand the conception of theo-ethical equilibrium as the fundamental element of the multidimensionality of the public sphere in Indonesia.

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[10] Taylor 2003.
[11] Elson 2009.
[12] Rinaldo 2011: p. 543.
[13] Rinaldo 2008b: p. 26.

Indonesia's founding president Sukarno made the decision to accommodate the tension between secular-nationalist and Muslim leaders. Nevertheless, it still led to huge disappointment among some Muslim leaders, who perceived it as a setback from a more central position of Islam during the short period of Japanese colonial rule during World War II.[14] To ease the tension, the nationalist government established the Ministry of Religious Affairs, which became responsible for managing religious education in the newly established republic.[15][16] The tension between Sukarno and Muslim leaders reached a new level after Sukarno allowed the establishment of the Indonesian Communist Party.[17] In the 1960s, Indonesian politics was heavily affected by the three blocks: the nationalists, the communists, and political Islam.[18] Later, this decision opened an opportunity for General Suharto to overthrow him and become Indonesia's second president, ruling from 1965 until the collapse of his authoritarian government in 1998.

For the communities of *pondok pesantren,* the disappearance of the Jakarta Charter from the national consciousness has become the main reason for their detachment from national development. Religious leaders in these institutions seem to believe that the postcolonial government owe a debt to the *pondok pesantren* community for their contribution to

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[14] Prior to independence, the Japanese colonial government established the Office of Religious Affairs (*Shimubu*) that aimed to cater the interest of Muslim leaders. With the establishment of the official body, "Muslim leaders received a heightened sense of their own importance under the Japanese, although that never translated into a sense that Muslim figures would be permitted a significant political role". (Elson 2009).

[15] Isbah 2012.

[16] On 1 June 1945, Sukarno delivered a speech about *Pancasila* "which unambiguously based Indonesia on nationalism rather than Islam" (Elson 2009). However, in the official meeting of drafting Indonesian constitution on 22 June 1945, Kahar Muzakkir and Wahid Hasyim insisted to add the statement 'with the obligation for its adherents to carry out Islamic law' in the preamble. Many meetings, and many deadlocks, occurred between June and August 1945. On the morning of 18 August 1945, Hatta held a meeting with Muslim leaders and emphasised "of the urgent need, for the sake of national unity, to accede to the demand to remove the seven words and, as well, to tone down other parts of the draft that appeared to privilege Islam". (Elson 2009).

[17] Zurbuchen 2002.

[18] Beatty 2009.

the collective national independence struggle. The sentiment led to a significant distance between the national system of education and the educational system of *pondok pesantren.* Although religious schools are managed by the national government under the auspicions of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, in *pondok pesantren*, the style of *kiai* (respected Muslim cleric) is the key determinant to understanding educational policy in *pondok pesantren* and the institutional differences with the struggle of Muslims in the highly modernised and individualised public sphere in the national context of Indonesia.

During the three decades of Suharto's presidency, the tension between secularism and religiosity was reflected by the struggle of Muslim media to gain an influential position. Some Muslim-based media, most notably *Republika, Media Dakwah,* and *Ummat,* were established in the early 1990s as an alternative to the mainstream media outlets, which were mainly owned by Chinese-heritage owners with Christian or Catholic backgrounds.[19] This socio-religious factor is critical due to the complicated relationships between Muslim and Christian communities.[20] The domination of Chinese and Christian conglomerates in the Indonesian media industry[21] also created suspicion among Muslims towards Chinese-Christian communities, mainly due to the issues of *Kristenisasi* and *Islamisasi* that targeted the followers of both religions to convert to the other religion.[22] As some converts to Christianity were former members of the Indonesian Communist Party, Suharto also strategically used this issue to strengthen anti-communist sentiment among Muslim communities.[23]

It is also important to understand the various shifting strategies used by Suharto in managing the tension between Islam and secularism. At the beginning of the New Order period, the regime often sentenced and jailed Islamic political activists, including *kiai,* who were critical of his

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[19] Hefner 1997.
[20] Arifianto 2009.
[21] Hefner 1997.
[22] Arifianto 2009.
[23] Ropi 1999.

authoritarian system.[24] Suharto's policy of 'Normalisation of Campus Life' (*Normalisasi Kehidupan Kampus*) in 1978 limited Muslim activism on secular campuses and "stimulated growing numbers of students to turn toward Islamic *da'wa* activities".[25] However, upon his return from a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1991, Suharto appeared to be more Islamic than his syncretic Javanese identity in the past.[26] He accommodated middle-class Muslim technocrats by establishing the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals *(Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia/ICMI)*,[27] and selected many Muslim intellectuals as ministers in his cabinet and high-level staff in civil and military authorities[28] as a strategy to tackle the perceived issue of his close relationships with Chinese-heritage and non-Muslim conglomerates.[29] These strategies increased the confidence of the Muslim middle class and set the standard for the Islamic revival following the collapse of the Suharto regime in 1998.

The religious revival in post-Suharto Indonesia has signalled the shift of private moralities into a public issue[30], leading to "personal piety and national morality".[31] Hoesterey emphasises the role of Aa Gym, a popular Islamic preacher, in promoting the issue of morality to the national level. On 18 August 2004, Aa Gym led a mass protest and stressed the dangers of pornography to then-President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.[32] In response, Yudhoyono agreed with Aa Gym, stating that pornography was "very dangerous, a big threat to our nation, for future generations".[33] The public discourse invoked by popular figures such as Aa Gym and President Yudhoyono contributed to the development and ratification of

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[24] Heryanto 2014b.
[25] Hasan 2009: p. 232.
[26] Heryanto 2011.
[27] Hasan 2009.
[28] Vatikiotis 1993.
[29] Winters 1996; 2013.
[30] Brenner 2011.
[31] Hoesterey 2016: p. 134.
[32] Hoesterey 2015; 2016.
[33] Hoesterey 2016: p. 139.

the Anti-Pornography Law in 2008.[34] In this case, Aa Gym "invoked the psycho-political language of moral crisis and shamelessness to endow the state with a political effect of shame".[35] For Rinaldo, the contemporary *dakwah* movement in Indonesia provides an interesting example of the debates about the definition of private and public spheres.[36] It challenges the original concept of the Habermasian public sphere that separates ideas and identity, as well as secularism and religiosity.

Internally, Muslims in Indonesia have been divided into dichotomies, with the splits often described as modernist and traditionalist,[37] urban and rural, and literal and liberal. While modernist, urban, and literal Muslims continuously attempt to maintain the spirit of religious purification in modern institutions, the other categories of Indonesian Muslims are often associated with syncretic religious practices with local customs and traditions.[38] In terms of academic backgrounds, modernist Muslims tend to pursue their degrees at secular universities in Indonesia or Western countries, predominantly in science and engineering subjects. Interestingly, while studying at secular universities, they maintain the spirit of Islamic revival through Islamic study groups.[39] This new generation of Muslim modernists represents a new trend of modernist Muslims who "have access to modern education, to urban life, and politics and public visibility but refuse assimilation to the values of secularism and modernist elites".[40]

In contrast, the spirit of Islam in the traditionalist group aims "to reconcile Islam with human rights, democracy, and pluralism".[41] Some prominent traditionalist Muslims studied Islamic studies in Western universities and were inspired by Muslim reformist and liberal intellectuals

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[34] Barker 2014.
[35] Hoesterey 2015: p. 150.
[36] Rinaldo 2010: p. 423.
[37] Rinaldo 2011.
[38] Hoesterey 2016; Rinaldo 2011.
[39] Brenner 1996; Rinaldo 2008a, 2008b, 2011.
[40] Göle 1997: p. 70.
[41] Rinaldo 2011: p. 545.

such as Abdulkarim Soroush, Fazlur Rahman, and Mohammed Arkoun.[42] The training within the Western tradition of social science and humanities has produced the Indonesian Islamic intelligentsia with a liberal outlook, such as Nurcholish Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Ulil-Abshar Abdalla. Interestingly, a new generation of traditionalist Muslims also studied at Islamic universities in the Middle East. However, their religious approach tends to be more moderate compared to modernist Muslims who have studied at similar Islamic universities.[43]

The intellectual pursuits of traditionalist Muslims in the past developed in an era where internet connection was limited. Before the 2000s, students and teachers of *pondok pesantren* had minimal interactions with information technology and could focus entirely on religious education. The shift of education from religious and secular contexts, from local to national to the global scene, happened entirely through offline interaction. Without significant disruption from the internet, *pondok pesantren* could strengthen the Islamic foundation of students before they embarked on further studies in Islamic or secular universities in Indonesia and abroad. However, with the emergence of the internet, students can easily interact with the global and secular outlook while being educated in *pondok pesantren.* This paper is an attempt to understand the struggle of students in *pondok pesantren* in navigating the multidimensionality of the public sphere.

Going back to the notion of theo-ethical equilibrium, it is evident that the balance between secularism and religiosity has not been fully achieved in Indonesia. Officially, the Indonesian constitution acknowledges monotheism, humanitarianism, national unity, representative democracy by consensus, and social justice[44] and emphasises that Indonesia has neither a secular nor an Islamic state.[45] In reality, the disappearance of the Jakarta Charter and the subsequent

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[42] Ali 2005; Van Doorn-Harder 2006.
[43] Saat 2017.
[44] Rinaldo 2011: p. 543.
[45] Rinaldo 2008b: p. 26.

allegiance of Suharto towards Chinese-heritage and Christian conglomerates have made it difficult to maintain such balanced and secular principles. Furthermore, the educational, financial, and technical affordances of middle-class Muslims have enabled them to be directly involved in the national struggle.

The current shift of private moralities into the public[46] and the concepts of "personal piety and national morality"[47] have signalled the impossibility of achieving theo-ethical equilibrium in the Indonesian public sphere. Indonesian Muslims nowadays have no constraints on expressing their religious interest in public, amidst the official status of Indonesia as a secular state. The highly Islamised and digitalised public sphere in the national context shows how the secular internet has become the religious interest of the middle class. In contrast, the different systems of education, together with the minimum level of financial and technical affordances, have created a different nuance of the public sphere in *pondok pesantren.* The subsequent parts of this paper deliberate the contextual complexity of the local public sphere in *pondok pesantren.*

## Understanding the Public Sphere of *Pondok Pesantren*

This paper is based on qualitative case studies conducted in two *pondok pesantren* in Tasikmalaya, West Java, Indonesia. There are several rationales for choosing the two *Pondok Pesantren* in Tasikmalaya as the subject of this research. *Firstly,* Tasikmalaya is well-known as a city of *santri (kota santri)[48]* due to the high number of *pondok pesantren* and the population of *santri* within the city.[49] *Santri* refers to people who study at

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[46] Brenner 2011.

[47] Hoesterey 2016: p. 134.

[48] The title of *Kota Santri* has a consequence for "designs and attributes in public spaces" where Islamic "religiosity is involved in all aspects of social life – including politics and governance" (Octastefani & Samadhi 2018).

[49] The terminology of *santri* comes from Geertz (1960) trichotomy of *santri, priyayi,* and *abangan.* While *priyayi* and *abangan are* related to the socio-economic status of secular groups, *santri* is a

*pondok pesantren*. In 2016, data shows that there were 833 *pondok pesantren*, 5,888 *kiai*, and 93,986 *santri* in Tasikmalaya,[50] more than any other city in Indonesia. *Secondly,* the reputation of Tasikmalaya as a city of *santri* is unique due to its geographical distance from major cities such as Bandung and Jakarta. Bandung is significant as the centre of popular culture and creative industries in Indonesia,[51] and is the nearest metropolitan city to Tasikmalaya. In contrast to other *pondok pesantren*, which are primarily identified as being places of Islamic education for rural students, the geographical position of Tasikmalaya attracts students from both urban and rural areas of the region.[52]

*Thirdly,* two large *pondok pesantren* represent different characteristics of history and pedagogy. Pondok Pesantren Cipasung is one of the biggest *pondok pesantren* in Tasikmalaya. At a national level, Cipasung is also prominent due to the involvement of its *kiai* in the national leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organization.[53] Cipasung combines religious education in *pondok pesantren* with formal educational institutions, from kindergarten to the institutes of higher education. Meanwhile, Pondok Pesantren Miftahul

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category of a religious group in Javanese society, regardless of their socio-economic status. In contemporary Indonesia, *santri* refers to the student (s) of *pondok pesantren.*

[50] Badan Pusat Statisik Jawa Barat 2017.

[51] The creative industries in Bandung operate through 15 sub-sectors, such as handcrafted goods, fashion, publishing, architecture, performing arts, media and film. In 2007, the sectors contributed 14.4% (USD 400 million) of Indonesia's economic growth and were predicted to grow more rapidly in the future (Sarosa, et. Al., 2017). In 2015, Bandung also joined as a member of UNESCO Creative Cities Network (UNESCO 2015).

[52] According to the Central Bureau of Statistics in West Java *(Badan Pusat Statistik Provinsi Jawa Barat)*, in 2017 there are 758,100 *santri* in West Java Province and 93,986 *santri* in Tasikmalaya. The number reflects the importance of the province and the city in the discourse of *santri* in national level.

[53] In 1992, the late Kiai Haji Ilyas Ruhiyat, then a leader of *Pondok Pesantren Cipasung,* was elected as a *rais aam* (the ultimate leader) of *Nahdlatul Ulama,* the biggest Islamic organization in Indonesia. *Pondok Pesantren Cipasung* also hosted the XXIX *Muktamar* (general meeting) of Nahdlatul Ulama in 1994 (Yahya 2006).

Huda has a reputation for its core teaching of *kitab kuning*;[54] the absence of formal schooling in Miftahul Huda necessitates a different educational strategy. The unique characteristics of the institutions represent the nature of *pondok pesantren* as a micro-educational institution system without a national standard.

My fieldwork from October 2018 to January 2019 fell into the campaign period of the 2019 General Election. During this campaign period, some *kiai* directly involved in supporting the big of President Joko 'Jokowi' Widodo for re-election. The support from *pondok pesantren* communities was vital for Jokowi, reflected in his decision to choose Ma'ruf Amin, a senior *kiai,* as his running mate. In line with the political events, I witnessed the offline campaign of Ma'ruf Amin at Miftahul Huda. He particularly emphasised the critical position of *kiai* and *santri* in national leadership. On a similar day, he also campaigned at Cipasung. These two institutions were central for acquiring voters from a traditional Muslim background in West Java.

Navigating the national politics of Indonesia is a challenging task for the *pondok pesantren* community. Indonesian politics is full of conflicting interests between various political ideologies as well as rampant practices of corruption and nepotism. At the same time, the lack of personal access to digital technology hinders the capability of students to express their religious and political interests individually. Against this background, the two *pondok pesantren* in my research represent two different masses and traditions. Cipasung has been primarily identified as the backbone of NU, while Miftahul Huda shows inconsistencies in its political affiliation. The establishment of formal schools in Cipasung represents a group of *pondok pesantren* that support, to a various degree,

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[54] *Kitab kuning,* or the yellow book, is the primary teaching material in traditional *pondok pesantren.* Bruinessen (1990) traced the terminology of *kitab kuning* 'after the tinted paper of books brought from the Middle East in the early twentieth century' (p. 227). The primary teaching material in traditional *pondok pesantren* is contrast to *buku putih,* the Romanized Islamic books and printed on white paper, that became the primary teaching material in more modernized *pondok pesantren* (Bruinessen 1990).

the idea of nationalism and modern democracy. For institutions such as Miftahul Huda, the rejection of the national system of education has shown various degrees of resistance against the architecture of Indonesia as a secular state.

Nevertheless, in the 2019 General Election, both institutions showed a similar pattern of political Islam in supporting Jokowi as a presidential candidate. Cipasung and Miftahul Huda also sent members of *kiai* families to stand for election at different electoral levels. Although the dominant aspects of religious life in the institution remain offline, in some political campaigns *kiai* have shown the ambition to extend their political agendas through online platforms. The charisma of *kiai* and the sense of collectivism among the people of *pondok pesantren* have made it impossible the *pondok pesantren* community to ignore the political campaign of *kiai*. Inside *pondok pesantren,* the lack of or limited access to the internet has placed *kiai* as the primary references in determining political action.

While the attachment to *kiai* is predominantly built through offline interaction, the online presence of *kiai* on social media platforms has led to confusion about the existence of religious authority. The emphasis on the institutional, rather than individual, has made it difficult for students to express their political preferences, as they worry that disobedience to *kiai* could lead to an unblessed life *(hidup yang tidak berkah)*. Yet in assessing the political campaign of *kiai,* the distinction between the institutional and the individual has been blurred. *Kiai* can utilise the institutional power extensively to fulfil their personal interests. Furthermore, *pondok pesantren* communities tend to differentiate themselves from Muslim communities in urban settings, particularly through comprehensive religious training in an offline setting. Yet the online campaigns of *kiai* have forced the institutions to utilise a method that is less familiar to the offline communities.

The emphasis on collectivism is shown clearly in the online campaign of *Harejo (Haji Azid Rekan Jokowi/*Haji Azid, Friend of Jokowi) from the leader of Miftahul Huda. In Sundanese, a local language in West

Java, *harejo* also means 'greenery'. Green is a colour that has been identified as a symbol of Islam in Indonesian politics. Although the campaign did not mention the institutional name of Miftahul Huda, a Harejo digital campaign on YouTube addressed the importance of choosing Jokowi in the general election:

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| *Akang-Akang, Euceu-Euceu sadayana Harejo* | [Brother and Sister, everyone is Harejo] |
| *Haji Azid Rekan Jokowi!* | [Haji Azid Friend of Jokowi!] |
| *Maenya moal Harejo?* | [Are you sure you won't vote for Harejo?] |
| *Akang-Akang, Euceu-Euceu* | [Brother and Sister] |
| *Ceu Haji, Kang Haji,    Sadayana Harejo* | [Auntie and Uncle, everyone is Harejo] |
| *Rumasa kuring mah bodo* | [I am aware that I am foolish] |
| *Rumasa kuring mah kurang gaul* | [I am aware that I am not cool] |
| *Masalah politik mah moal ngemut, bade tumut* | [In politics, I will not think, I will follow] |
| *Sakitu* | [That's all] |

There are some crucial elements emphasised within the song. First, its chosen language is Sundanese, signalling that this song is addressed to voters in West Java. From their previous experience of provincial elections, the Miftahul Huda alumni network was effective in supporting the victory of Ridwan Kamil and Uu Ruzhanul Ulum as governor and deputy governor. Uu himself is the grandson of the founder of Miftahul Huda and the former district head of Tasikmalaya. Thus, the decision of Ridwan Kamil to choose Uu as his running mate was a sign of the importance of the voters from *pondok pesantren* and rural backgrounds for winning the election.

A similar decision was made by Jokowi when he chose Ma'ruf Amin as his running mate. Compared to Uu, Ma'ruf Amin had a stronger network, as he was the former chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council *(Majelis Ulama Indonesia/MUI)* and the member of *syuriah*, a supreme governing

council, of NU. The trend to place *pondok pesantren* as an essential political consideration has only grown in recent years, amidst the heated competition with the urban Muslim middle class. During the 2019 General Election, at both the provincial level of West Java and the national level, voters from urban backgrounds favoured different candidates.

Secondly, an emphasis on collectivism is prevalent in the song. By utilising a popular method of the campaign, Haji Azid aimed to catch all potential voters of various ages, gender, and socio-economic backgrounds. Nevertheless, a particular emphasis has been placed on *ajengan* (the terminology of *kiai* in the Sundanese language) and *santri*. Thirdly, the line "in politics, I don't think, I will follow" reveals the political stance of *pondok pesantren*.

Despite its political participation, the institution did not position political agendas as something that should be thought deeply in the 2019 General Election. Instead, students should follow the leader, Haji Azid. In Cipasung, an official announcement from *kiai* was circulated on WhatsApp groups before the general election on 17 April 2019. The decision was made on 11 April 2019 and contained three essential messages. Firstly, to support and ensure a conducive and safe situation for the general election. The 2019 General Election was haunted by tension between the supporters of Jokowi and his opponent Prabowo Subianto, particularly on social media platforms. Responding to this situation, the first message appeared as a diplomatic strategy to ease the tension. Secondly, the message encouraged support for fellow alumni of Cipasung who were standing as legislative candidates. In the last decade, the political involvement of a member of *pondok pesantren* has relied heavily on the support of the alumni network. However, in the third message, *kiai* in Cipasung openly announced his political decision to support Jokowi in upcoming election. To some extent, then, the first message conflicts with the other messages, particularly the third message. By openly declaring its support towards Jokowi, Cipasung was fully participating in the escalated tension between the supporters of Jokowi and Prabowo.

Jokowi's choice of Ma'ruf Amin, a senior *Kiai*, as his vice presidential candidate also blurred a distinction between Ma'ruf's position as a *kiai* and as a politician. In his campaign at Miftahul Huda, Ma'ruf classified *santri* in a special category of Indonesian Muslims. In his opinion, *pondok pesantren* are partners of the government in preserving the tolerant form of Islam in the multicultural country of Indonesia. His decision to become Jokowi's running mate was based on his responsibility to lead the *ummah* (Muslim community) through a mechanism of national politics. During the campaign, he also held a ceremony to finish *Safinatunnajah* (a popular *kitab kuning*), which was written by his direct ancestor, Syekh Nawawi Al-Bantani. This demonstrates how Ma'ruf combines his position as a *kiai*, as a descendant of influential ulama, and as a future leader in national politics. Regardless of the conflict of interests, for a student in Miftahul Huda, the political socialisation of *kiai* was enough to determine his political preference:

> I had an opportunity to discuss this with a student from the University of Indonesia. I told him that I chose [candidate pair] number one [Jokowi-Ma'ruf Amin] because I knew the candidate, I could assess the benefit of choosing the candidate, not merely because of religious sentiment.[55]

The respondent is a senior student who completed 12 years of education at Miftahul Huda. However, in discussing his political preference, it is evident that he follows the preference of *kiai.* He also proudly expressed his contribution to promoting the political preference of *kiai* to his families in Bekasi, an industrial city on the edge of Jakarta. In supporting Uu for vice governor of West Java, the student tirelessly went

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[55] Reza (28 years), a pseudonym, personal communication, 13 November 2018.

door to door to ensure that his relatives could follow the instruction of *kiai* at the provincial level, even though Bekasi is an urban basis of the Justice and Prosperous Party (PKS), who promoted another candidate. The student also believes that following and promoting the political preference of *kiai* is the right way to get *barakah* (blessing) from *kiai* and to have a meaningful and happy life.

The concept of *barakah* could provide a basis for the whole explanation of the nature of the public sphere in *pondok pesantren.* It is not only related to the total adherence of his leadership but also regarding the close physical proximity inside the confinement of *pondok pesantren.* The lack of digital access in the institutions is replaced by the daily religious rituals and the comfort of the religious guidance of *kiai.* Indeed, in a practical sense for the daily life in *pondok pesantren*, such religious affordances are beneficial in maintaining *santri* well-being. At the same time, by maintaining offline religious instruction, *kiai* also aim to differentiate the institutions from the online religious learning of middle-class Muslims in urban settings. The religious ideas manifested through the communalistic practice in the public sphere of *pondok pesantren* provide an antithesis to the capitalistic and individualistic practices in the national public sphere.

Meanwhile, in the national public sphere, the ongoing religious revival challenges secularism by enmeshing the religious interests of middle-class Muslims into capitalistic and individualistic practices. Herein lies the tension and intersection between secularism and religiosity, as well as between communalism and individualism in which the pendulum has repeatedly swung in different directions. Returning to the notion of theo-ethical equilibrium, and learning from the contexts of Indonesia and *pondok pesantren,* it is evident that in every layer of society, there is an imbalance between religious and secular interests. In the global public sphere, secularism has become the dominant idea, including becoming the basis for technological development. In the national context of Indonesia, the secular infrastructure of the internet has become the key piece of infrastructure for religious revival. Meanwhile, in the context of

*pondok pesantren,* anti-secularism has enabled the constant restriction of internet access. The asymmetrical and asynchronous power articulation in global, national, and local contexts of society is the key factor in understanding the multidimensionality of the public sphere.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the multidimensionality of the public sphere has shown the fundamental challenges in maintaining theo-ethical equilibrium. While Habermas relies heavily on the power and potential of secular ideas, the Indonesian case is a contrasting environment with his version of the public sphere. Powerful actors from the state, the oligarchy, and political Islam are fighting each other and utilising various forms of power and capital. During the three decades of the authoritarian Suharto era, the grand narrative of nationalism and national development effectively upheld the strength of the national government. However, Suharto's inability to manage the Asian financial crisis in 1998, deepening internal inequality, and increasing global communication capacity created turmoil for his political power. In post-Suharto Indonesia, the proliferation of information technology has shifted the dominant power to the market mechanism and weakened the domination of the state. At the same time, the Islamic revival and the increasing presence of political Islam also provide a different arrangement in the public sphere. As Heryanto argues, there is an increasing sentiment that Islam should be positioned in equal status with the ongoing modernisation and digitalisation of the public sphere.[56]

Through this paper, I argue that the public sphere of *pondok pesantren* has many distinctive elements, including, most importantly, its ability to maintain collective political mobilization amidst the individualisation of digital democracy. The attempts of *kiai* to mobilize *santri* to support particular political candidates through online campaigns

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[56] Heryanto 2014b.

show a contrasting capability between the individual and the communal, the online and the offline, and the secular and the religious public sphere. However, the political mobilization of *kiai* is problematic considering the corrupt and oligarchic nature of contemporary Indonesian politics. Within the current trend of democratic decline in Indonesia, we should be more critical in understanding the political participation of *pondok pesantren* leaders. Only by maintaining a critical stance against the corrupt practice in national politics, *pondok pesantren* will be able to cultivate a long tradition of civil Islam that is essential in the long process of democratisation in Indonesia.

As the results of 2024 General Election in Indonesia unfold, we should also rethink the gap and the distinction between different public spheres. Millions of Indonesians voted on 14 February 2024 amidst the soaring prices of basic goods, unemployment, and disinformation. People voiced their aspirations through the election, yet the disinformation through various digital platforms has systematically erased the bloody history from the public memory. Certainly, with the systematic digital divide, digital democracy in Indonesia has always been beneficial for powerful oligarchs and corrupt governments. With the absence of political and digital literacy, people in *pondok pesantren* are certainly located at the very central problem of the digital divide in Indonesia. As Indonesia is going through a period of democratic decline, it is important that technocrats, educators, and policymakers work together to ensure that our digital democracy is beneficial for all. Only by collectively working for such initiatives, we ensure that the multidimensionality of the public sphere is supporting, rather than hindering, the inclusive promise of digital democracy.

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