

Religious Authority in New Media Era

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Abstract : In the social sphere, the development of religion requires "explanation" which has credibility to explain and convey religious messages. In reality, however, religious authority is not static, but dynamic. In its development, religion requires an explanation to reach its adherents. In Islam, the authorities interpret the Qur'anic verses, issue laws and give religious fatwas given to people who have met certain criteria, whether those relating to the integrity of personality, as well as those related to the mastery of the knowledge used to extract from the source of Islam. This paper describes descriptively the phenomenon of the so-called "new media" era that has implications for religious authority, so that there has been a shift in the religious authority from the concept of conventional authority to this new media authority. In this paper also presented the effect of change of this authority in Islamic society both from the methodology aspects of the field of religious sciences and its effects on the practice of Islamic teachings.

1 INTRODUCTION

There are about 142.26 million Indonesia internet users from the population of 262 million people, meaning 54.68% on Indonesians have used the internet (mastel.id 2018). If this data is related to religious life, it can be assumed that there are relation between the progress of social media usage and religious life, because Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world.

One of the most obvious implications of the above situation is the shift of religious authority from scholars, *kiyai* and teachers whose existence is based on personality integrity to online sources through impersonal internet and social media.

In the classical perspective, religious authority rests on the authority of *ulama*, *kiyai* and teachers who are claimed as the heirs of the prophets (*al-ulama'uwarasatu al-anbiya'*) who have the knowledge and ability to understand the basic of Islamic teaching practices. They directly give direction, advice, warning, and cultivate people in running the message of Islam in Muslim life.

But now the religious authority has been a shift (dissemination), that is, people gain new authority that seems impersonal, based on the main network of information (internet). Everyone can easily access

information according to their wishes and needs. Islamic information can be available with just a few moves on the keyboard. Thousands of books can be simplified in some flash pieces and can be easily accessed via the internet.

Someone who needs an answer to a religious issue may not ask directly to the *ulama* at the *pesantren*. Religious fatwas are not only owned by certain *ulama*, but everyone can find answers and make decisions based on information available in the media. The tendency of the shift contains challenges and expectations. The challenge is that fatwas of *ulama* and religious institutions are increasingly vulnerable to scrutiny by alternative online criticized voices. The doctrines, symbols and practices of religious traditions are increasingly open to debate. While the hope is with the opening of new sources of Islamic authority through new media, encouraging communication, and spreading the message of Islam so quickly.

2 RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES IN ISLAM

Religious authority in Islam is the right to exercise and order rules that are considered to be the will of

God. Religion authority means therefore the right to impose the rules which are deemed to be in consonance with the will of God (Gaborieau 2010). Although the idea still very problematic because the owner of supreme authority is God. From this definition, then those who have the authority are ulama personally or ulama united in an organization or institution that gets government legitimacy.

The issue of religious authority is not simple, either in its terminological definition or its implementation in the experience of religious life. The issue of who the owner of Islamic authority in the context of nation and state of Indonesia becomes a special discussion. It can be said that Indonesia is the most difficult Muslim country to answer the question of who is the sole proprietor of religious authority authorized to organize and give Muslim direction to translate the messages of Islam in life. Moreover, in a new media-based society, where society is increasingly scattered, neither socially nor intellectually presently can barely determine who the religious authority is and what its boundaries are. In other Muslim countries this issue can be answered by granting religious authority to certain states / governments or fatwa institutions, such as in Malaysia, Brunei, or in the Middle East.

Traditionally, religious authority in Islam is in the hands of *ulama* or *kiyai*, they have legitimate authority and interpret the scriptures to resolve the issue of the people with the fatwas issued. This fatwa becomes a reference for the behavior of people in society. The *ulamawho* teach the basics of Islam and instill Islamic values to the *ummah* (Azra 1999).

Because the religious authority in Islam lies in the hands of the *ulama* to provide a holy understanding (*mufassir*), formulate laws that will be implemented in daily life for Muslims (*mujtahid-faqih*), or give a religious fatwa relating to an act or events (*mufti*), then the holder of this authority plays an important role in Islamic teaching practices.

Under these conditions, any problems to be resolved should be questioned or explained by a *Ulama*. So it takes a very strict requirement to become a *mufassir*, *mujtahid*, *faqih*, and *mufti*. One aspect of the requirement is the existence of the integrity requirements of a *ulama*, so that people will only believe in *ulama* who has a good personality integrity. Thus, the opinions expressed are not independent, but strongly influenced by the personal integrity respectively. Recent developments in the Muslim words illustrate the complexity with which religious power and authority are exercised (A 1986).

From the historical aspect, since the beginning of the spread of Islam, until centuries afterwards, ulama

became the sole actor in determining and forming Islamic discourses and patterns in Indonesia. This is reinforced by the fact that, in the pre-colonial Islamic empire, the important role of these scholars received political legitimacy with the formalization of the office of kadi (*qadi*) and *syaikhul Islam* which taught and supervised the implementation of Islamic teachings, decided and taught Islam, and strengthened Islam in the kingdom. Therefore, Ulama became the religious elite and became an elite part of the Islamic kingdom (Burhanuddin 2012, 11-15). Since the colonial phase, the Ulama began to pull over from the center of the city and coastal areas to rural villages. Because they lost their political legitimacy, they began to build their own institutions by establishing Islamic teaching institutions such as *pesantren*, *dayah*, *surau*, and others. This model of *pesantren* teaching will be the formation of the role of ulama as an authoritative institution in teaching and determining Islamic teachings and subsequent Muslim religious practices.

Although a Santri studied the treasures of books written by classical scholars, the oral tradition had played a significant role in the *pesantren*. First, because the ulama are the holders of religious knowledge authorities originating from the network of previous scholars. Second, this tradition is a guarantee that the knowledge that reaches the santri is not the result of self-taught processes. These two reasons make the oral explanation by the ulama an absolute necessity. Authority is enforced based on oral transmission of knowledge from their teachers, which if traced further, will reach the authors, founders of the School of Islam, or even the Prophet Muhammad himself. In the *pesantren* tradition, this is known as "Sanad of Knowledge".

In the beginning, the use of print technology in Islam supported this already established process. In the case of Indonesia, this condition began with the establishment of a printing press in Cairo, Egypt, in the 1880s which printed the books of Shaykh Nawawai al-Bantani - a Bantenese Ulama who lived in Mecca - whose books were widely used in Islamic boarding schools. In addition, a printing press in Mecca, which was founded in 1884, made Malay-language books (with Arabic script; among *pesantren* better known as *Pegon* or Arabic-Malay writing) as an important part of his business. The production process of the printed books of the Middle East contributed to the widespread spread of Islamic knowledge in the archipelago and provided a great opportunity for ulama Nusantara to increase their followers and authority among the Muslim Nusantara (Burhanuddin 2012, 122-127).

However, printing technology has a dual effect. Reformism and the idea of Islamic renewal initiated by Jamaluddin al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Ridha spread from Cairo at the end of the 19th century. Newspapers are the mouthpiece of the spread of reformist ideas that actually challenge the established authority of scholars. The ideas of reformists were brought to the archipelago, especially by Nusantara students in the Middle East (especially Makkah and Cairo) who returned to their regions. The spread of this idea was further strengthened by the entry of print media from the Middle East that had been subscribed to by the students. Some prominent figures, such as K.H. Ahmad Dahlan and the founders of Islamic Unity (Persis), for example, were registered to subscribe to the al-Manar magazine initiated by Rasyid Ridha, which has made it an Islamic teaching material in Indonesia.

The idea of reform was then developed independently by the Muslim reformist archipelago. Through established educational institutions (schools that adopt the Western system and leave the model of pesantren / surau / dayah), this idea that was initiated was mainly disseminated through print media. This is in accordance with Abduh's statement that Muslims must adopt modernity and utilize modern devices in the interests of the advancement and glory of Muslims. The publication of "al-Imam", the first Southeast Asian reformist Islamic magazine which first appeared in 1906, became the first milestone in the effort to spread this idea. The magazine was initiated by Thaher Djalaluddin, a Minang student in Mecca - because he was interested in the ideas of Abduh and Ridha - decided to study in Cairo. This publication was followed by the appearance of another newspaper with a similar direction.

Printing machines and print media, became a feature that marked the existence of Islamic reformism. The printing press has played a role in changing the face of Southeast Asian Islam in the early 20th century. The use of print media and education system reform with various other efforts resulted in traditional ulama no longer being regarded as the sole holder of Islamic authority. New Muslim figures - reformists - began to get involved in defining Islam in the archipelago. This phenomenon shows a new trend. For example, there was a special column giving religious fatwa in various Islamic magazines and newspapers at that time. Religious questions that were previously only submitted to pesantren scholars, are now also being asked of reformist clerics who are newspaper/magazine editors.

Islamic sources of knowledge from classical Arabic books and studied exclusively in the guidance

of Islamic boarding schools, as well as oral traditions that have been established as a method of knowledge transfer for centuries, were seriously challenged by the sources produced by the printing press. Along with the proliferation of religious books published in Malay and regional languages, Muslims are increasingly facilitated in accessing religious knowledge, without having to settle in boarding schools. In this phase, people can find books, magazines, and newspapers that discuss or study religious issues in bookstores, libraries, and other places that were not previously considered and linked to Islamic studies. Studies of Islamic teachings can be found not only in Islamic boarding schools accompanied by Ulama, but also at home and schools.

In further developments, those involved in the public sphere are not only Middle Eastern-educated Indonesian students, but also Western-educated scholars who study Islam. Various Islamic movements with various tendencies also emerged. Starting from a movement that focuses on improving socio-economic moderation to elaborating on the latest political ideology. Finally, the ulama who felt undermined by their influence realized that the wave of change was inevitable, the ulama began to accommodate new ways to maintain the Islamic-traditionalist style they believed in and the authority of their religion.

If before, scholars seemed to be disadvantaged by the existence of printing technology. But on the contrary, print technology actually provides a diversity and the possibility to maintain, enhance, and even strengthen the religious authority of the Ulama in a new way and style. In this case, print technology also functions to strengthen the network of emerging scholars. Printing machines play a role in the formation of a community of scholars in Indonesia. The print media in fact plays a role in strengthening authority among Muslims.

In the pre-internet era, the relationship between people and *ulama* as the owner of the reference authority is personal. When people need something related to religion, they will come directly to the *ulama* or *kiyai* they trust. The effects of personal relationships between people and *ulama* have important implications: the understanding of religion tends to be collective and communitarian, not individual. This personal relationship makes a person has a bond with a particular community who became followers of the *ulama* concerned. In this discussion, Islamic authorities can be classified to individuals (*ulama, teachers, ustadz, da'i*), Islamic educational institutions, Islamic mass organizations, and government (Ministry of Religious Affairs).

3 NEW MEDIA PHENOMENON

The development of new media information technology followed by waning of traditional authority, the religious authorities shifted to the impersonal media, such as books, websites, and blogs. In terms of materials, books derived from paper can be categorized as conventional media (Nasrullah 2015). But the bookkeeping industry is no longer a conventional medium because the current bookkeeping industry is also based on new media, the internet. Nowadays everyone can learn Islam from books and internet available in various places. Therefore, now the Muslim generation can master the knowledge of Islam even though never had formal education in Islamic schools or *Pesantren*. They learn Islam without the guidance of the *ulama* or the *kiyai*. This means that the Muslim generation is now studying Islam from new sources that are different from previous sources of traditional knowledge.

In recent years, recent studies of the Islamic public have emphasized the importance of new media in shaping and influencing Muslim behavior in the public sphere (Anderson 2001, 39). Primarily about how the process of democratization and public fragmentation has occurred as a result of the capacity of new media to weaken established domination such as the state and institutions of Ulema. Conclusion Eickelman (2005) states that the existence of a new class of "Islamic activists" throughout the Muslim world has taken place along with the spread of new information technology, such as cassettes, audio CDs, satellite television and the internet (Hefner 2005). This is a new discussion about how Muslims present themselves with their identity in a society that is constantly changing. New media has created a new structure so that its fundamental impact changes established patterns in people's lives beyond their limits, and allows a reduction in traditional religious authority.

It is very difficult to define and understand what new media is. The term is still a new term if it is opposed to old media. The term is also very widely used differently by many interests, including various meanings, concepts, technologies and functions. New media is understood as a product of future media communication technology with digital computers. Before the 1980s media was relied primarily on print and analogue media such as newspapers, cinema, television, and radio. Now radio, television, digital and cinema, and printing machines have been changed by new digital technologies such as software for displaying images and publications. New media is

a term intended to cover the existence of the digital era, computers, or information and communication technology networks in the late 20th century. Most of the technologies described as "new media" are digital, often having characteristics that can be manipulated, are networked, interactive and impartial. Some examples can be called: Internet, websites, computer multimedia, computer games, CD-ROMS, and DVDs (Wardrip-Fruin and Montfort 2003, 13-25).

Vin Crosbie explained that there are three communication media that play a role. First, interpersonal media called "one to one". This media allows someone to communicate with each other or exchange information with someone else. Second, it is known as mass media. This media is used as a means of disseminating information from one person to many people called "one to many". The third communication media, called "new media". This media is an acceleration and refinement of the two previous media. Furthermore this media is used to communicate ideas and information from many people to many other people, called "many to many" (Crosbie n.d.). Based on this terminology, the characteristics of new media can provide access to content anywhere and anytime, are digital, are interactive media, and give everyone the opportunity to participate creatively and collectively.

In general, all new media have the same characteristics, which are related to distribution, production and consumption. Its characteristics are digital, interactive, hypertextual, virtual, networked, and simulative. Without technical elaboration, these characteristics allow new media to present various forms of content, such as text, video images, and sound, all together as part of the same media, based on digital technology. It also transforms new media audiences into users, independent, autonomous, who are free to choose specific content or topics, in the form of presentations, from any new media site on the Internet, or a combination of both, users feel more comfortable because of the interactive, hypertextual and network from new media.

Unlike conventional media such as newspapers or magazines, new media is real time, so it can provide up to date information. Newmedia is also considered more democratic and independent both in making, publishing, distribution, and in terms of consumption of available content. This media is relatively more "independent" in conveying information because it is not affected by the power and interests of the authorities (both government and capital holders). Likewise, the audience is free to enjoy the content provided with high privacy. Even today, between media owners, users can interact with each other and

share information. New media makes the audience part of the community, because senders and recipients have more in common, not only in interests but also in cultural styles in social positions. Although not as large as production and consumption of tapes and pamphlets, the internet reproduces many features on a social scale. As the characteristics of all new media, the socio-cultural distance on the internet between producers and consumers is radically reduced. This trend is evident in the growing development of citizen journalism (participatory journalism). Citizen journalism presupposes a communication link that anyone can be a source of information as well as a user for the public as long as it does not conflict with the journalistic code of ethics.

Subsequent developments as a result of new media are the increasing numbers of Islamic sites both by religious institutions and by individuals who both offer the importance of Islamic Implementation. Each portal offers opinions, fatwas, articles, and programs to meet the needs and answer the issue of the *ummah*. Some offer dialogs, online reviews, on-line chats. Some others let their portals be accessed without mutual communication. Interesting and also encouraging in the context of democratization of religion are that the web, portals, sites, blogs and others are so openly indefinitely and uncontrolled by institutions or persons of any religious authority and widely accessible.

In the new media era, citizens as well as audiences also become producers, commonly referred to as citizen journalism, such as personal blogs and private video recordings (Harahap 2013). Many people are searching for Islamic knowledge on television or digital magazines that are subscribed to, or preferred books that are all based on new media.

New media encourages communication and spreading Islamic teachings. The internet network is the most successful *da'wah* tool in modern times in Islamic history. Information on the sources of Islamic teachings can be available only with some movement on the keyboard. The translation of the Qur'an is available and can be downloaded on Islamic websites in several languages. Thousands of books can be packaged in multiple CDs and can be easily accessed on the internet just by moving the mouse.

Currently, those who are interested in learning about Islam simply need to browse the website to learn more about religion. Currently they prefer internet browsing than directly inquiring to the *ulama* or read books in the library in search of answers to religious issues. Many observers fear the internet and new media will create a new religious authority, as a moderator of an online group that is venerated and

treated as a legitimate spiritual authority by members of the religious community online (Herring 2005, 149-165).

4 NEW MEDIA EFFECTS ON RELIGIOUS AUTHORITIES

In the Internet era, personal relationships are not lost immediately. Until now, there are still many segments of Muslims who continue to maintain personal relationships with religious leaders (*kiyai, ustaz*), but the fact that there are radical changes in the relation of *ummah* and *ulama*. It can be seen the symptoms of impersonalizing relationship. This phenomenon can be seen through of a new generation of Muslims who get information about Islam through sites that exist in cyberspace. No scholars they meet directly. There is no *ulama* that they kiss his hand, but the relationship is impersonal with the text available on an internet site.

Of course, the internet will not completely replace a personal figure like the *ulama* as a religious reference. However, the position of the *'ulama* also began to shift, because their role was no longer the sole authority, the only source of reference. Some of their roles are gradually being replaced by "digital scholars" on the internet (Hoover 2001, 2).

In reality, there is a generation of progressive Muslims in the new media era today. They describe this is a new sketch of the wider religious space marked by the rising religious spirit among Muslims as a result of the growing number of new sources of religious authority other than the source of traditional authority (Kuntowijoyo 2003, 165). In the period, it will be very possible for the process of dialectics, mutual examination, mutual correction, even contradiction between one product of religious authority fatwa with other religious authority. In a deep study, the impersonalizing Islamic religious authority, which shifts the increasingly traditional authority, should be viewed positively and optimistically. Because whatever the situation, in the context of today's global development (Mahbunani 2011, 178-185).

In a personal relationship, the position of a Muslim individual is not too free, because he is tied to the figure of *kiyai/ulama*. He is also tied to the Islamic tradition developed by the *kiyai*. In the Internet era there is a phenomenon of "the dispersal of authority," the spread of authority. Authority is no longer concentrated on *kiyai* or *ulama*, but spreads anarchically to various sources. Each site can be an

independent source, an autonomous kiai. At this point will emerge the freedom of choosing religious understanding, but still also have a negative effect, namely the existence of freedom that is not guided directly by the scholars as a guide to avoid a Muslim selecting wrong teachings.

New media-based religious life that needs to be supervised while learning Islam with an impersonal source will form a "wild" understanding that is very different from Current mainstreams. Because the new media with all its advantages still cannot give feedback on interpretation, so that the learner is not accustomed to dialogue mutually and only follow the match with his own opinion. As a result, people are not familiar with the differences in religious interpretations that exist among *Ulama*. This condition will be more vulnerable when the learner gets a mentor who has a radical ideology and requires single loyalty in one interpretation. Although this is not the predominant trend among Muslims in new media-based religion, it often affects the notion of Muslim society's inhumanity in the eyes of the international community.

One of the effects of new media is the distortion of the meaning of *Ulama* in traditional terms. Leaders, *Ulama* or *ulama* organizations are aware of the dissemination of knowledge resources that allow new interpretations of religious messages to be faster. Perhaps, the new interpretation will be different from before. The progressiveness and openness of new media has accelerated the process of "rejuvenation of scholars". What has been called the "young *ulama*" has been born which is more progressive in addressing new problems that arise in society as a consequence of information and communication technology. It is possible that this "new *Ulama*" is not an alumni of Islamic Boarding Schools, has not yet held the title "Kiyai" or Ustadz but has far and wide access to the exploration of information and sources of Islamic studies.

The possibility of the emergence of diverse and tend to be free needs attention in the development of new media-based religious life in the learning of Islam with impersonal sources which opens opportunities for the spread of "wild" understanding that is very different from the mainstream. Because new media with all its advantages still has limitations, it cannot give a response back to someone's interpretation, so that the learner is not used to dialogue reciprocally and only follows what matches his own opinion. As a result, the learning community is less familiar with the differences in religious interpretations that exist among scholars. This condition will become increasingly dangerous when

learners get teachings from mentors who have radical ideology and require monoloyalty in one interpretation. Although this is not a dominant tendency among Muslims in new media-based religion, it often influences the perceived lack of civilization of Muslim societies in the eyes of the international community.

Openness in the accessibility of religious teachings. Religious teachings will be more open to access by anyone. The inevitable necessity in the development of new media is the increasingly dispersing religious fatwas without clear boundaries. The difference in religious fatwa in Indonesia is not a new problem. The difference is even the opposition to fatwas has become commonplace in Islamic legal treasures. This is evidenced by the sociological approach comparing the Muhammadiyah, NU, Persis, and MUI fatwas (as well as several other Islamic organizations and several individual *ulama* fatwas). But now the spread of fatwas is increasingly unlimited, which allows in one institution to oppose regional authority. Organizational authority internally shows how the decentralization of religion is very far and uncontrollable.

From the aspect of internet media users, the information available on the internet is abundant, diverse and rapidly changing, but also superficial. Every second, someone can get new information right away. As a result, society does not have enough time to understand. In-depth information and 'sophisticated' are not in demand in the digital age. The public prefers short and simple information, but superficial.

On the other hand, the new media is less concerned about aspects of culture and local social values. In personal relationships with *ulema*, usually the explanation given is very conditional with the culture and social conditions of society faced by a Muslim or scholar concerned, so that fatwa, interpretation and understanding in accordance with the social conditions and culture in which they are located. While the Internet era, religious dialogue occurs in cross-cultural, social and community, so sometimes found the understanding, interpretation and fatwa that is different from the circumstances in which Muslims are located.

The change of global and domestic societies based on new media has shifted and expanded the variety of religious authority, changing patterns of relations between people and leaders, requiring Muslims to reformulate the ways of communicating and learning "new languages" to interact. The continuing shift in religious authority and its implications are not to be stopped. Shifting is a necessity and a part that can't

be separated from new media and social, cultural and political changes, both at the national and international levels. Among those that need to be developed is the attitude of *tasamuh*, tolerance of each other, while minimizing the dominative and hegemonic tendencies among the various authority. Moreover, developing and familiarizing an honest and synergistic intellectual attitude are clearly the way for a dynamic religious life.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Religion and media have significant relationships. The development of new media (internet) also develops religious and media relations. In its development, it will appear that the media will change religious authority, this is caused by the easier access of religious teachings through this internet media which is followed by the development of this information technology. So it can be said that the new media not only serves as an entity that produces culture, but converts the function into a new religion / theology for some people. Religion and the media are a very interesting discourse to continue to see its development.

This shift of religious authority must be followed by the strengthening of methodological aspects in making internet media as religious sources, and the need for religious experts to master the internet media and make it as a medium of delivery and teaching of Islam. Therefore the interpretation of Islamic teachings does not ignore the culture of the Ummah Islam. In addition, there is a need to balance information on any religious information to avoid certain dominant understandings and the importance of socializing this new media usage method in the search for religious information.

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