

## Understanding Salafi Community in Yogyakarta

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In 2016, I visited Yogyakarta, a city that many people refer to as the capital of Javanese culture. I visited Gadjah Mada University (UGM) to try and locate a nearby mosque. Eventually, I found the *Pogung Dalangan* Mosque, which is situated near the engineering faculty. Upon visiting the mosque, I discovered that many students attend it. They were unique in the sense that some of them were dressed in Middle Eastern clothing. The common characteristic among these men is that they wear dresses that show their ankles and keep their beards long, which they claim are mandatory for Muslim men according to the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.



Picture 1: Pogung Dalangan Mosque, A Salafi Mosque near UGM campus.

Some of the women wore hijabs with veils (*cadar*), while others did not. However, the hijabs they wore were typically dark, following the guidelines of Prophet Muhammad's wives according to them.



Picture 2: Salafi women in Bantul Yogyakarta wear dark cloths.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/majalah-49353757>

They called themselves the Salafi community, but their opponents referred to them as Wahhabism. Looking at Wahhabism, the first time in our minds is Osama bin Laden. Yes, it is true that Osama bin Laden came from Saudi Arabia, and that the Saudi Arabian branch of Islam is Wahabism. However, Wahabism is not just in Saudi Arabia, but also a branch (school of thought ) of Islam in Indonesia that has grown significantly since before independence in 1945.

When we examine Wahabism in Indonesia or Salafi in their own terms<sup>1</sup>. We can see a different Salafi with the Osama bin Laden. This essay will provide an explanation of the other side of Salafi (or Wahhabism, in terms of Orientalists)<sup>2</sup>.

I spent five years of my undergraduate studies at Gadjah Mada University (UGM) in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, and lived with them, attended prayers in the same mosque, and attended some Islamic lectures from their ustadz (Islamic preachers). Most of the Salafi students were university students. In addition to Yogyakarta, Salafi grew in university cities near the University of Indonesia, Depok, West Java (near the capital city of Jakarta), and Bandung, near the Bandung Institute of Technology (ITB). These three universities are among the top three universities in Indonesia. Salafism in Indonesia, I believe, is primarily urban and is spreading near cities with universities. The majority of them came from natural science and engineering backgrounds, while only a few came from social and humanities backgrounds.

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<sup>1</sup> The term "Wahhabism" was coined by Western Orientalists in the 19th century to describe the religious movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the Arabian Peninsula. This term is sometimes considered problematic by some Muslims who follow the teachings of Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, as they believe it implies a sectarian or pejorative connotation. They may prefer to use the term "Salafism" to describe their beliefs and practices, as it emphasizes their focus on emulating the practices of the earliest generations of Muslims.

<sup>2</sup> The term "Wahhabism" was first used by the British orientalist, William Muir, in his book "The Life of Mahomet" published in 1861. However, it was the Swiss orientalist, Antoine-Henri de Bary, who popularized the term in the Western world in his work "Les Sectes de l'Islam" (The Sects of Islam) published in 1883. Since then, the term has been widely used to refer to the religious movement founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the 18th century.



Picture 3: Campus Mosque of UGM

Picture 3 shows the Campus Mosque of UGM, one of the centers of the Islamic movement among university students in Indonesia. It is from this mosque, along with the Salman Mosque in ITB (Bandung Institute of Technology) and the ARH mosques in the University of Indonesia, that conservative Islam originally came from.

Some western scholars have argued that the Salafi movement is the root cause of terrorism in Islam<sup>3</sup>. However, if we see more details in the observation, we can argue that this claim is oversimplified. In the issue of terrorism and violence, all Salafi in Yogyakarta argued that it was against Islamic laws. Evidence from their writing also supports this fact. Some Salafi *Ustaz and Sheikh* were also part of the deradicalization program funded by the Indonesian government. I observed some lectures or sermons in the mosque, and all of the *Ustaz* argue that terrorism is misguided Islam. Terrorism is not an authentic Islam. We can also observe videos on YouTube that explain their stance against violence and terrorism. Most of them argue by citing the narration from the prophet Muhammad who said “whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the land - it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved mankind entirely.”

Another misunderstanding of Salafi is their political behavior. These are nonpolitical communities. They were not interested in elections to support parties or presidential candidates. They are still debating about their participation in the elections. Some argue that participation in elections is just to prevent the worst candidate from being elected among other bad candidates. Some argue that elections cannot change anything, and that it is not an Islamic way to choose a political leader. This debate has fragmented Salafi in Yogyakarta and Indonesia to become two branches: first, moderate Salafi in politics, who argues that participation in elections is a necessity for avoiding ugliness in candidates but not to establish parties. Second, extreme Salafi argued that electoral democracy is forbidden in Islam. The majority of Salafi in Yogyakarta that I

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most well-known advocates of this view is perhaps the French scholar Gilles Kepel, who argued in his book "Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam" (2002) that the violent extremist movements that emerged in the Muslim world in the late 20th century were influenced by the teachings of Wahhabism and its offshoots.

meet are moderate Salafi. However, they do not explicitly declare candidates that they support in elections. In contrast to the Salafi movement in Egypt<sup>4</sup>, who established a political party after the Arab Spring, Salafi in Indonesia is not interested in initiating political parties as their political power tools to spread their teaching across the archipelago of Indonesia.

One concern that many scholars have about Salafism is their opinion on the position of the current Indonesian President. Some argue that Salafis, as a community of Islamic fundamentalists, strongly oppose secular governments such as the Indonesian government.<sup>5</sup>

However, my observations in Yogyakarta lead to the opposite conclusion. I can say that all Salafi preachers argue that protesting against the government is forbidden in Islam, and Muslims should follow the government's actions without protest, even if the government is evil. They also argue that Indonesia is not a secular state but an Islamic state because the government facilitates Islamic law, such as pilgrimage to Mecca, five daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, marriage, zakat (Islamic tax), and more. In many sermons, it is argued that although Indonesia is not a perfect Islamic State because it does not implement criminal law, rebellion against the government is prohibited.

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most prominent Salafi parties in Egypt is the "Nour Party" (The Party of Light), which was founded in 2011 following the ousting of former President Hosni Mubarak. The Nour Party espouses a conservative, Islamist ideology and advocates for the implementation of Islamic law in Egypt. The party won a significant number of seats in the Egyptian parliament in the 2011-2012 elections but has since seen a decline in popularity and influence. Other Salafi groups in Egypt include the "Salafi Call" (al-Da'wa al-Salafiyya) and the "Asala Party" (Authenticity Party), both of which promote a strict interpretation of Islamic law and morality.

<sup>5</sup> There are many scholars who argue that Wahhabism has a strong opposition stance against secular government. Here are some examples: Bernard Haykel (2009): A scholar of Islamic law and political theory, Haykel argues that Wahhabism represents a form of "Islamic puritanism" that rejects modernity, secularism, and the idea of the nation-state. Stephane Lacroix (2011): A French political scientist, Lacroix has written that Wahhabism is opposed to secular government because it views the separation of religion and politics as un-Islamic and believes that the state should be based on Islamic principles.



Picture 4: Source: <https://bogor.tribunnews.com/2018/11/23/ekspresi-kesal-ustadz-ini-saat-ditanya-apakah-presiden-kita-kafir-viral-apa-yang-membuatmu-ragu>. Translate in English of the title: “Is our President infidel?”

Picture 4 shows Ustadz Riyadh bin Badr Bajrey, one of the Salafi Ustadz who went viral on social media, stated that protests or demonstrations against the President are forbidden in Islam in the middle of massive protests against President Jokowi in 2016. These protests were held due to issues of blasphemy against Islam by the Christian and Chinese former Governor of Jakarta, Ahok during the governor election in 2016. In this moment, other groups of Islamists did some massive protest against the President<sup>6</sup>. However, Salafi community rejected protests against the government.

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/02/jakarta-protests-muslims-against-christian-governor-ahok>



Picture 5: A huge crowd gathers at the national monument in Jakarta from some Islamic groups to protest against the city's Christian governor. Source:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/02/jakarta-protests-muslims-against-christian-governor-ahok>

From this observation, we can learn that the prejudices held by some orientalist against them are wrong. By looking at them from a closer angle, we can see the humanistic view of this community, even though their clothes and lifestyles may appear strange from an outsider's perspective. Their political view is anti-politics, which sets them apart strongly from other Islamist groups.



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