

Indonesian Moderate Islam in the Eye of the Global Society: Is It Falling Yet?

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by **Ajeng Chandra, Dendy Raditya, Novrima Rizki, Obed Kresna, Selma Theofany.**

The team is currently working on a student research project entitled “*Ummatan Wasatan di Negeri Bawah Angin: Islam Moderat di Indonesia Pasca Aksi Bela Islam*”, funded by the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences UGM, started from March 2017 until November 2017.

ajengchndr@gmail.com

Indonesia, the biggest Muslim population in the world, has been acknowledged by the international society as a moderate Muslim country. The given image of Indonesian Islam is a result of the campaign done by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to construct the identity of Indonesian foreign policy (Umar, 2016). However, the discussion on the weakening of moderate Islam in Indonesia has arose recently, following the Jakarta protest in late 2016. Thus, a big question emerges among the international society: is the moderate Islam in Indonesia falling yet? In this essay, we are trying to briefly explain our argument on how the international society—mainly media and governments—perceives Indonesia as a moderate Islam country post the Jakarta protest. We are also going to analyse Indonesia’s foreign policy on maintaining its identity as a symbol of global moderate Islam.

The discourse on Islamic moderation in Indonesia commenced to be widely discussed by local Muslim communities after the 1998 reformation (Bakti, 2005), and getting more popular after the Bali bombing incident in 2002 (Umar, 2016). Jamhari Makruf (2011) briefly described moderate Islam as a value in Islamic movements that commits to democracy. It refers to the writings of Abdurrahman Wahid, one of the most prominent Muslim scholars in Indonesia, which stated that a moderate Islam movement would ensure the purity of national ideology and the indivisibility of the constitution. One would search from among its cultural heritage and religious faith for traits



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to be developed in the interest of supporting the state development (Wahid, 1985). Another moderate Islam scholar, Nurcholis Madjid, added that moderate Islam also promotes inclusivism and pluralism as its values (Bakti, 2005). Later on, moderate Islam is associated with the “accommodative, tolerant, non-violent, and flowering” stream of the religion.

The international society started to put an eye on the mass protest in Jakarta, November 2016. Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa MUI (GNPF MUI) and Front Pembela MUI (FPI) led the series of protest, known as “*Aksi Bela Islam*”. The two Islamic organisations are known as radical conservatives, judged from their reputation of being intolerant and violent, mostly towards non-Muslim communities and actions that they perceive as immoral (Burhani, 2016). The rallies were marked as a response to the statement by ex-governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who has been accused by both groups for blasphemy after quoting a Quran verse. *Aksi Bela Islam* is only a culmination point on the rising of extremism in Indonesia post-Reformation era (Varagur, 2017).

International media takes the momentum to contest the discourse of moderate Islam in Indonesia. Varagur, through an article publisher in Foreign Policy, argues that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a longstanding representative of Indonesia's pluralistic Islam seems to be collapsing at home. Burhani (2016) added that NU is still the main preference for public

services in the field of education and health, but they are no longer a reference in religious matter. Indonesia's image on its pluralistic and tolerant tradition are now challenged and waiting to see if Ahok's trial will help revive Indonesia's moderate Muslim establishment or mark the beginning of its end (Varagur, 2017). Furthermore, US News states that the blasphemy case against Ahok and the large-scale protests against him are threatening the reputation of Indonesia as a model nation for practising a moderate form of Islam (Emont, 2017). Recent court sentence to Ahok once again challenge Indonesia's moderate image. The Guardian and The Sydney Morning Herald describe this as a “shock sentence” and “shock verdict”, followed by the opinion that the recent dynamics was some kind of test on tolerance and pluralism in the world's most populous Muslim country (BBC Indonesia, 2017).

Albeit the international media is getting sceptical on the moderacy of Islam in Indonesia, we argue that *Aksi Bela Islam* has not changed the political image of Indonesia in global politics yet. Indonesian government is still persistent on maintaining its image among the international society by continuing to uphold liberal democracy values, mainly in its foreign policy. Islam and democracy are recognised as “soft power” in good image and identity making through public diplomacy (Sukma, 2011). Indonesia has been actively involved in several international forums, such as ASEAN Summit and Bali Democracy Forum to build this image. Even last year, Indonesia was a host of the International Summit of Moderate Islamic

Leaders (Varagur, 2016). Joko Widodo and his Vice President Jusuf Kalla brought this face of Indonesian Islam in separate international meetings on Islam. Joko Widodo attended Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh, while Jusuf Kalla delivered it at general lecture in Oxford Center for Islamic Studies of Oxford University (Suhada, 2017).

During his leadership, Joko Widodo stated, “Islam in Indonesia is a tolerant Islam, Islam in Indonesia is moderate, and we will continue to push for this: that our diversity, our pluralism in Indonesia will continue, that our people are united, that our country will continue to be developed and improve itself so that we will get better and better and better.” (Al Jazeera, 2017). As an addition, in the latest state visit by Mike Pence—Vice President of the USA—to Indonesia, he praises Indonesia’s tradition of modern Islam, also stated that it should be an inspiration to the world (Liptak, 2017). It shows that Indonesian government has always been promoting its image as the “good face of Islam” (Umar, 2016), and so far it has been successful. This effort needs to be maintained continuously since Indonesia is still perceived as an important actor in the global politics.

Aksi Bela Islam has reopened the discourse of moderate Islam in Indonesia. When the international media seems to start doubting the moderation of Indonesian Islam post *Aksi Bela Islam*, it would be too soon to judge if moderate Islam in Indonesia is failing. We cannot ignore the existence of Islamic values in Indonesian

foreign policy, which to large extent contains a huge contribution from the domestic society that is dominated by Muslims (Perwita, 1999). It means the majority of Indonesian Muslim society still upholds the values of moderate Islam, proven by the the direction of Indonesian foreign policy that is still recognised by the other countries as a model for other Muslim countries. However, *Aksi Bela Islam* is a wake-up call for Indonesia to start securing its image as one of the last moderate Islam countries in the world.

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IIS Publication Division
publication.iis@ugm.ac.id