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## **TRANSNATIONAL RELIGIOUS ACTOR AND MULTI-TRACK DIPLOMACY: A CASE STUDY FROM THE SPECIAL BRANCH OF NAHDLATUL ULAMA (PCINU) IN THE UNITED KINGDOM**

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### **Abstract**

*As the research on moderate Islam is very state-centric, we need an alternative understanding by exploring the role of non-state actors in the issue. This article aims to provide the view by identifying the transnational religious actors from Indonesia, especially the Nahdlatul Ulama, in promoting moderate Islam on the global stage amid ongoing bad image of Indonesia and that religion circulated among global citizens because of terrorism. The research consists of two layers of analysis. First, we identify several cases of terrorism and radicalisation affecting Indonesians, and to the extent they also impacted Indonesia's image. Second, we explore the role of the Special Branch of Nahdlatul Ulama (PCINU) in the United Kingdom, that is actively constructing the message that Islam is not what people perceive. It is worth noting that PCINU has been in more than 30 countries, one of them is in the UK. The writers of this article chose the PCINU UK as representing the Western world in which people have a limited understanding of moderate Islam, moreover when there was the 9/11 attack affecting negatively on Islam. To analyze it further, we conducted in-depth interviews with PCINU UK and used library research by collecting data from journals, reports, and news related to the topic. It found that while terrorism has contributed negatively to Islam and Indonesia's reputation, it is worth noting that PCINU in the UK plays a pivotal role in neutralizing the issue. NU is essential to bring another image of Indonesia and Islam that is modern and dynamic.*

**Key Words:** *Transnational religious actor, Multi-track diplomacy, Nahdlatul Ulama.*

### **Abstrak**

Mengingat penelitian mengenai Islam moderat sangat negara sentris, maka diperlukan pemahaman alternatif dengan mengeksplorasi peran aktor non-negara dalam isu ini. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi aktor-aktor religius transnasional asal Indonesia, khususnya Nahdlatul Ulama, dalam mempromosikan Islam moderat di kancah global di tengah buruknya citra Indonesia dan Islam yang beredar di kalangan masyarakat global karena terorisme. Penelitian ini terdiri atas dua poin pembahasan. Pertama, peneliti mengidentifikasi beberapa kasus terorisme dan radikalisme yang berdampak pada masyarakat Indonesia, dan seberapa besar dampaknya terhadap citra Indonesia. Kedua, peneliti mengeksplorasi peran Pengurus Cabang Khusus Nahdlatul Ulama (PCINU) di Inggris yang secara aktif membangun pesan bahwa Islam bukanlah apa yang dipersepsikan masyarakat. Perlu diketahui bahwa PCINU telah hadir di lebih dari 30 negara, salah satunya di Inggris. Penulis artikel memilih PCINU UK karena mewakili dunia Barat dimana masyarakatnya memiliki pemahaman yang terbatas terhadap Islam, terlebih lagi sejak serangan 9/11. Untuk menganalisisnya lebih lanjut, peneliti melakukan wawancara mendalam dengan PCINU UK dan menggunakan studi pustaka dengan mengumpulkan data dari jurnal, laporan, dan berita terkait topik tersebut. Artikel ini menyebutkan bahwa meskipun terorisme telah memberikan kontribusi negatif terhadap Islam dan reputasi Indonesia, perlu dicatat bahwa PCINU di Inggris memainkan peran penting dalam menetralkan isu ini. Peran NU penting untuk menghadirkan citra lain Indonesia dan Islam yang modern dan dinamis.

**Kata Kunci:** Aktor religius transnasional, Diplomasi multi-jalur, Nahdlatul Ulama.

## **1. Introduction**

According to Samuel Huntington, the primary source of conflict in the post-Cold War will be cultural. Huntington also mentioned nations and groups of different civilizations would compete for each other, and the clash of civilizations will dominate global politics (Huntington, 1993). One piece of evidence that seems very relevant to portray the conflict is the emergence of Islamist global terrorism, which an expert argued because modernisation was not able to fulfill its promises (Haynes, 2001). The groups have undermined the international order in terms of norms and values created by international institutions (Haynes, 2007). Global Terrorism Index 2024 revealed that there is an increase by 22% to 8,352 deaths because of terrorism, and it is the highest level since 2017 (Vision of Humanity, 2024). According to Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesian Muslim religious leader, this global phenomenon is actually related to 'world balance'. Gus Dur assessed that the roots of conflict and radicalism were because of Israel's occupation of Palestine. However, other factors were relevant to consider such as poverty, politics, economics, culture shock and so on. In general, they emerged to respond to the West.

In relation to that context, Indonesia is one of the countries that experienced terror attacks. The groups are trying to replace the Pancasila ideology with the Khilafah system. They proliferated because of Indonesian diaspora who have lived abroad, especially in the Middle Eastern countries, and they brought into Indonesia (Kumparan, 2018). Indonesia is a country that adheres to the world's largest Islamic religion. Islam is the majority religion in Indonesia. In 2021, the number of Muslims in Indonesia was 86,7%, equal to 231 millions people (CNBC Indonesia, 2023). With such a large number and a fairly diverse Islamic spectrum, Indonesia is vulnerable to polarization and waves of radicalization among its population. Furthermore, it also risks the image of Indonesia in the eyes of the world.

On the other hand, Indonesia, through one of the large organizations, namely Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), that spread throughout the world, is actively promoting moderate Islam. In international relations studies, the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is considered as soft power diplomacy, through programs and activities carried out aimed at promoting tolerant and peaceful Indonesian Islam at the international level (Hasanah, 2023). With the presence of the concept of moderate Islam, it is hoped that it will become an icon of Islam in Indonesia, namely an Islam that loves peace. Moderate Islam has now become the branding of Indonesia's foreign policy. Indonesia, through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, seeks to promote moderate Islam as part of Indonesia's foreign policy identity. Not only did the government use this as a tool for diplomacy, the non-state religious actors such as NU also took part in those activities by introducing a friendly, non-violent, tolerant and moderate Islam (Taufiq and Harisudin, 2022). It is interesting to examine further regarding NU's efforts abroad to promote the good image of Islam and Indonesia in the midst of a wave of terrorism. This paper focuses on the Special Branch of Nahdlatul Ulama (PCINU) in the United Kingdom, that is actively constructing the good image of Islam.

## **2. Literature Reviews**

'Transnational religious actors' was firstly demonstrated by Jeffrey Haynes to depict the emergence of religious actors in international politics, either to support international order or undermine the sovereignty of states. Jeffrey Haynes concerned the issue as to challenge the nature of International Relations studies that is very secularistic and criticized the Western social science that marginalized and 'privatized' religion (Haynes, 2009). In the meantime, International relations studies also put more attention on the role of states that have neglected the role of non-state actors in global interactions. Furthermore, the studies on transnationalism gave more attention on non-state actors that are involved in political and economic security. Because of this,

religion has got little attention (Haynes, 2001). However, globalization has made a strong contribution to the proliferation of religious actors. They interact with state and other groups, delivering their messages and objectives (Beyer, 1994). This paper focused on the transnational religious actors, namely Nahdlatul Ulama, that is actively promoting peace and moderate Islam around the globe.

Previous studies about the promotion of moderate Islam in the context of Indonesia were very state-centric. For example, Indonesia's foreign policy has internalized moderate Islam. It becomes 'common perception' and essential value (Purwono, 2018). Moderate Islamic identity also has the potential to bridge the gap between the West and Islam (Naim and Mokodenseho, 2023). Indonesia also empowered the value to collaborate with Middle Eastern countries which was welcomed by the region (Nursita, 2023). During Megawati Soekarnoputri and Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono's presidency, Indonesia made moderate Islam as a tool to send the message Indonesia did not support transnational terrorist networks. However, President Joko Widodo used this value to alienate Islamist groups at the domestic level. This article also shows that the content of the moderation discourse is uncertain because it depends on the interests of the political actors (Alvian and Ardhani, 2023). Furthermore, moderate Islam not only has an impact on the contestation of identity politics in Indonesia but also on Indonesian foreign policy. The moderate Islamic narrative is used in building relations with the Islamic world in overcoming the conflict that occurred in the Middle East (Arab Spring) and is also used to encourage reconciliation in Afghanistan and Palestine as well as establishing a more comprehensive partnership with the United Arab Emirates (Nursita, 2023).

Meanwhile, there has been some research that recognized the importance of non-state actors in that context of moderate Islam. Purwono (2020) shows that the concept of *Rahmatan lil Alamin* possessed by Nahdlatul Ulama is used in diplomacy through the International Ulama Conference. The event has made a positive contribution among the religious epistemic community, building networks and developing good relations between Islam and the West. Then, Budionto (2022) found that Gus Yahya and Gus Yaqut played a role in efforts to build peace and present a friendly and tolerant Islam both on a national and international scale. Hoesterey and James B (2023) examine public diplomacy initiatives in order to defend the idea of "moderate Islam and Indonesia's efforts to export "Islam Nusantara" throughout the Muslim world. Based on the literature reviews above, scholars have started to recognize the NU as transnational religious actors but we need more alternative understandings. A study case from the PCINU UK that actively constructs a good image of Islam and Indonesia amid the presence of global terrorism is essential to discuss.

### **3. Research Method**

This research used qualitative methods by exploring the two competing powers in constructing the image of Islam which are the Indonesian terrorists and the moderate organization namely the Nahdlatul Ulama abroad. It aims to answer to the extent NU's effort on the global stage to counter the bad image of Islam and Indonesia. To analyze further, the writers conducted a deep interview with Munawir Aziz, a Secretary of the Special Branch of Nahdlatul Ulama (PCINU) in the UK and also a coordinator for PCINU global media networks. As information, PCINU UK was established in the early 2000s. As based in the UK, it is interesting as the country represents the Western world in which people have limited understanding of moderate Islam moreover after the 9/11 attack. Therefore, it matters to analyze the NU's significant contribution in bringing the good image of Islam and Indonesia. To support our findings, we also conducted library research on relevant issues such as public diplomacy on moderate Islam.

#### **4. Discussion**

##### ***Terrorism and Indonesia's Bad Reputation***

Terrorism has affected the country's reputation negatively. Indonesia, as one of the countries that underwent the attacks, has to deal with the situation, making the foreigners doubtful of Indonesia's security. The 2002 Bali bombing was one example that left a dark memory among Indonesians and global citizens. The attack has caused 202 deaths in total, 88 people were Australians, 38 Indonesians, 23 British, 7 Americans, and other foreign citizens (SBS News, 2022). The casualties have been headlines in many global news reports. For example, the media in Australia continuously repeated the coverage of this incident which shapes the Australian public's perception of Indonesia as a country that is not safe for a tourist destination (Indriani and Prasanti, 2020).

Not only that, analysts especially from overseas are also paying attention to Indonesia as responses to several terrorist attacks in the country. The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP) released data on a list of countries most affected by global terrorism. Global Terrorism Index showed Indonesia was in 42<sup>nd</sup> position in 2018 with a score of 4.5, and is even in 23<sup>rd</sup> place with a score of 5.5 this year. The report states that Indonesia is in a 'medium' position, still far from Singapore which has 'no impact at all' due to terrorism. This means that Indonesia is not safe enough, and this can create a bad image of the country in the eyes of the world. Not only that, the West's view of Islam is quite worrying because of accusations such as being 'radical' and the perception that it is a religion that supports violence. The occurrence of terrorism in the world often makes Islam as a threat to world security. As the country with the largest Muslim population, Indonesia is affected by this perception.

On the other hand, the potential of radicalisation among the Indonesian diaspora has put Indonesia's reputation at risk as well. Migrant workers are one of communities who are vulnerable to being radicalized. There are several factors that influence this such as the low education and economic level, limited knowledge, and lack of skills. Terrorist groups made those as an opportunity to recruit new members because they offer a better condition (Prasetyo and Angelina, 2019). Considering the high numbers of Indonesian migrant workers, they are vulnerable to being radicalized. It is worth noting that The Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Agency (BP2MI) mentioned that high school or vocational high school graduates dominate the Indonesian workers; there were 103.293 workers in 2023. Meanwhile, there were 74.303 from junior high school graduates and 53.792 from elementary school. The high numbers of the workers, followed by the high risk of radicalization, would potentially threaten Indonesia's reputation.

Indonesians overseas affiliated to terrorism were not new. For example, The Security and Immigration Agency of South Korea arrested an Indonesian overseas worker in 2015 because it found some pictures related to Al Qaeda in his mobile phone. It also found knives, the M16 rifle and some books. The worker was detained because he might endanger the security condition (Kompas, 2015). Then, Malaysia and Singapore deported 88 workers to Indonesia in January 2017 after they were visiting Southern Thailand to learn Islam. Both countries found some images related to ISIS in their cell phones. It is worth noting that Southern Thailand is well known as a conflict zone where Islamist insurgency grows (Benar News, 2017). Meanwhile, a woman Indonesian Migrant Worker was jailed for two years in Singapore in 2020 because she donated 1.3 million rupiahs to an organization affiliated to ISIS (CNBC Indonesia, 2020). In 2016, The New National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) reported there were 500 Indonesian citizens in Syria to join ISIS (Antara, 2016). Even more, 1500 Indonesian citizens involved in terrorism action overseas as stated by the agency in May 2021 (CNN Indonesia, 2021). Considering the cases, Indonesia needs to work harder to improve its reputation and introduce

the good image of Islam that is modern and peaceful. It is worth noting there is a perception that Islam is not compatible with the western society. Western societies tend to portray Islam identically with ‘fanaticism’ and ‘aggression’ (DW, 2013).

### ***NU, Islam, and Indonesia’s Good Reputation***

Indonesia needs a more strategic measure to improve its reputation and the image of Islam. Nahdlatul Ulama as one of the largest Islamic organizations in the country plays a pivotal role in the issue because it represents moderate Islam, a dynamic value that condemns the acts of terrorism. In the overseas, NU is actively conducting various activities to promote the value. The Special Branch of Nahdlatul Ulama (PCINU) in the UK has an interesting trajectory. Having had an interview with the Committee Secretary of the organization, Munawir Aziz, the writers of this paper found as follows.

According to Aziz, originally, PCINU UK was established for ‘dakwah’ (teaching) ‘Islam rahmatan lil alamin’ (blessing for all humans and nature) and for consolidating the students or Indonesians diaspora in the country. Islam in the UK has developed for the last 20 years and it is predicted that there are 5% of Moslem. Interestingly, some Members of Parliament (MPs) are Moslem, reflecting structural and political change. The Moslem communities are diverse, and it is a home to Pakistani descents, Indians, Turkish, Middle East, and many more. They are very solid in developing mosques, but most importantly, they are very open to acculturation and modernisation as well as cosmopolitanism without losing the true essence of being Moslem (Aziz, 2023). Acculturation is one major topic among Western societies because of the ongoing perception that Islam is not fit to Western world. A study found that religious diversity, including the existence of Islam, would threaten Europe’s social cohesion (Koenig, 2023). However, the perception on Islam in the UK is different. Aziz mentioned local citizens in the UK view terrorism as a problem that does not have any correlation with religion but more see the damage due to the violence. They believe that any kind of action has legal consequences, the court would impose penalties.

Then, to what extent moderate Islam could neutralize the bad image of Islam? According to Munawir Aziz, moderate Islam emphasizes the middle path, avoiding the left or right extreme in interpretation. This value embraces all communities regardless of any identities. The PCINU UK contributed to various local activities such as facilitating religious gatherings in terms of ‘tahlil’ or an online joint prayer. It also sometimes conducts ‘pengajian’ (the Islamic Teaching) every Friday or month in the Indonesian Embassy in London. These activities are to introduce the understanding of religious moderation and disseminate *ahlus-sunnah wal jamaah an-nahdliyah*. Besides that, PCINU UK is involved in social and economic programs such as facilitating the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) among the Indonesian community in England, wedding, and funerals. It also holds an iftar event together during the month of Ramadan at the Southampton Mosque which is open to various groups including non-Muslims, local officials, church officials and even the homeless. This is essential to facilitate such dialogues among different religious groups to foster mutual understanding and peace. Furthermore, PCINU UK assists migrant workers who have difficulties. It is all to optimize the moderate Islamic preaching so that Indonesian citizens in England and local residents could enjoy the benefit.

The PCINU UK consists of various members that might be slightly unique compared to other PCINU in other countries. They are professional workers who work in international agencies, students, Indonesians who have become residents in England, and migrant workers. What makes it more interesting in PCINU UK is the presence of experts in science and economics. Although their members are voluntary, they have a significant contribution to knowledge development. Currently, it is now trying to promote digital transformation to make

communities and government more connected and integrated. It is part of soft power diplomacy that also involves professors in international campuses, and to consolidate PCINUs from various countries. The PCINU UK is supported by the Indonesian government. Along with the Indonesian embassy, it has collaborated on various programs such as holding the Islamic Teaching, inviting Muslim clerics and NU Muslimat tambourine group, as well as assisting the elections.

However, the PCINU UK has a challenge in maintaining its members because they do not live permanently in the UK. Members especially students only stay for several years meanwhile an organization needs a strong sustainability culture. In response to that, it provides a space for the Indonesian diaspora who have become permanent residents to become organizational administrators. Apart from that, it also maintains network connection with alumni who have returned to Indonesia to preserve good relationships.

So far, Nahdlatul Ulama is well-known as an organization that actively spreads moderate Islam widely, both in domestic and abroad. For Indonesia, the role of Nahdlatul Ulama is very important in carrying out public diplomacy to promote moderate Islam as one of Indonesia's foreign policies. It is important to involve non-state actors that have the ability to reach out to societies at grassroots level. Having the ability to influence public opinion as mentioned by Ali Cicek (2022), PCINU UK is essential to provide perspective beyond government for locals. It is expected the cultural activities supported by the organization could create a good reputation for Islam and Indonesia on a global stage.

## **5. Conclusion**

It found that while terrorism has contributed negatively to Islam and Indonesia's reputation, it is worth noting that PCINU in the UK plays a pivotal role in neutralizing the issue. NU is essential to bring another image of Indonesia and Islam that is modern and dynamic. It is interesting to look at the moderate value of Islam, which is well-known as neither extreme right nor extreme left. It is also powerful to counter terrorism and introduce Islam as a religion that is 'rahmatan lil alamin', especially among UK citizens. Indonesia, as one of the countries with the largest Muslim population in the world, has been the target of global terrorism since the 2002 Bali bombings. The Institute of Economics and Peace reported that Indonesia was ranked at 42nd in 2018 and 23rd in 2023 in the Global Terrorism Index. This shows that Indonesia is not safe enough. Apart from that, threats also come from Indonesian migrant workers abroad.

Factors such as level of education and economic reasons make migrant workers vulnerable to radicalisation. This problem is increasingly exacerbated by the number of cases of Indonesian citizens being detained abroad. BNPT recorded that as many as 1,500 Indonesian citizens were involved in acts of terrorism in overseas. This problem means that the government still has to work hard to improve its image as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. By looking at the role of the PCINU UK, we understand the importance of its contribution in various programs, from religious gatherings to social and economics as well as politics. Apart from that, PCINU UK has to deal with sustainability of its members, but the organization has a strategy by maintaining network connection among students and the Indonesian diaspora through digital transformation.

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