

Navigating against the surge of Salafism in Indonesia's Malay society

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Abstract

As a global movement, Salafism has transformed the religious landscape of the Malay world, which is commonly associated with moderate religious characteristics. While some scholars have found Malay acceptance of Salafi ideology in Southeast Asia, this article explains Salafi activism in Bangka Belitung and the resistance of traditional religious authorities to it. The paper utilises a qualitative approach, combining library studies of online and offline sources with field research through interviews. A comparative social movement perspective, particularly political opportunity structure and resource mobilisation, was used to gain a holistic comprehension of the topic. The study found that Salafi activism gained momentum with the establishment of Bangka Belitung as a new province and the changing structure of society, which provided room for Salafi activists to mobilise resources in *da'wah* (proselytisation) and education. To promote their ideology, recruit followers, and exert influence on Malay society, they conducted various activities, including religious gathering forums and learning circles known as *halaqah* and *dawrah* in mosques, the establishment of Islamic schools and pesantren, publication, and the use of communication and information technology. Although it remains small and exclusive, Salafi activism has confronted traditional religious authorities that tend to have a passive, tolerant attitude towards it. In general, they applied two main approaches: a preventive approach against Salafi ideological influence and a defensive approach to protect the internal Malay Muslim community, including strategic actions to avoid internal religious conflicts and maintain peace and harmony in the plural society.

Sebagai gerakan global, Salafisme telah memengaruhi lanskap keagamaan dunia Melayu yang selama ini dikenal memiliki corak keagamaan moderat. Meskipun sejumlah sarjana menunjukkan adanya penerimaan masyarakat Melayu terhadap ideologi Salafi di Asia Tenggara, artikel ini berupaya menjelaskan aktivisme Salafi di Bangka Belitung serta resistensi otoritas keagamaan tradisional terhadap gerakan tersebut. Artikel ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan memadukan studi pustaka terhadap sumber daring dan luring serta penelitian lapangan melalui wawancara. Perspektif teoretis gerakan sosial komparatif, khususnya konsep struktur kesempatan politik dan mobilisasi sumber daya, digunakan untuk memperoleh pemahaman yang menyeluruh atas persoalan yang dikaji. Studi ini menemukan bahwa aktivisme Salafi memperoleh momentum seiring dengan pembentukan Bangka Belitung sebagai provinsi baru dan perubahan struktur masyarakat setempat, yang membuka ruang bagi aktivis Salafi untuk memobilisasi sumber daya di bidang dakwah dan pendidikan. Untuk menyebarkan ideologi, merekrut pengikut, dan memperluas pengaruh di tengah masyarakat Melayu, mereka melakukan berbagai aktivitas, seperti forum pengajian dan lingkaran belajar yang dikenal sebagai halaqah dan daurah di masjid, pendirian sekolah Islam dan pesantren, publikasi, serta pemanfaatan teknologi komunikasi dan informasi. Meskipun gerakan ini masih relatif kecil dan eksklusif, aktivisme Salafi telah berhadapan dengan otoritas keagamaan tradisional yang cenderung menunjukkan sikap toleransi pasif. Secara umum, otoritas keagamaan tradisional menerapkan dua pendekatan utama, yaitu pendekatan preventif untuk membatasi pengaruh ideologi Salafi dan pendekatan defensif untuk melindungi komunitas internal Muslim Melayu. Kedua pendekatan tersebut mencakup langkah-langkah strategis untuk menghindari konflik keagamaan internal serta menjaga perdamaian dan harmoni dalam masyarakat yang plural.

Keywords: *Salafi activism, Malay Muslim society, Traditional religious authority, Bangka Belitung.*

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Introduction

The Malay world in general has experienced the dynamics of transnational Islamic movements challenging the long-established traditional Islamic authority and the Malay cultural system. Salafism literally refers to a puritan interpretation of Islamic faith and practice as understood and implemented by the Prophet Muhammad and the early generation of his followers (Malik, 2017). Formerly, it was called Wahabism, referring to Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab's (1703-1792) literalist and scriptural movement with strict monotheism, purification from syncretic and popular customs, and anti-Shi'ism. In the Malay Archipelago, it was known as *Kaum Muda* or the young people promoting the same puritan mission and hostility towards customary practices of the Malay communities, which they called *shirk* (polytheism) and *bid'ah* (religious innovation), and the traditional Muslim establishment since the nineteenth century, as opposed to *Kaum Tua* or the old people, namely the traditionalists. This has inevitably resulted in debates, polemics, and clashes between the two Muslim groups. Since Wahhabi is pejorative, term Salafi is preferred and becomes widespread (Hasan, 2018). Both terms Wahhabism and Salafism have been used interchangeably. Now, the term Sunnah is increasingly popular as the banner of the movement.

The myriad studies have been devoted to analysing Salafi phenomena in the Malay world, like elsewhere, either from doctrinal and ideological aspects, political development and influence (Hasan, 2018), socio-religious dynamics (Wahib, 2017), educational institution model (Wahid, 2014; Makruf & Asrori, 2022), or intra-faith relations among Muslims (Saparudin & Ermawati, 2023). In Malaysia Salafism has been a very important topic of research among Malaysian scholars (Mustapha & Mustapha, 2026). At state level, the country resists Salafism through strong resilience by defining state Islam, strong religious affairs control, and law enforcement mechanism (Abdullah, 2022). But some ruling elites were found to have ambivalent attitude and weak resistance towards Salafi teachings which may have provided a room for the proliferation of Salafi groups in

Malaysia. In addition to Middle Eastern and Western graduate factors, the introduction of the internet and the massive use of communication and information technology are instrumental for the substantive contribution of Salafi ideology (Malik, 2017).

In the post New Order Indonesia, the Malays experienced significant changes in political, social, and cultural lives due to political opportunity structures that provide rooms for the emergence of identity movements based on religious tendency, ethnicity, and locality. Many studies on the Malays in Indonesia tend to see the political instrumentalisation of ethnicity and religion in the context of local election like in the Riau Province, the Riau and Bangka Belitung Archipelagic Provinces (Long, 2013; Milner, 2008). Further, ethnicity has been contextualised in social and political processes in the urban community of Batam, the Province of Riau Archipelago (Syafri, 2010). Other studies have been devoted to analysing social harmony among Malays and Chinese ethnic groups (Idi, 2009; Sya et al., 2019). Scholars have highlighted Bangka as a model of social integration between Malays and Chinese group in Indonesia, where intercultural communication fosters sustainable peace integrating diverse communities effectively. In addition, as shown by Hasbullah et al., (2022) and Rosadi (2022), the Malay communities in Indonesia have witnessed the rise of Salafi movements which attracted a significant following. Hasbullah et al., (2022) reveals the acceptance of Salafi style of Islam among urban Malays in Riau due to effective strategies of Salafi figures and moderate character of Islam and moderate attitude of Malay Muslims while Rosadi (2022) suggests the psychological dimensions of Salafi acceptance such as a feeling of deprivation and spiritual emptiness among the youths. Furthermore, many studies have uncovered many forms of intra-religious conflicts between Salafi groups and the traditionalist majority in some communities in Indonesia like communal conflict in Aceh (Alhusni et al., 2024), while others identify associative types such as the bargaining position of the Salafi groups in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara

(Saparudin & Ermawati, 2023), negotiated coexistence among the people in East Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara (Jannah et al., 2025), and selective adaptation among the Muslim communities in Banten (Rusyadi et al., 2025).

Recently, the Malay society in Bangka Belitung has also witnessed the emergence of a small number of Salafi groups with its own style of physical and dress appearance, namely young men with long beards, Arab style of robes, turbans, and ankle-length trousers and women wearing black veil in the public, different from the Malay majority. Responses are varied. Most are certainly negative and this tends to create uneasiness and tension among populations, despite acceptance from some individuals. Neglecting the Malay majority's resistance to the new religious phenomenon, Hidayatullah et al. (2025) identify it as a form of Islamic identity negotiation of the global and local dimension of human life. The unique rural Islamic identity expression seems to ignore differences in religious doctrines uphold by either local teachers or new groups.

Therefore, this article focuses on two main issues: the emergence and development of Salafi activism in Bangka Belitung within the context of political decentralisation, social change, and the transformation of Malay Muslim society; and the responses of traditional religious authorities in preserving Islamic traditions, Malay customs, and social harmony. Based on this focus, the study aims to explain the social and political conditions that enabled Salafi activism to expand and to analyse the preventive and defensive strategies adopted by traditional religious authorities in responding to it.

Methodologically, this article employs a qualitative research design combining library research and fieldwork. The data were collected from scholarly literature, online and offline documents, institutional sources, and interviews with selected religious figures, community leaders, and local actors in Bangka Belitung. The analysis is guided by a comparative social movement perspective, particularly the concepts of political opportunity structure and resource mobilisation, to

understand both the expansion of Salafi activism and the responses of traditional religious authorities.

Salafism as a global movement

Salafism is an Islamic puritan movement with its puritanical ideology based on literal interpretation of the Qur'an and Prophetic Traditions, claiming the emulation of pious predecessors (*al-Salaf al-Shalih*) referring to the best generations of Islam, namely the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, the followers of the companions, and followers of the followers of the companions whose exemplary behaviours are considered as pious practices of religion reflecting authentic Islamic teaching (Makruf & Asrori, 2022). The basic doctrines of Salafism consist of *tawhid* (the Oneness of God), returning to the Qur'an and the Sunnah (Prophetic Traditions) and opposing the *bid'ah* (religious innovation), and *al-wala wa al-bara* (alliance and dissociation) which become the fundamental principles that are absolute and final (Rusli, 2025). As a form of reconstituted Wahhabism, Salafism strongly rejects the contextual and pluralistic interpretations of Islamic teachings, as promoted by moderate Muslim majority. It condemns strict adherence to a specific school of Islamic jurisprudence and theology, the practice of Sufism and Sufi orders (Malik, 2017).

Salafis also condemn Western and secular ideas and practices that are considered deviating from true Islamic doctrines. Accentuating the centrality of *tawhid* (the Onness of God) against *shirk* (polytheism), this movement struggles to purify Islam from any religious innovations or *bid'ah*. In the Indonesian context, Salafis attack any popular religious practices and traditions including Sufi rituals and visitations of grave (*ziyarah*) which are popularly called TBC (Tahayul Bid'ah Churafat/Khuraful), three packs of evil to be abolished, namely heresy, innovation, and superstition.

Salafi believes that secular worlds are sources of religious deviations and innovations (*bid'a*). Some Salafis argue that the spirit of Islam decreases because

Muslims are busy with their profane world. They also believe that the purity of Islamic teachings envisages two serious threats i.e. folk customs and western values. Folk customs become sources of religious innovations (*bid'a*) and superstitions (*keburafat*) which contaminate Islamic teachings by adding or reducing religious rituals (*shari'a*) and beliefs (*'aqida*). Some religious innovations which originate from customs such as *yasinan* (the recitation of the Qur'an Chapter 36), and *tahlilan* (prayers for the dead), in some occasions such as in mourning days (seven days, forty days, 100 days after the funeral) and several religious gatherings. These practices contaminate the pristine of Islamic teachings (Wahib, 2017).

Salafism is a global movement which has developed as a product of Saudi Arabia's enormously ambitious global struggle for the Wahhabisation of the Muslim world. It follows Wahhabi form of theology, jurisprudence, and approach which were then formulated by contemporary prominent Salafi authorities such as Abd al-Aziz bin Baz (1910-1999), Nasir al-Din al-Albani (1914-1999), and Muhammad bin Salih al-Uthaymin (1929-2001). They served as the main patrons of the Saudi state. The circle was established after the victory of Iranian revolution and its succeeding foundation of Islamic Republic of Iran, and Juhayman al-Otaybi's (1936-1980) attempt to take-over the Masjid al-Haram in 1979 (Hasan, 2018). The Saudi Salafi circles have enjoyed influence on some Muslims in the globe, from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia to the United States of America, Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Malik, 2017).

The Salafi movements are not monolithic. They may be classified into three categories, namely purists, politicians, and jihadists. The first group seeks to maintain purity of Islamic faith and practices concentrating on purification efforts through *da'wah* and education while avoiding political engagement. The second consists of those who are actively engaged in political engagement to implement the Salafi doctrines oriented to political power to ensure God's law.

The third group is jihadist Salafi attempting to create Islamic power by force without any compromise with the political and religious establishment in society (Wiktorowicz, 2006). The jihadists believe in the necessity of jihad to wage war for Islam. The three categories can be also called quietists, reformists, and jihadists (Hegghammer & Lacroix, 2007). In their development in Indonesia, the Salafi groups compete for the legitimate position of authentic Salafism which inevitable resulted in fragmentation and conflicts. The position is urgent to gain financial support from Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states. They split into two fractions, namely the Sururis following the Syrian Muhammad Surur al-Nayif Zayn al-‘Abidin (1938-2016) and the non-Sururis or the Yemenis strengthening the link to the Yemeni Muqbil ibn Hadi al-Wadi’i (1933-2001). Despite differences in orientation and alliance, they continue to receive financial support from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Middle Eastern countries (Hasan, 2018).

In Indonesia Salafism started to increase in the 1980s through Saudi-financed networks, namely DDII (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia or Indonesian Council for Islamic Propagation) and LIPIA (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab or Institute for Study of Islam and Arab, a branch of Muhammad ibn Saud University in Riyadh), founded in 1967 and 1980 respectively. These two institutions play a major role in the propagation of Salafism in Indonesia until today (Wahib, 2017). With the financial support from Saudi Arabia DDII actively sponsored the construction of mosques and Islamic educational institutions, in addition to sending Muslim youth to pursue learning at various universities in the Middle East such as Muhammad ibn Saud University, the Islamic University of Madina, and the University of Riyadh. LIPIA also provides scholarships for Indonesian students to study Salafi teachings. Graduates in turn became a new type of Muslim teachers with strong missionary zeal to propagate Salafism, establishing Islamic schools and pesantren which were also financed by philanthropic agents in the Middle East (Hasan, 2018). Among renowned Salafi institutions in Indonesia are As-Sunnah

Foundation, Majelis al-Turats al-Islami, and the Islamic Centre Bin Baz in Yogyakarta, Al-Sofwah Foundation in Jakarta, As-Sunnah Foundation in Cirebon, Al-Huda in Bogor, Nidaus Sunnah in Karawang, and the Wahdah Islamiyyah Foundation in Makassar (Iqbal & Zulkifli, 2020).

Along the de-politicisation of Islam Indonesia under the New Order regime witnessed the mushrooming of Islamic learning circles which was transformed as *tarbiyah* ('education') movement at university campus mosques such as ITB's Salman Mosque, UI's Abdurrahman Hakim Mosque, UGM's Salahuddin Mosque, IPB's Al-Hurriyah Mosque, ITS's Manarul Ilmi Mosque, and UNJ's Ulul Albab Mosque. "This campus-based Islamic movement aims to create pious Muslim cadres with unwavering loyalty and a scripturalist stance toward Islamic teachings" (Makruf & Asrori, 2022). Since mosque has become a centre of Islamic learning and civilisation in Islamic history, Salafi activists utilised it as a centre of their networks and a base for their political, religious, and intellectual movements (Makruf & Asrori, 2022).

This development was supported by the increasing number of Islamic publications including translated works by Salafi scholars from Arabic into Indonesian by returned graduates from Middle Eastern universities. The Islamic books dan magazines were circulated among campus activists using them learning material sources at study circles at campus mosques throughout cities in Indonesia (Makruf & Asrori, 2022). Some publishing houses such as Pustaka Azzam, Darul Falah and Pustaka At-Tauhid were established to publish and disseminate Salafi ideologies in order to reach extensive audiences. In addition, the proponents of Salafism have used the internet as important resources to propagate their ideas since the growth of the internet in Indonesia since 1990s. As many scholars have suggested, the internet has stimulated communication, expansion of networking, exchange of ideas, and publication, and promoting Salafi ideology. The Salafi use of the internet may include the internet as a medium of mission, a place of cyberwar, an instrument of response, and a

medium of linkage (Iqbal & Zulkifli, 2020). Thus, the internet and the widespread use of communication and information technology have been a substantive contributing factor to the development of Salafi movement in Indonesia.

The emergence of Salafi movements in Bangka Belitung

The emergence of Salafi movements in Bangka Belitung cannot be dissociated with the fall of the New Order regime in 1998, democratisation process, the establishment of Bangka Belitung Archipelagic Province on November 21, 2000, as an implementation of regional autonomy policy, and the changing social structure of Malay society. As widely known, the New Order's de-politisation of Islam led to the mushrooming of Islamic learning circles centred in university campus mosques which include *tarbiyah*, Hibut Tahrir Indonesia, and Salafi groups. Some university student activists from Bangka Belitung adopted these movements studying at universities in Java. Upon their return, they started to attract followers and spread their ideology within the community. The democratisation process as a part of political opportunity structures provided a room for them to propagate their ideology. Gradually, through various strategies, particularly the use of social media, coupled with advances in information technology, these religious movements gained a following (Zulkifli, 2021).

Like elsewhere in Indonesia, the Salafi movement in Bangka Belitung attempted to promote its teachings, attract following, and exert wide participants through religious gathering, learning circle, and lecture known as *halaqah* and *dawrah* in mosques, formal Islamic schools and pesantren, publication, and the use of social media and the internet. Religious gathering and lecture have been carried out at some mosques in Pangkalpinang such as Masjid Al-Tauhid, Masjid Al-Hujjah, Masjid Darul Ikhwan, Masjid Umar bin Khattab, and Masjid Baitul Arofah, in addition to Masjid As-Sunnah in Pangkalanbaru, Central Bangka, Masjid Baiturrahim in Sungailiat, Masjid Al-Ukhuwah in Belinyu, Masjid Al-Ihsan in Toboali, South Bangka (Interview with AS, 13 April 2026; Interview with SB,

12 April 2026). Several Salafi teachers from Jakarta, Aceh, Bogor, and other places in Indonesia were invited to propagate Salafi teachings at the above mosques. Some mosques were built up by Salafi activists as centres of educational and da'wah activities in their pesantren complex while others were seised from traditional Muslim community. Mosques have become important channel for propagation of Salafi teachings. "The Salafi movement used mosques as the basis for preaching and ideological networking" (Saparudin & Ermawati, 2023).

The propagation of Salafi ideology was also implemented through two models of Islamic education institutions, namely *tahfiz* pesantren focusing on the teaching of Salafism and the memorisation of the Qur'an and Integrated Islamic Schools focusing on the integration of the national secular subjects and religious subjects. The institutions are aimed at teaching Salafi faith and practice as well as establishing unique Salafi lifestyles such as dress, language, and social interaction. In the website of Indonesian Salafi school directory, there are ten educational institutions in Pangkalpinang, the Bangka Belitung Archipelagic Province, including five Integrated Islamic schools, three *tahfiz* pesantren, and one kindergarten (SekolahSunnah.com, 2026).

Under the umbrellas of Al-Tauhid Foundation led by Ali Agustian Bahri, there are Islamic kindergarten, Integrated Islamic schools from primary to senior high school level, in addition to *tahfiz* pesantren. Additionally, Al-Hujjah Foundation organises Integrated Islamic elementary and junior high schools. Compared to most public schools in the city, they are relatively elite education institutions labelled as 'excellent' schools that attract many middle-class urban Muslims. As Wahid points out, Salafi educational institutions also integrate secular subjects outlined by the government in the Salafi curricula and pedagogy on order for the students to pursue their learning at higher levels (Wahid, 2014). Other Salafi education institutions in Bangka Belitung include Pondok Pesantren Islamic Center Bin Baz and Pondok Pesantren Tahfiz as-Sunnah (Sulaiman et al., 2021) and Pondok Pesantren Utsman bin Affan in Koba, Central Bangka. The

tahfiz program has become a point of distinction for Muslim families in the region, like elsewhere in Indonesia. In short, the Salafi education models attract the interest and support from urban middle-class Muslims throughout Indonesia (Makruf & Asrori, 2022).

Thus, the education institution is the heart of Salafi movement in Bangka Belitung, which is a part of global Salafi movement. In Bangka Belitung the Salafi educational institutions have gained international financial support from Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern networks. Makruf & Asrori (2022) conclude: “The Salafi activities in Indonesia have been implemented through Salafi *manhaj* education that teach rigid *salafy aqidah* (faith) and create particular social life such as the way to dress, eat, and interact with people. The Salafi *manhaj* education—the Integrated Islamic School and the Salafi *manhaj* pesantren—have colored the Islamic education system in Indonesia”.

In addition to the field of education, Salafi teachings are disseminated through the publishing products of Salafi movements such as books and magazines like *Majalah as-Sunnah*, *Majalah al-Furqon*, and *Majalah asy-Syariah*. Salafi activists have also been actively engaged in propagating their ideology through internet and varied social media platforms. The skillful utilization of communication and information technology is an important contributing factor to the dissemination of Salafi ideology not only in Bangka Belitung but also elsewhere in the world. Another Salafi activity is the advancement of their own *da'wah* media such as Roja TV, Roja Radion, and Radio as-Sunnah, besides benefitting from the local television and radio. Marzuki et al. (2022) have emphasised that radio is very instrumental for disseminating Salafi ideas, ideology, and identity, different from other Islamic groups. Other Salafi activisms in Bangka Belitung include Babel Bertauhid, Bangka Mengaji, and Dakwah Tauhid Pangkalpinang (Sulaiman et al., 2021). Through their own media and institutions, the ideas of Islamic puritanism, rejecting popular religious traditions

and customs, were carried out in a strict and firm manner (Interview with SP, 14 April 2026).

The Salafi groups in Bangka Belitung are small and exclusive, with their preference in interacting with the members of their own group and participating in religious services at their own mosques. Fealy (2008) has suggested that they tend to maintain their group's exclusivity with distinctive lifestyles, religious symbols, and internal networks. They are reluctant to adapt to the Malay cultural system, refusing to accommodate local customs and traditions in the Malay majority and disobeying the dominant Malay culture. This differs sharply from research finding on Salafis in Banten who "selectively adopt, reinterpret, or contest Salafi teachings, underscoring that religious change is context-dependent and shaped by resilient local traditions" (Rusyadi et al., 2025). Besides challenging the Malay cultural systems, they tend to use Arabic words in some aspects of daily life because they believe that Arabic which is the language of the Qur'an is a symbol of piety (Wahib, 2017). Like Salafis in general, they are in the process of purification and Arabisation as the main elements of piety (Wahib, 2017).

The development of Salafi groups has affected the religious profile of Malay Muslim in Bangka Belitung. In 2024, there were at least 250 religious learning forums affiliated to transnational Islamist groups in the region (Personal Communication with SB, 16 June 2024). This is due to both internal and external factors. Hasbullah et al. (2022) suggest that the acceptance of Salafi teachings among the Malays in Riau was due "the Islamic Malay cultural values which have similarities with Islam, and the Islamic Malay communities' character which welcome any diversities." Besides psychological elements, namely deprivation and spiritual emptiness (Rosadi, 2022), there is also a lack of Islamic knowledge among those who accept Salafi ideas. Most of them never experienced a strong pesantren learning system and a lack of engagement in varied Malay customs and traditions. They generally are incapable of reading and understanding *kitab kuning* (literally means 'yellow book'), namely books written in Arabic script, either in

Arabic or in Malay, which is instrumental in Islamic knowledge. Most are also unfamiliar with aspects of Malay customs widespread in the Muslim community such as reading of Barzanji's *mawlid* and leading *tablilan*. This makes them easily exposed to Salafi teachings (Sofyan, 2026).

In addition to the various propagation approaches, the development of Salafi movement is due to accommodative attitudes of some local political leaders. The former governor Erzaldi Rosman Johan (2017-2022), for instance, was active in promoting the implementation of Shariah in every aspect of human life and providing a roof for Salafi activists to participate in his efforts (Zulkifli, 2024). Some Salafi activists took part in social and religious activities at the provincial office's mosque and other places in the province. The emergence of Salafi groups with their new ideas and solutions to social, political, and religious problems was to a certain extent accommodated by certain local elites in the context of changing society.

Salafi movement in Bangka Belitung is also an urban phenomenon. It mainly attracts urban Muslims from the middle class as its followers and proponents as well as those who send their children to Salafi educational institutions. Nearly all educational institutions are located in Pangkalpinang, the capital city of Bangka Belitung Archipelagic Province. Urbanisation as a result of establishment of the new province along with new state institutions and organisations which required new government officials and the changing structure of society indirectly contribute to the development of Salafi movement in the region. The number of Salafi followers in Bangka Belitung remains small and their influence is more visible in urban settings than in rural areas (Suparta, 2026; Irawan, 2026).

Resistance to religious authority

The emergence of Salafi movements has challenged traditional religious authority and community leaders in Bangka Belitung, resulting in uneasiness and feeling

threatened. There are several strategic actions implemented by them to protect the majority from being exposed by Islamic puritanism, to preserve the Malay cultural system, to maintain peace and harmony, and to avoid intra-religious conflicts in society. In responding to the Salafi movement, religious authorities tend to show passive tolerance, namely “the refusal to negatively interfere in disapproved conduct, characterised by nonbehavior or not acting against what one disapproves” (Adelman et al., 2022). Even though they disagree and are not happy with Salafi activities, they tend to just let the activities go as long as they do not cause unrest and conflict in society and do not openly and harshly criticise traditional Muslim religious practices. This condition creates the absence of contact, dialogue, and cooperation between both traditional religious authorities and Salafi activists. This absence may be called passive coexistence between them.

The reactions of traditional religious authorities can be classified into the preventive approach against the influence of Salafi ideology on the Muslim community and the defensive or protective approach, namely the protection of internal Muslim community. In the preventive approach, traditional religious authorities attempt to limit the space for Salafi participation in religious ritual leadership, religious activism, and social fields. Realising the fact that Salafi activists attempted to take over the control of mosque management, they never give an opportunity for them to lead prayers, to deliver sermons at Friday prayers, or to become preachers at religious gathering. This action is taken based on some cases of conflict between the Malay community members and Salafi activists regarding mosque management like Al-Amanah Mosque which then became Umar Bin Khattab Mosque in Pangkalpinang, in addition to the smooth seizure of some others. Mosque has become a contested place that has resulted in internal religious conflict (Asy’ari, 2013). In most cases of seizure of mosque management control, local Muslim leaders were forced to accept the reality for the sake of peace and harmony in society. This tolerant attitude is in line with the Malay cultural system (Irawan, 2026), in response to Salafi movements not through

confrontation but through the Malay ethic of *damai bermartabat* (peace with honour). Their restraint is not weakness but moral wisdom, namely a lived manifestation of Islamic moderation (Asy'ari, 2013).

To reduce the influence of Salafi groups, the provincial branch of Indonesian Council of Ulama tends to exclude them from the organisational leadership structure of the Council. Some Salafi activists were even dismissed from the institutional units under the local MUI although they criticised the policy (Zayadi, 2026). This action to cleanse elements of international Islamic groups was taken because the MUI leaders have moral concern to preserve the interest of the Malay Muslim majority with its Islamic traditions and Malay customs in Bangka Belitung.

But some Salafi activists themselves were not quietist. They even attempt to express their identity when there are opportunities. They were for instance engaged in arising religious issues to the public like Ahmadiyya group in Sungailiat in 2016, urging political and religious authorities, particularly the Indonesian Council of Ulama to prohibit its existence and activities. The local MUI tends to have a careful attitude in responding to their action because it is considered as a part of their global puritan movement. In addition, they frequently criticise the local MUI for having fully supported the government programmes in the social, cultural, and health fields. The local MUI was likely to ignore their criticism because of its role as a strategic partner of the government assisting the success of the implementation of community development for the prosperity and welfare of Indonesian society.

Traditional religious authorities generally choose the defensive approach which includes at least five actions. First is the strengthening of traditional Islamic teachings through Islamic educational institutions such as pesantren and madrasah. The majority of Muslims in Bangka Belitung are adherents of traditional Islam, namely Islam that is strongly bound to the thoughts of ulama of the 7th and 13th centuries who were authorities in Islamic jurisprudence,

Prophetic Traditions, Quranic exegesis, Islamic theology, and Sufism (Dhofier, 1982). Traditionalist Muslims basically follow the integrated system of Ash'ari theology, Shafi'i jurisprudence, and al-Ghazali's morality and Sufism or adhering to the principles of Sunni Islam or *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah* (ASWAJA), like Indonesian Muslim in general. Ash'ari theological, jurisprudential, and Sufi system begins with the belief in the six pillars of faith, five pillars of Islam, and one virtue (*ihsan*), as shown in the Prophetic Tradition on the trilogy of Islamic teachings which is generally memorised by madrasah or pesantren students. The belief system is simply formulated in the popular form of Knowledge of Twenty Attributes (*Ilmu Sifat Dua Puluh*). The jurisprudential dimension follows Shafi'i tradition which has strong Sufi characteristics. *Ihsan* is the highest level of all dimensions as it defined as the condition that you worship God as if you see Him and if you cannot see Him, God sees you. Most pesantren in Bangka Belitung are also affiliated to traditional Islam (Zulkifli et al., 2022). Some pesantren continue to teach *kitab kuning* (literally, yellow books), namely books written in Arabic script, either in Arabic or in Malay, which is instrumental in disseminating and strengthening traditional Islamic faith practice. Nurul Muhibbin Pesantren in Kemuja, Bangka, is even dedicated only to teaching the *kitab kuning* as material sources of learning. It is generally believed that those who are educated in such pesantren have good Islamic knowledge and strong commitment to protect themselves and members of Muslim community from being influenced by Salafi ideology.

Second, many religious teachers and ulama have been devoted to maintaining Islamic traditions of Malay Muslim community through religious gathering or *pengajian* and learning forums or *majlis taklim* in order to protect the Muslim community from being exposed by Salafi ideas. Historically and sociologically, traditionalist Muslims tend to practice the unity of Islam and customs in daily life (Zulkifli, 2007). As Sefriyono (2020) has maintained, Malay Islam evolved as a moral project rather than a legalistic regime. It is an integration

of jurisprudence, Sufism, and *Adat* that generated a culture of balance between divine command and human welfare. This synthesis aligns with the Qur'anic ideal of *ummatah wasatan* (a community of the middle path) which has guided Malay spiritual and social life since the earliest stages of Islamisation. They continue to lead religious learning forum in mosques, prayer houses, dan Muslim's houses, both regular religious learning forum and religious preachings at the celebration of Islamic holy days such as the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, the Muslim new year, the Isra' and Mi'raj, and the Revelation of the Qur'an (Zulkifli, 2007). For some traditional religious teachers, the threats from Salafi groups have increased their awareness of the importance of strengthening defensive power in the Malay community. For instance, Majlis Yasin & Tahlil led by K.H. Ali Wafa is a religious learning forum that is actively engaged in the attempts to bolster traditional Islamic traditions such as *tahlil* (prayers for the dead), *ziyarah* (visitation of graves), and *salawat* (salutations to the Prophet Muhammad) through its regular Thursday Night religious activity in mosques in Pangkalpinang (Suwaidi, 2026). K.H. Ali Wafa is a renowned ulama who leads Miftahul Khoiroh Pesantren in Pangkalpinang and actively delivers religious preaching and lectures in the Muslim community.

Third, the Sufi orders (*tarekat*) have played a major role in the maintenance of Islamic traditions in Bangka Belitung which functions to resist the influence of Salafi ideology. The most influential tarekat in Bangka Belitung is Sammaniyyah associated with its founder, Shaikh Muhammad Samman al-Madani (1718-1775). Students of Abdussamad al-Palimbani (1737-1832) and Muhammad Azhari ibn Abdullah al-Palimbani (1856-1932), renowned Sammaniyyah murshid in Palembang, spread Sammaniyyah teachings in Bangka. Similarly, some famous Banjarese ulama particularly Shaikh Abdurrahman Siddik (1857-1939) contributed to the dissemination of the Sufi order in the region. Recent developments of the tarekat were the establishment of a branch of Muhammad Umar bin Zainal Abidin's Majlis Taklim Ummatu Wahidah in

Pangkalpinang, in addition to Kms. Zamhari bin Muhammad Zen's regular religious learning forum in Muntok, West Bangka. They taught the teachings of the Sammaniyyah and practise their rituals. The influence of Sammaniyyah tradition in the Malay Muslims in Bangka Belitung is evident in the popular reading of Samman Manaqib or hagiography of Shaikh Muhammad Samman in varied occasions and purposes (Zulkifli, 2025). Other tarekat that gain following in the region include the Qadiriyyah-Naqshabandiyyah, a combination of the two Sufi orders by Ahmad Khotib Sambas (1803-1875), and the Tijaniyyah founded by Ahmad al-Tijani (1739-1815). The teachers of the tarekat not only teach the Sufi teachings to their members but also deliver religious preaching to other Muslim community at large. Their contribution is also to preserve the practice of Islamic traditions and Malay customs. This is in accordance with Rubaidi et al., (2023) conclusion that the Sufi orders "... succeeded in its efforts to defend the traditional Sufi spirit of a tolerant and inclusive *Islam damai* [peaceful Islam] which is more in line with the local culture and forms a strong bulwark against radical Islamist groups and their intolerant ideologies".

Fourth, the moderate socio-religious organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, as the main pillar of traditional Islam, participated in the implementation of religious moderation programmes (Kementrian Agama, 2019) in the framework of reinforcing the moderate and inclusive religious thought and practices in the Muslim community although throughout history renowned ulama and Islamic scholars in Bangka Belitung have also served as role models for the community in implementing religious moderation (Zulkifli, 2021). LTMNU (Lembaga Takmir Masjid Nahdlatul Ulama or Institute for Mosque Management of NU) for instance had regular mosque visits to promote moderate style of Islam and to maintain rituals and local cultural traditions in Bangka Belitung such as *nganggung* (bringing food in a tray to the mosque, prayer house, or village hall to be eaten together after the religious ritual), *yasinan* (the recitation of the Qur'an Chapter 36), *tahlilan* (prayers for the dead), *rumahan* (the commemoration of the dead on

the fifteenth of Sha'ban or fifteen days before the fasting month of Ramadan), *mauludan* (the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), and others (Sulaiman et al., 2021). In addition, the NU of Bangka Tengah managed a socialisation programme of the prevention of radicalism, intolerance and terrorism among the young generation on 16 March 2023. This is conducted because the millennials are a group vulnerable to radical ideologies and intolerant movements, particularly through the internet and social media, so that NU should take part in fostering moderate and peaceful Islam and mitigating the potential for radicalism among them (Lintasbabel.inews.id, 2023).

The fifth is the consolidation of local religious leaders and teachers to promote moderate Islamic faith and practice. This is conducted to coordinate religious activities including topics, contents, and actors suitable to the principle of traditional Islam and Malay customs. Due to feeling threatened by transnational Islamist ideology, some informal conversation and discussions on this topic took place among the local division of Ministry of Religious Affairs, the provincial leaders of MUI, the local branch of NU, intellectuals, and religious teachers to counter the expansion of Salafi ideology and maintain social harmony in the Muslim community. Cooperation, coordination, and consolidation among them are very instrumental in strengthening the defensive power of the Muslim community because Salafi activists for instance can easily take over mosque management from the divided community or those with weak ties and the infiltration of Salafi ideas may easily take place among them (Suparta, 2026). Therefore, the unity of religious authorities, state apparatus, and community leaders greatly contributes to the maintenance of moderate Islam and Islamic tradition in the Malay community.

Thus, in response to Salafi activism, both preventive and defensive approaches are instrumental to reduce its influence and expansion, preserve the sustainability of Islamic traditions and Malay customs, as well as to maintain peace and harmony in the changing plural society.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that Salafi activists in Bangka Belitung have mobilised their resources in the field of *da'wah* and education in the context of political opportunity structures of the establishment of new province and changing Malay society. They have attempted to promote its ideology, recruit followers, and exert extensive participants through religious gathering forum and learning circle which are popularly known as *halaqah* and *daurah* in mosques, the model of Islamic educational institutions, namely Islamic schools and pesantren, publication, and the use of the internet. Although the movement remains relatively small and more visible in urban settings, it has influenced the religious dynamics of Malay Muslim society.

The study also demonstrates that the expansion of Salafi activism has challenged traditional religious authorities and the established Malay Muslim cultural-religious order. In response, traditional authorities have generally avoided open confrontation and adopted passive tolerance, preventive strategies, and defensive strategies. These responses are aimed at limiting the influence of Salafi ideology, strengthening traditional Islamic institutions and practices, preserving Malay customs, and maintaining social harmony.

These findings contribute to the study of Salafism in Southeast Asia by showing that Malay Muslim society is not merely a passive recipient of transnational Islamic movements. Rather, the case of Bangka Belitung shows how local religious authorities negotiate, limit, and resist Salafi activism through culturally embedded and institutionally grounded strategies. Future research should conduct comparative and multi-sited studies to examine different patterns of acceptance, negotiation, resistance, and coexistence between Salafi groups and traditional Muslim authorities in other Malay societies.

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