

Contestation of Islamic Discourses: Responses of West Sumatra Scholars to Contemporary Religious Discourses

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Abstract

This study aimed to elucidate Islamic discourses and the responses of scholars, particularly in West Sumatra, to contemporary religious issues. A qualitative and a socio-anthropological method was adopted. The result showed that the tug-of-war in religious discourses in West Sumatra was both negotiating and confrontational with a dynamical and sharply dialectical religious discourse. In West Sumatra where religion was considered as life philosophy, scholars were placed in a highly central position in confronting the dynamics in the community. Consequently, the responses of scholars were significant and transformative with substantial strength.

Keywords: *Contestation, Religious, Contemporary, Scholars.*

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Introduction

Indonesian Islam is a battleground for ideological clashes where diverse religious discourses and ideologies thrive and evolve. Despite the geographical distance from the Islamic center, the country does not affect the importation of both extremist and moderate religious discourses. The connections between Middle Eastern scholars and Indonesian Islam have been established for centuries and continue to shape the dynamics and clashes of religious ideologies among Muslims. Given the fertility of Indonesian ground for inculcating various ideologies, it is expected to have far-reaching consequences.

Various humanitarian issues arise, inseparable from the loss of spiritual space in modern human life. As a result, the previously glorified modernity has rendered humans rigid, dry, and empty due to the loss of genuine meaning and life purpose. The true purpose of life is in spirituality, which is the deepest aspect of human existence. Spiritual fervor arises when individuals experience decline while competing in the world of modernism (Putra, 2019). Therefore, religion is reconsidered as a therapy for contemporary humanitarian crises. Some individuals doubt its positive function as a therapy for contemporary humanitarian crises. This is because certain acts of violence, exclusivism, and various violations of universal human values are committed in the name of religion.

Socio-cultural changes over the past four decades have shaped new worldviews and orientations of interest in the Indonesian community. Alongside these changes, as a nation characterized by significant religious diversity and tradition, religion is often a tool for legitimizing the status quo or reform, borrowing Mun'im Sirry's terminology (Mun'im Sirry A., 2003). According to Carool Kersten, the post-1998 opening of the democratic floodgates became a locus for the growth of new religious discourses in the public sphere. The initially proclaimed reform ideas ignited a broader contestation of religious discourses. This reality provided opportunities for new actors to play the roles even in the massive use of public space in the democratic era. The discourses forced to the surface concern socio-political issues and, more deeply, the essence of Islam as a religion (Kersten Carool, 2018).

Alternative discourses draped in religion, proposed with the hope of shifting dominancy, have resulted to heated debates in local discursive space. One of the agents that actively participates in producing and resisting the propagation of the discourses is scholars (Alfian, 2019). The presence of new actors, with the competencies enhanced by the widening public space, does not diminish the significance of scholars. Borrowing Pierre Bourdieu's language, *doxa* are considered the primary authorities to interpret the will of God in the community. The actors play a highly significant role in determining, directing, and responding to religious doctrines operating in the Islamic community. The personal and intellectual integrity allows their religious narratives to be quickly and easily accepted by the community. Historical records attest to the central role of scholars in social, political, and religious life, as authorities in movements, formulators of aspirations, and occasionally participants in resistance against colonization.

Scholars, as the social elite in the Islamic community system, play a central role in the development of Islamic education and the religious knowledge produced. They function as experts in Islam, serving as a reference on various religious matters and individuals respected by the community. Scholars also serve as a group of experts in Islam traditionally functioning as preachers or teachers and also a resource for the Islamic community to seek guidance when facing various issues. In this situation, there is a bridge in Islamic teachings as outlined in the holy Quran, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (hadith), and the classical books left by previous scholars to the community. Therefore, the role of scholars is synonymous with educators in a broad sense and educates the Islamic community through the dissemination of teachings and setting examples through behavior (Ahmad Suja'i and Muhammad Amir Baihaqi, 2022).

The contribution of scholars to the development of the Islamic community in recent times is evident in the benefits related to interfaith dialogue, specifically in Indonesia. Interfaith dialogue is crucial for two main reasons, namely, first the issue of religious pluralism in the world is an increasingly evident reality (Martin Ramstedt, 2019). The second reason is the interfaith dialogue that

helps each participant grow in their own beliefs when encountering individuals of different religions and exchanging thoughts on the practices of each religion. With the presence of pluralism, scholars play a significant role in providing understanding to the community to mutually respect and coexist harmoniously (Khoirul Anwar and Muhammad Afdillah, 2018).

Historical perspectives showed that the Minangkabau community and scholars have been intensively interacting with Islam from the beginning. In the course, the contestation of religious understanding led by scholars has manifested in both confrontational and negotiating forms. Bloody conflicts, as widely known in the events of the Padri War, to the formulation of the life philosophy “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*” (customary law based on Islamic law, Islamic law based on the Quran) signifies that the dynamic and dialectic discursive process of religion in West Sumatra (Roby Algi and Wira Ramashar, 2022).

Reflecting on the past that shaped the establishment of the Minangkabau life philosophy, religious issues occupy the highest pyramid compared to other life structures and elements. This reality also explains the significant role of scholars in the socio-political and religious changes in West Sumatra. Subsequently, scholars become the main axis in both producing and controlling religious matters. The presence of actors as the epicenter of role models, consciously or unconsciously, has a significant magnitude for the community to rely on and reference in adhering to guidance (Ferry Adhi, 2018).

The intellectual contributions of scholars in religious understanding have influenced a significant portion of culture and dominated the concrete behavior of the community life. At this level, it is intriguing to delve deeper into various responses of West Sumatra scholars to contemporary religious discourses, as well as the instruments that underlie their acceptance and rejection. The examination of this particular issue is deemed crucial and warrants comprehensive study, owing to a multitude of significant and far-reaching implications. *First*, in the Indonesian context, West Sumatra is known for the strong religious identity. *Second*, generally, scholars in the Islamic community hold a significant position and further

become actors in mapping the religious social structure as in the Minangkabau life philosophy “*adat basandi syara’, syara’ basandi Kitabullah*” (Yohanis, 2020). *Third*, religious discourses continue to unfold as academic study evolves according to the changes in modern social, economic, and political structures (Rahmat Syahrul, 2021).

Method

This field study used a qualitative descriptive-analytical and socio-anthropological method. Data were collected using interviews with several scholars from West Sumatra, representing specific groups and field observations related to contemporary religious issues. The data were processed and analyzed to draw conclusions according to the raised problems.

Results and Discussion

The dominant religious discourses among Muslims are often considered as taken for granted (Jean Marie Donegani, 2018). However, through a deep and critical examination, every piece of knowledge experiences a lengthy process to be acknowledged as a truth. According to Berger and Luckmann, human actions and interactions in social space constitute elements that construct an objective reality. This shows that standardized reality is built in human subjective definitions through intensive interaction processes.

Humans exist in both objective and subjective realities. In this objective reality, humans are structurally influenced by the environment inhabited but are seen as organisms with specific tendencies in the community, in terms of the objective reality. In objective reality, the direction of human development is socially determined from birth to adulthood and old age. Therefore, there is a reciprocal relationship between humans and the social context that shapes the identity until the occurrence of habitualization. In subjective reality, individuals engage in the social environment, and assume control over the social world, which has been shaped according to creativity (Adhi, 2018).

According to Peter L. Berger and Luckmann, Burhan Bungin stated that the dialectic between individuals created the community and vice versa. This dialectical process occurred through the

externalization, objectification, and internalization (Bungin Burhan, 2008).

Religion experiences the process of objectification, such as existence in texts or becomes values, norms, and rules. These texts or norms are subjected to the process of internalization into humans because religion has been interpreted by the community to be its guidance. Furthermore, religion experiences the process of externalization as it becomes a reference for norms and values that function to guide and control the actions of the community (Berger P. L. and Luckmann, 1999).

In the ever-heated political situation, mutual suspicion arises, specifically in matters of religion, leading to accusations and justifications. The phenomenon of suspicion has a significant impact on tension in religious matters and leads to claims of an individual truth. Religious and national issues are two sides that cause the disintegration of the nation expressed through violence due to the religious egocentrism practiced by each follower (Riki Saputra, et al., 2020). These issues require a new formula in the form of a new epistemology that should be advocated by scholars to overlap with their respective religions. Engaging in religion is a shared commitment to maintaining a perfect balance where every community in Indonesia, regardless of ethnicity, race, or belief, should listen to each other. According to (Riki Saputra, et al., 2022), it is expected that the community can coexist with tolerance and unity in both religious and societal aspects through religious moderation with a new epistemology.

Berger identified deviations in the use of religion as an object to legitimize individual actions, followed by the institutionalization in the social environment of the community. According to Berger and Luckmann, there is reality and knowledge in the community. Both acknowledge the construction of social reality when it is legitimized using religious values. In essence, religious reality is absolute because it is based on faith values and is susceptible to worldly motives.

In the moment of externalization, social order or the space of contestation is a human product or, more precisely, human production

that occurs condusively. Human existence should be continually externalized in activities. In this context, humans need to strive for or endeavor to establish relationships with their social environment (Qihai Cai and Aya Okada, 2021). This starts with interaction or the institutionalization of humans with the environment and the practice in daily life. Meanwhile, the objectivity of institutional worlds is created and built by humans.

The Influence of Scholars in West Sumatra Community

The position of scholars in West Sumatra is significant, high, and capable of influencing the religious, social, and political discourses in the community. West Sumatra, which considers religion as the societal life philosophy, accepts the consequences of scholars' position. Religion, traditional leaders, and the government share power in defining the attitudes of West Sumatra community. However, the authority of scholars can have a greater influence, specifically on issues related to religion itself. This influence has become more pronounced in recent times, where their strength often affects decisions taken by the government. Furthermore, the opinions of scholars are often stronger and more listened to than the policies of the government.

The concept of *Tigo Tungku Sajarangan* is actualized in the Minangkabau Traditional Meeting Institute (LKAAM), West Sumatra Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), and Cadiak Pandai represented by the government and intellectuals (Dyan Chlaudina, 2021). These three organizations oversee and shape institutions in the community, thereby playing a significant role in West Sumatra. Scholars cannot be overlooked when determining the direction of development in West Sumatra, which also contributes significantly to the influence of scholars in shaping policy directions.

To what extent are scholars in West Sumatra open or closed to religious ideologies?

In addition to holding significant authority, the religious groups in West Sumatra are quite diverse, resulting in difficulty in determining which group wields the most influence. Each group has a small-scale influence in their respective territories formed in the *nagari-nagari*. When responding to broader contemporary discourses,

vocal voices are more noticeable in the attitudes taken by the West Sumatra MUI, as a formal entity representing the position of scholars in Minangkabau customs.

New values and discourses from external sources are always filtered and experience sharp dialectics with existing cultural values. The currents in West Sumatra do not allow every discourse to be presented in a profane manner. External influences are shaped first and accepted when there is consistency with the culture of West Sumatra itself. Dramendra, a Minangkabau religious figure, stated (Dramendra, Interview, 2022):

“Minangkabau is a region that still strongly adheres to traditions and customs based on ‘adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah.’ Therefore, Minangkabau is not closed to the possibility of being open to cultures coming from outside as long as they align with Islamic teachings and do not deviate”.

Since Islam became dominant in West Sumatra starting from the 16th century, it has experienced significant developments. In the early days of Minangkabau, the Sufi community played a significant role in spreading Islam. Sheikh Burhanuddin, the murshid of the Syattariyyah order, began teachings in Ulakan Padang Pariaman located in a surau or mosque. Surau was not a contribution to Minangkabau because it existed before Islam entered West Sumatra. However, Islam played a significant role in reforming the function of surau.

Religious groups in West Sumatra are grouped into three categories. *First*, the Traditional Groups are represented by various order groups spread across every region in West Sumatra. These groups are considered the first to appear in West Sumatra. Islam was introduced by Sheikh Burhanuddin Ulakan in the 16th century in Pariaman from Aceh. Sheikh Burhanuddin was a teacher of the rapidly growing Syattariyyah order, especially in Pariaman. At least three major orders are present in the traditional community in West Sumatra, namely Syattariyyah, Naqsabandiyyah, and Qadiriyyah. *Second*, the Moderate Groups are represented by various Islamic organizations as well as students from schools and Islamic

universities in West Sumatra. There is a wide variety of religious organizations, including West Sumatra MUI, Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and the Islamic Education Union (PERTI). The moderate groups are much more modern and structured. These groups operate systematically, adapt to the identity of the community, and are generally active in urban areas but also have branches in rural areas. *Third*, the Fundamentalist Groups (Hardline Islam) do have significant influence in the community. Although relatively small in number, their influence is profoundly felt and highly significant. These groups can infiltrate institutions that shelter their existence and serve as vehicles to achieve objectives. After the fall of the New Order, the fundamentalist groups strengthened the power in West Sumatra under the pretext of freedom of thought and expression (Zainal, “Gerakan Islamis di Sumatera Barat Pasca Orde Baru”, MIQOT XXXVIII, No. 2 (2014): p. 449). These groups grew rapidly due to the introduced discourses and West Sumatra has always respected anything with a pure religious essence. Therefore, the presence of fundamentalist groups, adorned in robes, is readily accepted in West Sumatra. It also shows a stagnation of thought with conservative and opportunistic attitudes. Among these groups are Hizbut Tahrir, Salafis, Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), and the Committee for the Enforcement of Islamic Sharia (KPSI) in West Sumatra (Zainal, 2014).

The diversity of these religious groups makes West Sumatra a contestation field for Islamic discourses in the framework of “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*.” This implies that every religious ideology still be accommodated in the contestation of religious discourses. In other words, scholars in West Sumatra are considered quite open to the accommodating attitudes.

Background of openness and closedness

Islam in Minangkabau is not a recent arrival, tracing the interaction with the religion back to ancient times. According to Hamka, Islam first entered West Sumatra or Minangkabau in the 16th century. The long-standing interaction with Islam has given rise to various events, such as altering the community structure and causing conflicts. However, as an open community, Minangkabau is highly receptive to such changes. While their cultural norms are firm, the community

has long been aware that customs and cultures can evolve with the times. Two values are contained in the customs of Minangkabau, namely spiritual and practical. In specific forms, practical values may change but spiritual values should be preserved. This is evident in the successful consolidation between customs and Islams in West Sumatra. Islam arrived and influenced the customs of West Sumatra, then both became the guiding principles to this day.

The democratic culture ingrained in the community is the background for this openness. The community is accustomed to deliberation in decision-making where consensus is the highest form of policymaking (Suprpto, 2021). This longstanding democratic climate has made West Sumatra an open field for the contestation of religious ideas. The long-lasting contestation deeply rooted in the community life can often backfire. In some aspects, Minangkabau scholars are unprepared to evolve and compete, thereby selecting a cautious or even non-compromising path toward new discourses. Riki Dhamparan P, (2020) stated that *“This is due to the pride of scholars in West Sumatra who feel the most and have long been ‘Islamic,’ hence innovations like these are deemed no longer essential”*.

Responses of Scholars in West Sumatra to Contemporary Religious Discourses

The influx of culture and discourse from outside is unavoidable in the globalization era. The more open nature of the community leads to easier interactions between cultures and discourses. This is inseparable from the paradigm that the modern community (post-modern in philosophical literature) no longer desires something concrete and everything is perceived relative. This weakening of control culture occurs naturally due to these tendencies.

Scholars in West Sumatra tend to be confrontational in a situation where the discourses contradict the principle of *“adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah”* and can be conservative at times. Despite the accommodative values, scholars take a firm stand against contrary values to ABS-SBK. The culture of West Sumatra has consistently exhibited a pronounced dialectical, with a tug-of-war of values, influences, and discourses. Particularly, external influences are not solidified in this region. The condition

has persisted for a long time and became visible when Islamic values tried to exert their influence on the Minangkabau community in a challenging manner.

West Sumatra have recently faced cynical views regarding the openness, which can be interpreted in a multidimensional context. The response of scholars tends to be more conservative, specifically in addressing contemporary religious discourses. This resulted in criticism for clashes with external parties. Therefore, it is unsurprising that scholars responded with significant opposition when the discourse of Islam Nusantara surfaced in West Sumatra. The West Sumatra MUI took an attitude contrary to the Central MUI because the scholars believed that the foundation of the community was built on noble Islamic values.

Forms of Responses and Strategies Employed

In responding to contemporary Islamic discourses, scholars in West Sumatra attempted to adapt to the needs of the community. According to Hanani, scholars in Minangkabau are transformative and responsive to the prevailing discourses. This allows for easily implementation of diffusion, transmission, and internalization of cultural-religious values into the community (Hanani, 2021; Fauziyah & Hidayati, 2023).

The strategies used by scholars in West Sumatra in dealing with contemporary Islamic discourses tend to be unstable and subject to change, resulting in strange contradictions in their decisions. These strategies were criticized by Bustamam where the attitude of scholars in West Sumatra are highly conditional, depending on the context of a discourse (Bustamam, 2016). However, further studies are needed to conclude that this condition indicates regression or a more cautious attitude, as stated by the late Buya Ahmad Syafii Maarif.

The attitudes and the strategies used in facing contemporary Islamic discourses are closely related. *First*, the Transformative Attitude: Scholars in Minangkabau have successfully transmitted and internalized socio-cultural-religious values to the community through a responsive local paradigm with a theological approach (Hanani, 2021). The values from the adiscourses accepted by the community

are brought to life and are actively integrated in the daily lives. Additionally, scholars play a direct role in overseeing and ensuring the effective implementation of policies in the community. *Second*, the Integrative Attitude: The path taken by scholars in West Sumatra is by adapting new discourses that may be accommodated in the ABS-SBK principles. These discourses do not adopt a confrontational attitude.

Conclusion

West Sumatra, also known as Minangkabau, considered religion as the life philosophy as reflected in the expression “*adat basandi syarak, syarak basandi Kitabullah*.” The community interacted with various religious discourses, including recent contemporary perspectives. The predominant attitude adopted in this region was dialectical. Recent religious discourses were not outright rejected, as seen in closed-minded perspectives. Conversely, these discourses were first examined through the values in the life philosophy of the community.

Scholars in West Sumatra have recently tended to be opportunistic and conservative, standing in a critical position. In the future, there might be a degradation of their stance, thereby necessitating serious attention. The hope for preservation remained open as the Islamic tradition in West Sumatra continued to maintain its dialectical aspect as part of the religious identity.

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