

# Negotiating Salafism: Women Prayer Groups and their Preachers in Indonesia's Islamic Digital Mediascapes

**Fatimah Husein**

Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Kalijaga

## Abstract:

*This article is concerned with Muslim women's negotiation of Salafism at the intersection of online and offline spaces. It focuses on two groups of Indonesian Muslim women who formed majelis taklim (study groups on Islam), namely Majelis Mutia (lit. Assembly of the Obedient) and Majelis Sahabat Cinta (lit. Assembly of the Friends of Love), to examine how these social media-savvy women, who demand a more contextual interpretation of the Islamic foundational texts, negotiate Salafi teachings in order to bring them in accordance with their everyday lives. This article argues that online and offline encounters at these majelis have brought different negotiations. They have also created incongruencies, especially on the parts of Salafi preachers, as the latter have to adjust to the audience who are not used to pure Salafi discourse. These incongruencies provide opportunities for the members of the majelis taklim to practice a "softer version" of Salafism that, on occasion, seems to contradict those same Salafi teachings. Contrary to the general understanding that Muslim women are easy prey for Salafis, my research shows that the proliferation of preachers in the context of Indonesia's Islamic digital mediascapes have created a far more pluralized and optative religious forum.*

## Keywords:

*Muslim women, Salafism, Indonesia, Digital Mediascapes*

This article focuses on the encounters between Salafi preachers and Indonesian Muslim women who are active at *majelis taklim* (Arabic *ta'lim*, prayer and study groups on Islam), namely *Majelis Mutia* and *Majelis Sahabat Cinta*, within the context of today's proliferating Islamic digital mediascapes.<sup>1</sup> This

article also addresses the question of how these women, most of whom do not have a personal history of sustained study in the Islamic sciences, adhere to but also negotiate Salafi teachings in order to bring them in accordance with their everyday lives that are informed by particular priorities and interests. It further examines how the online and offline spaces, which have become their media of interactions, are partly characterized by incongruencies and ambivalences, and how this influences the Muslim women's negotiations of Salafi teachings.

In this article, Salafism is understood beyond its generic meaning as an ideology that preserves a literalist reading of the Qur'an and the Hadith (Prophet Muhammad's words or acts that are considered authoritative by Muslims) as well as rejects *taqlid* (uncritical acceptance of the four schools of Islamic law established a millennium ago within Sunni Islam) in order to maintain the purity of Islam (Byman and Gold 2012, 28; Moosa 2017, 570; Pall and Pereiro 2020, 237). It rather emphasizes two additional characteristics of Salafism, that is the acceptance of the Salafi *manhaj* (path, method) and the doctrine of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* (loyalty and disavowal). Salafis generally agree that a proper literalism is possible only with a methodology of scriptural reading explicitly based on the scholarship and a *manhaj* of a recognized Salafi scholar. Hence, "Muslims' return to the first two sources [the Qur'an and Hadith] alone is not a warranty that they will embrace true Islam because they still may go astray due to a false understanding of these sources" (Wahid 2014, 20). In line with this, Heykel (2014, 47) stated that the concept of *manhaj* constitutes an important element in understanding Salafism. The second prevalent characteristic of Salafism is the doctrine of *al-wala' wa al-bara'*, meaning loyalty to those who are proper Muslims and repudiation of all those who are non-Muslims or who profess a corrupted variety of Islam. Meijer (2014, 10) further underlined that the disavowal should be directed towards non-Salafi Muslims. In this context, "the concept of *al-wala' wa al-bara'* bears the meaning of love and hate for sake of Allah" (Wahid 2014, 30).

This attitude of repudiating those whom they consider as infidels has often placed Salafism as diametrically opposed to Sufism. Howell (2010, 1030), however, found "the Salafist colouration of Sufism" in the teachings of two

Indonesian Muslim preachers, namely HAMKA (d. 1981) and M. Arifin Ilham (d. 2019). She further argued that contrary to the argument that Sufism is “antithetical to Salafi Islam,” it is “being reworked in Salafist variants” (Howell 2010, 1049). Mandaville (2005, 315–316) has outlined a similar line of thought when identifying different groups within contemporary transnational Islam who, unlike the Salafis who emphasize “hard-and-fast categories,” tend to be “much more eclectic in their reading and understanding of textual sources.” He further argued that some major modern Islamist movements, such as that of Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949) of the *Ikhwanul Muslimin*, have also been “heavily influenced by Sufi thought and practice” (Mandaville 2014, 45). Possible intersections between Salafism and Sufism are also discussed by Schielke (2015a) for Egypt, where he attempted to understand the everyday religious commitments of his interlocutors at different phases of their lives. While they subscribed to the Salafi teachings in their times of difficulty, they shifted to other forms of religious piety, chiefly Sufism, when feeling frustrated with the strict doctrine offered by Salafism. Schielke thus underlined “the impossibility of perfection and the primacy of the incomplete and inconsistent” (2015b, 91), which leads us to the concept of negotiation to explain “how people are able to live ‘in between’ different demands and expectations” (Schielke 2015a, 37).

Academic studies on the development of Salafism<sup>2</sup> have particularly blossomed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States of America (among others, Heykel 2014; Pall 2018; Wiktorowicz 2001). *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* edited by Roel Meijer (2014) is among those works that attempt to discuss Salafism and its relationship to politics and violence, its transnational character, as well as its appeal among youth. Within the context of Indonesia, Salafism has received considerable scholarly attention (Hasan 2002; Krismono 2017; Sunarwoto 2016; Wahid 2014; Wildan 2013), not least because it is often seen as contradicting the character of Indonesian Islam which is blended with local traditions.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, van Bruinessen (2013), in his mapping of Islamic radicalism in post-Suharto Indonesia (after 1998), argued that starting in 2005 Indonesian Islam was taking a “conservative turn” as chiefly evidenced by the issuance of controversial *fatwa* (religious edicts) by the *Majelis Ulama Indonesia* (Indonesian Council of Islamic

Scholars) stating that secularism, pluralism, and liberalism are against Islamic teachings. Wahid's study (2014, 191–234) of Salafi *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) seems to support this thesis when he found the internalization of Salafi teachings in those boarding schools.

My case studies focus on a different aspect of Salafism and are among the few accounts that examine Salafi online behaviour in Indonesia (see Iqbal 2019; Nisa 2013), which contributes to the understanding of contemporary Islam well beyond the Javanese urban landscape. Moreover, this study is the first to relate Salafism to pious practices of Muslim women who are not part of Salafi communities. However, there are several studies dedicated to the exploration of how Salafi members negotiate the teachings, which can take multiple forms. In discussing the Indonesian *Madkhaliyya* Salafis, who draw their teachings from Rabi' al-Madkhali (b. 1931), for example, Sunarwoto (2020, 228) maintained that they are caught in ambiguity as they endeavour to hold the Salafi core doctrine of “obedience to the ruler” within the context of Indonesia's democratic system. They, therefore, attempt to constantly negotiate this ambiguity by neither expressing publicly their discontent with democracy nor participating in the Indonesian elections. Within the context of Muslim communities in Cambodia, Pall and Pereiro (2020, 265) argued that in order for the Salafis to win political protection, they have to show their “pragmatism and flexibility in responding to their specific local contexts” by supporting the ruling party. Inge (2016) delved into the lives of Salafi women in the UK and their everyday negotiations. She concluded that some Salafi women have to compromise their Salafism by, for example, prioritizing the advice of their parents or husbands in case the latter disapprove of the *niqab* (full-face veil), which is perceived as *wajib* (obligatory), whereas for many Muslims the practice is only considered to be a *sunna* (recommended) act (Inge 2016, 160; see also Uthman 2006; Wieringa 2009). My research on Indonesian Muslim women builds on these earlier studies and offers a different perspective on negotiating Salafism within the intersection of online and offline spaces, where women actively assemble the religious pedagogies within which they encounter Salafi teachings.

Scholars have studied online and offline Islamic practices, including the ways social media is used to express one's religiosity (Hew 2018; Hoesterey 2016;

Lengauer 2018; Nisa 2018; Slama 2017c). Thanks to the growth of “smart” communication technology, online Islamic practices have increased in popularity and this has coincided with the emergence and spread of offline, collective forms of piety, including *majelis taklim* (Slama 2017c) and the *One Day One Juz* (ODOJ) Qur’anic reading practice (Nisa 2018). Hew’s (2018) examination of the intersection between online activities and offline events within the preaching of Felix Siauwa, a popular Indonesian Hizbut Tahrir (HTI) preacher,<sup>4</sup> provides a background for this present article.<sup>5</sup> Hew’s main argument (2018, 68) is that Siauwa’s online and visual *da’wa* does not replace his offline and textual *da’wa*, but that they rather complement each other. Siauwa combined social media platforms and offline events in urban and rural places arguing that “online is important for spreading Islamic messages (*syiar*), online is crucial for strengthening Islamic faith (*pembinaan*)” (Hew 2018, 68). Based on interviews of key organizers and preachers at Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta (2014–20), online research, and participation in offline events of both *majelis taklim* in Yogyakarta, I take Hew’s argument a step further by arguing that, in the case of Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta, the relationship between online and offline *da’wa* is not only “complementing” and “co-constituting” one another, but is also involving negotiations of the Salafi teachings that point to incongruencies and ambivalences.

This article starts by discussing the formation of Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta, their choice of preachers (*ustadz*, male sing. and *ustadzah*, female sing.) and their positioning in Indonesia’s Islamic digital mediascape. This background information paves the way for an analysis of how the members of the *majelis* negotiate Salafi teachings in accordance with their lifestyles. The last part of the article considers the incongruencies and ambivalences that are part of these processes and that have become particularly apparent in differences between online and offline practices.

## Majelis Mutia

The history of *Majelis Mutia* (lit. Assembly of the Obedient), formerly known as *Majelis Dhuha Mutia Sholehah* (lit. Assembly of the Pious Obedient),<sup>6</sup> can be traced back to 2010 to a middle-class woman in her thirties by the name of

Rully Surbakti. Surbakti recalled that, at that time, many middle-class, young Muslim mothers, including herself, spent their time at shopping malls while waiting for their children to return from school. Acknowledging the malls as places of “moral distraction” (Hefner 2019, 498) and perceiving this habit as unproductive, she initiated a small-scale *pengajian* (religious gathering) with around twenty people at her house. This initial religious activity later developed from discussions of religious issues to practical applications of social services aimed at helping local communities. In 2012, she and her friends established Majelis Dhuha Mutia Sholehah, a *pengajian* for Muslim women. “When a problem arises, people tend to be close to God and this can be easily facilitated at the *majelis*,” as noted by Rully Surbakti.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that some organizers of the *majelis* joined the group not only for increasing their knowledge about Islam but also for seeking support in dealing with their marital problems (see also Abaza 2004, 183).

At the beginning of its establishment, most of the Majelis Mutia organizers did not have much knowledge about Islam and thus did not know how to select a good *ustadz* and *ustadzah*. *Ustadz* Wijayanto was one of its early supporters, and they also invited other celebrity preachers of that time including *Ustadz* Ahmad Hadi Wibawa (known as *Aa* Hadi) and *Ustadzah* Ninih Muthmainnah (known as *Teh* Ninih). Some important criteria for selecting the preachers were later included, such as their willingness to be contacted through existing social media platforms (Slama 2017a), their public speaking skills, their attractiveness, and their ability to preach in a humorous way (see also Millie 2017, 20).

With the development of social media and the increase of media-savvy Islamic preachers (Hew 2018; Hoesterey 2016; Slama 2017a), the members of Majelis Mutia started to invite those who were active online. And because many members struggle with questions and issues they are facing in their family, they turned to Salafi preachers,<sup>8</sup> who could be perceived as capable of providing firm answers. While it is clear that Salafism has prescribed textual interpretations of Islam, which at first glance might contradict the lifestyle of the *majelis* members, some of them, on the contrary, claim that the Salafi teachings are more appropriate to cater to their modern context: “I think

Salafism is a more appropriate choice for living at this time. It is simpler, suitable, and there is no practice of *tahlilan* (communal prayer for those who have just passed away),” as stated by Rully Surbakti.<sup>9</sup> However, while choosing certain Salafi preachers who they deem “smart” and “have broader perspectives,” they have some reservations against those who are “more extreme,” “strict,” and “inflexible.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, they prefer preachers who studied hard sciences as they are expected to provide clear answers and instructions on how to live an Islamic life.<sup>11</sup>

These criteria are found in *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal, who has become a regular preacher at the *majelis*. He is a prolific writer and started his *da'wa* through his website in 2013.<sup>12</sup> He also uses social media creatively, including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter to propagate *Salafi* ideology and to increase his “public visibilities” (Hew 2018, 62). *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal completed his undergraduate study in Chemical Engineering at Gadjah Mada University in Yogyakarta, while at the same time studying at an Islamic boarding school under the Islamic Center Bin Baz in the same city (Tuasikal 2020).<sup>13</sup> He continued his Master’s degree at King Saud University, Riyadh, in Polymer Engineering in 2010. In addition, *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal studied the works of Ibn Taimiyyah<sup>14</sup> for six years.

During the early phase of establishment, the organizers tried to avoid discussing sensitive topics such as *fiqh al-mar'ah* (Islamic jurisprudence for women) due to the fear of losing members.<sup>15</sup> However, they gradually welcomed such issues in responding to the members’ need to find well-founded answers for their daily issues. At one session, for example, *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal quoted *Syech* al-Fauzan, a member of the Saudi Arabia Commission of *fatwa*, listing 12 requirements for proper female dress, including covering from head to toe except for the face and the hands.<sup>16</sup> These prescriptions are compatible with what has been addressed by other Salafi preachers online, including the celebrity preacher *Ustadz* Adi Hidayat.<sup>17</sup>

On another occasion *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal discussed the topic of *Bakti Istri pada Suami* (Wife’s Devotion to Her Husband) at the *majelis*, underlining that women should only participate in outside activities in urgency and only

after completing their household chores. In addition, when they have to work, they have to choose jobs that will place them among women so they will not be burdened by male sexual advances.<sup>18</sup> This topic was indeed very sensitive to discuss among young mothers who are socially active. Yet *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal's style of *da'wa*, which is "colourful yet conservative" and "interactive yet dogmatic" (Hew 2018, 76) has won the hearts of the mothers and kept him on the preacher list of the *majelis*.

In addition to Salafi preachers, however, *Majelis Mutia* continues to include various *ustadz* and *ustadzah* in its programs, including preachers with a traditionalist background, such as *Ustadz* Novel Alaydrus, and celebrities who converted to Islam such as Dewi Sandra. Thus, while the organizers of this *majelis* depart from more familiar patterns of authority and compliance in conventional Salafism by adhering to *Salafi* preachers, they also welcome a variety of preachers to maintain its members' interest in joining the *majelis*. This choice of non-Salafi preachers also evades the loyalty and disavowal ethos in stricter varieties of Salafism.

### Majelis Sahabat Cinta

*Majelis Sahabat Cinta* (lit. Assembly of the Friends of Love) owes its birth to *Majelis Mutia* in December 2012 (Zaen 2018). Rima Nanda, who is currently the leader of *Majelis Sahabat Cinta*, was one of the former coordinators of *Majelis Mutia*. At the time when a special Qur'anic reading group, known as *One Day One Juz* (ODOJ)<sup>19</sup> was introduced to *Majelis Mutia*, some members realized that their ways of reading the Qur'an were not correct and that they lacked understanding of the history of the Prophet Muhammad. For that purpose, a group of four women started to learn from *Ustadz* Andi Ardiyan Mustakim who had just returned from Al-Ahgaff University, Yemen.<sup>20</sup> The *Majelis Sahabat Cinta* was later established in 2014 as a female learning community following the Shafi'i *madzhab*.<sup>21</sup>

*Majelis Sahabat Cinta*'s focus on learning from permanent *ustadz* and *ustadzah* on arranged topics marks its difference from *Majelis Mutia*. *Majelis Sahabat Cinta* focuses more on the *tahsin* (the correct way of reading the



Qur'an), *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis), *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), and later added *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism). These differences in methods and topics of learning (*ta'lim*) were noted by Rully Surbakti who explained that Majelis Sahabat Cinta was closer to Nahdlatul Ulama in its ideology and practices, whereas Majelis Mutia was closer to Muhammadiyah and Salafism.<sup>22</sup>

Even though Majelis Sahabat Cinta used various social media accounts, chiefly Facebook and WhatsApp, it does not primarily base their choice of *ustadz* and *ustadzah* on their engagements with social media, nor their academic backgrounds in hard sciences, because of its emphasis on learning from more permanent *ustadz* and *ustadzah*. Realizing that their members come from various Islamic backgrounds, Majelis Sahabat Cinta does hope that differences in interpreting Islamic teachings could be solved by understanding the roots of these dissimilarities under the guidance of their *gurus* (teachers), namely: *Ustadz* Andi Ardiyan Mustakim, *Ustadz* Sholihuddin Alhafiz, and *Ustadz* Syatori Abdurrouf. This, however, does not mean that they completely avoid Salafi *ustadz* and *ustadzah*, as narrated by Rima Nanda:

Yes, we did invite Salafi *ustadz*. We take only what is positive from them. For example, I think there are Salafi preachers who have a good way of calling Muslim women to wear proper Islamic dress. So we asked them to speak about *busana Muslimah* (Muslim dress). When we invite them, we give them a specific topic so that they do not touch other issues. We give them supervision of what they preach.<sup>23</sup>

Hence, while arguing that they establish their learning on Shafi'i *madzhab*, Sufism, and under the guidance of their three main teachers, they accept Salafi *ustadz* who could meet their criteria. The choice of the Salafi *ustadz*, however, has to be in consultation with their permanent teachers, who would digitally check the credibility of the Salafi preachers and the content of their preaching before giving their permission.

It was therefore not surprising that on the Majelis Sahabat Cinta's Facebook page during 2017–18, one can find shared postings of conservatively inclined preachers, including *Ustadz* Salim A. Fillah (2017). However, the *majelis* has

ceased learning from the Salafis since then due to their preference over the Shafi'i preachers, even though some members continue to follow Salafi preachers online, as stated by Rima Nanda: "I follow *Ustadz* Adi Hidayat on his YouTube channel. I first attended his preaching in Jakarta, and then in Bogor, even though I do not go there regularly."<sup>24</sup> In a more recent conversation with her, however, she revealed that she no longer follows his YouTube channel except when excerpts of his videos are shared by her friends on social media, or when they appear on her Facebook timeline because the *majelis* has firmly opted to learn from Shafi'i preachers.<sup>25</sup>

The reason for this change seems to be closely related to a new tendency, developed over the past three or four years, by the *majelis* to invite and learn from *ustadz* and *ustadzah* of Hadhrami descent, especially the Indonesian Ba 'Alawi preachers who are the *sada* (sing. *sayyid*, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad).<sup>26</sup> Among the Ba 'Alawi teachers who are often invited to the *majelis*, three female preachers are worthy of discussion in the context of this article, namely: *Ustadzah* Halimah Alaydrus, *Ustadzah* Aisyah Farid BSA, and *Ustadzah* Muna Al-Munawwar, all of whom are graduates from the Daruz Zahro boarding school in Tarim, Yemen,<sup>27</sup> and are thus perceived as holding religious authority. These teachers and preachers often share their knowledge and practices of the *Thariqah 'Alawiyyah*, a Sufi path established by Muhammad bin 'Ali 'Alawi (d. 1255; Alatas 2011; Knysh 2001), to the *majelis*' members through various activities and events. The *majelis* is consistent with its hashtag #*dakwahsantun* (polite *da'wa*), #*dakwahmenyejukkan* (refreshing *da'wa*), and #*transferrasa* (empathy transfer) by inviting *ustadz* and *ustadzah* who they claim can "soften and calm their hearts."<sup>28</sup>

Issues related to modern Muslim women have become one of the *majelis*' primary concerns. To cater to this purpose, they base their learning on certain Islamic books, such as *Khuluquna* (our morality) written by *Habib* 'Umar b. Muhammad b. Hafidz (b. 1963) from the Darul Mustofa boarding school in Tarim, who is also the founder of the female-only Daruz Zahro. The emphasis on Sufism, such as the importance of the members to cleanse their hearts, is evident in many activities of *Majelis Sahabat Cinta*. In addition, for the past four years, they have regularly conducted *dauroh* (a short-term, in-depth training, workshop) with various topics,

including *Bekal untuk Muslimah* (provisions for Muslim women). They also have their routine meetings on *khataman* (prayer upon completing the reading of the Qur'an), *majelis shalawat* (gathering to invoke the blessing of Prophet Muhammad), and *JiHad* (an abbreviation of *Ngaji Ahad*, religious gatherings on Sundays), all of which underline the importance of drawing closer to Allah. This emphasis on morality, however, does not eliminate practical discussions related to Islamic law that are also found in Majelis Mutia. Issues related to *hukum sikat gigi saat berpuasa* (rules on brushing teeth during fasting) or *hukum zakat* (rules on alms-giving), for example, are discussed offline in their meetings as well as posted on their social media accounts (Majelissahabaticintaofficial 2019; 2020).

Another important phenomenon during the online *ta'lim* is worth discussing. While the offline *ta'lim* provides an assured women-only gathering, the online engagement does not always provide this warranty. This has concerned some female Ba 'Alawi preachers who consider their voice as part of *aurat*. For this purpose, Majelis Sahabat Cinta has created a closed platform called *Amanah Sahabat Cinta* (lit. Commitment of the Friends of Love) only for women, based on Zoom and customized live streaming on Facebook page called *Amanah Sahabat*, which is not an open account. In addition, a women-only WhatsApp group has been created to particularly exchange information related to online *ta'lim* with female preachers.

It is therefore clear from the above that Majelis Sahabat Cinta's emphasis on Sufism, on the one hand, and their initial interest in learning from Salafi preachers, on the other hand, confirms the above discussion on the crossover between the two ideologies as outlined by Howell (2010), Mandaville (2005; 2014), and Schielke (2015a). At the same time, their ability to later replace Salafi preachers with non-Salafi *ustadzah*, notably female Ba 'Alawi preachers, allows them to evade the requirement for submitting to the authority of a Salafi scholar who commands a proper *manhaj*.

### Muslim Women Negotiating Salafism

The above-mentioned criteria of Majelis Mutia for Salafi preachers, such as not being "extreme," "strict," or "inflexible," has opened the possibility

for its members to negotiate the teachings offered by the preachers. When I attended a session on July 30, 2018, a topic on *Nasihah untuk Para Istri: Cara Mudah Wanita Masuk Surga* (Advice for Wives: Easy Ways for Women to Enter Paradise) was discussed.<sup>29</sup> During the question and answer session, one member asked:

*Ustadz*, you explained that if a woman wanted to enter Paradise they should perform their daily prayers at home, and should not go out to the mosque. I have a son and I want to accustom him to pray in the mosque, whereas my husband works in another city. I have been accompanying him to pray at the mosque. What would you say about this?

The *ustadz* answered: “Yes, in that case, it is alright, but let his father take him to the mosque when he is around.” Her question indicates that the *majelis* member not only interpreted the teaching of the *ustadz* in light of her current circumstances, but she was also exercising “a new form of consumer power” (Hoesterey 2016, 19) through negotiation, expecting that the *ustadz* would compromise and legitimize her choice. On another occasion, one member asked him: “*Ustadz*, you stated that, when we are outside of our house, we need to be among women, but this is impossible to be practiced here. So, what should we do?” *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal answered: “Yes, I have delivered some theories and I realize that prohibition on free-mixing is often difficult to practice in Indonesia. It is alright to go outside, but try your best to distance yourself from men.”<sup>30</sup>

Such negotiation does not stop at the discourse level when the *majelis taklim* takes place. What the members learn from the Salafi preachers is often negotiated and adjusted according to the members’ own interpretations. When discussing *Muslimah yang sholehah* (pious Muslim women), for example, some Salafi preachers whom they invited had clearly listed several rules, including covering a woman’s body from head to toe. However, members of Majelis Mutia found ways to negotiate the boundaries of what had been outlined as pious Muslim women by the Salafi preachers, as the following example from the leader of Majelis Mutia indicates:

As for me, I prefer Salafi teachings... I only choose the Salafi teachings that are simple... Our *ustadz* stated that a good outfit for women is the one that is wide and not too tight, but I couldn't wear a long dress as I often sit casually. So I wear wide trousers, and this is my choice. This is better than wearing a long dress but showing off my thigh, right? Therefore, as I said, I am not a Salafi but in this modern life, Salafism is easier to apply.<sup>31</sup>

It is notable that for members of Majelis Mutia becoming a good Muslim woman does not mean following their preacher's word for word. They can negotiate to find what is comfortable and logical for them without necessarily losing the opportunity to be a pious Muslim woman. This attitude is resonant with what Schielke (2015a, 70) argues, namely that "embracing a Salafi understanding of religiosity and morality is not necessarily the same thing as becoming a committed Salafi."

A member of the *majelis* confirmed this statement when saying: "There were indeed some preachers whom we invited and with whom we took selfies, but they warned us not to share them on social media for fear of *fitnah* (slander). In fact, we often shared them on social media, and the preachers did not object."<sup>32</sup> Similarly, while uploading a self-portrait is prohibited according to their Salafi *ustadz*, members of the *majelis* continued to do so, as this was perceived as something natural in the era of social media. Here we see that while Salafism in its core form is premised on the acceptance of a *manhaj*, and this acceptance implies full and uncompromising submission to a Salafi scholar, the members of the *majelis* find their ways to adopt a more pick-and-choose approach to their engagement with Salafism.

Another interesting negotiation of Majelis Mutia with Salafism rests on its more recent selection of preachers and in their choice in conducting activities associated with Sufism. A *khataman* (a ritual prayer where *dzikr* litanies are chanted to mark the completion of the reading of the whole Qur'an) led by *Habib* Mustafa Sayyidi Baraqbah (Majelismutia 2019) exemplifies this negotiation. *Khataman* is traditionally practiced by Muslims of Nahdlatul Ulama background, which contradicts Salafi teachings. In this

context, the discourse on Sufi-Salafi crossover, as discussed above (Howell 2010; Mandaville 2005; 2014; Schielke 2015a), retains its significance.

Majelis Sahabat Cinta's negotiation of Salafism takes a different form as compared to that of Majelis Mutia. The former does not normally confront its teachers nor directly negotiate their teachings. (1) The above discussion on Majelis Sahabat Cinta's criteria for preachers offers insight into how its members negotiate Salafi teachings. At the earlier stage of its establishment, the *majelis* occasionally invited certain Salafi preachers, whom they considered suitable and who could offer useful teachings. Only certain topics, however, were given and the preachers would therefore not be able to touch on other issues. This shows the power of not only choosing the preachers but also limiting what they could preach. The above statement of the *majelis* that "We give them supervision of what they preach" also indicates how the relationship is hierarchically constructed: a collective of women is in control of Salafi preachers, and thus signifies a conscious female negotiation in the preacher-disciple relationship. This scheme has proven to be effective in limiting the Salafi preachers' space in spreading their ideology to the members of the *majelis*.

(2) Along with its development, Majelis Sahabat Cinta is more attached to permanent *guru* (teachers) who adhere to the Shafi'i *madzhab* and to preachers of Ba 'Alawi descent. While at an earlier stage they were sharing issues related to Islamic law on their social media accounts from Salafi preachers, they now alter their preference of preachers by posting similar contents from Sufi-oriented Ba 'Alawi *ustadz* and *ustadzah*. We see here the significant role of *Ustadzah* Halimah Alaydrus, who is very active on social media and who has developed a close friendship with the leading woman of the *majelis*, Rima Nanda. Through their online and offline activities, the *majelis* has made an implicit statement that these male and female Ba 'Alawi preachers can provide assured answers related to Islamic law as well (Alatas 2018), and this negotiation, therefore, has resulted in a rejection of Salafism on the group level.

(3) The term *cinta* (love) in the name of Majelis Sahabat Cinta itself has conditioned its members to deal more with issues of the heart, which is closer to Sufi teachings. While in its earlier phase the *majelis* occasionally turned

to particular Salafi preachers, they now hold on to Sufism and some Sufi-oriented teachers who can also offer “the core of authentic Islam” (Howell 2010, 1033), albeit in a different way than that of the Salafis. The *majelis* argues that by establishing their learning with the Ba ‘Alawi preachers they gain both knowledge and blessing because these preachers are descendants of the Prophet Muhammad; a lineage that cannot be found among other non-*sada* preachers. Interestingly, even though the *majelis* as an assembly had ceased learning from Salafi preachers since 2018, both online and offline, some members have continued to learn from them virtually. In this context, the negotiation of Salafism takes place in a more private space.

### Incongruencies between Online and Offline Da’wa

The widening of the network of Salafi preachers is not without consequences. The Salafi *ustadz* and *ustadzah* have to leave their comfort zone of preaching their own beliefs inside their closed community to face Muslims of various backgrounds. In the case of Majelis Mutia, for example, its members are mostly young Muslim women who are media-savvy and who carry several characteristics and expectations towards the preachers that would not be found among women with a firm Salafi background. Requests for selfies, as mentioned above, exemplify a new demand on the part of the Salafi preachers that forces them to compromise the Salafi teachings if they want to enlarge their audience. This, in turn, has created incongruencies and, to some extent, ambivalence on the part of the Salafi preachers because they have to change their tone of *da’wa* between their online and offline appearances.

The online and offline *da’wa* of *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal illustrates this incongruency. In his online preaching on his YouTube channel (Rumaysho TV), for example, we find sermons ranging from dating and dress codes for Muslim women to the concept of *al-wala’ wa al-bara’* (loyalty and disavowal), discussed above as an important character of Salafism. On the issue of relations between Muslim men and women, for example, he firmly argued that when a woman goes out of her house, she has to ask permission from her husband. Men and women should also avoid close interactions and that communication should only take place between a wife

and a husband. When a man sends a WhatsApp message to a woman, for instance, the woman should not reply to it. Or, if she chooses to reply she should respond by saying, “Please, contact my husband.” (Tuasikal 2016).

However, in his offline engagements with the Majelis Mutia members, quite often *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal has to find a compromise between Salafi doctrine and their demands because these new audiences requested more contextual interpretations, as explained by the leader of the *majelis*:

*Ustadz* Abduh has stated that when women go out of their houses, we have to ask permission from our husband. But, he never stated that we have to go with our male *mahram* (family members who are forbidden to marry each other). What he said was that it is good if we could do that, but we are now living in a different era. I think when *Ustadz* Abduh is talking to members of Majelis Mutia it is impossible [to be too strict]. I believe the *ustadz*, too, has to consider his audiences.<sup>33</sup>

*Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal’s decision to compromise with his audiences makes him different from other Salafi preachers. In discussing Islamic law related to women at Majelis Mutia, for example, only *Ustadz* Abduh’s teaching could be accepted by the members because he shared a more general discussion of the law and did not give a too detailed explanation, which would have resulted in conveying stricter regulations to the members.<sup>34</sup> This method of preaching, as exemplified by *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal, has created incongruencies between online and offline *da’wa*.

The above case leads us to a further discussion on the relationship between online and offline preaching and its incongruencies. When *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal delivers his preaching at the *majelis*, it is usually recorded and later uploaded on his YouTube channel. Hence, what occurs offline becomes at least to some extent part of his online appearance, and what was negotiated by the audiences during the preaching becomes public knowledge, including that of the Salafi community at large. *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal realized this and stated that he was “ready” if other (Salafi) preachers were angry at him due to the



incongruencies of his *da'wa*.<sup>35</sup> Hence, such divides do not present a significant problem for him, because if looked upon carefully, some of his answers remain ambivalent. Answers like “yes, I have proposed some theories and I realize that they are often difficult to practice in Indonesia,” or “yes, this is what I have to explain to you, but it is up to you to implement it,” has opened up a “safe space” for both parties, the *majelis* members and the preacher. For the *majelis* members, these types of answers have given them options on how to implement his teachings. On the part of the *ustadz*, this has helped him to show to his Salafi community that he has tried his best to be consistent in delivering the Salafi teachings, even though, in reality, certain “pragmatism and flexibility in responding to the local context” (Pall and Pereiro 2020) has to be taken and that ambivalent statements have to be made to satisfy different target audiences.

The case of Majelis Sahabat Cinta offers a different analysis in explaining the incongruency of online and offline encounters because it centers more on its members rather than its preachers. Since 2018, as stated above, the *majelis* as an assembly had ceased learning from Salafi preachers, both online and offline. However, members of the *majelis* continue to learn from preachers of various backgrounds online, including the Salafis, while emphasizing that they found a more peaceful environment within the *majelis*. The reason given was that the preachers in the *majelis* offer a logical and more inclusive way of studying Islam, which does not force them to take their interpretation for granted.<sup>36</sup> These learning practices point to an incongruency as well, since the group has abandoned Salafi preachers regarding both their online and offline activities, while they privately follow some Salafi preachers' online *da'wa*.

For example, Rima Nanda, the leader of the *majelis*, continues to follow the YouTube channel of *Ustadz Zaidul Akbar*,<sup>37</sup> a Salafi medical doctor who is very active on social media. With around 205 thousand subscribers for his YouTube channel and 2.6 million followers on his Instagram account, he actively promotes herbal recipes for a healthy lifestyle based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. Rima Nanda's reason for following this channel is that the recipes are easy to find and to practice. Her seemingly inconsistent choice in moving between offline and online *ta'lim* and between Ba'Alawi and Salafi preachers, however, is not contradictive to her, as she explained:

“We are happy with our permanent preachers, especially with their teachings on theology and Islamic law, whereas information that we might access from social media are additional in nature.”<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

This article has discussed Muslim women in Indonesia, as represented by Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta, their relationship to Salafi preachers and their teachings as well as the online–offline intricacies that are an important part of the religious negotiations that take place in digital realms. Compared to earlier accounts of the negotiation of Salafi teachings (Inge 2016; Pall and Pereiro 2020; Sunarwoto 2020), I have approached the subject differently by focusing on the religious practices of Muslim women who are not part of the Salafi community. I investigated the dynamics between online and offline *da'wa*, both from the perspectives of the assemblies' members and their preachers. A closer look at these dynamics revealed incongruencies and ambivalences that inform the religious activities of both the preachers and the members. These incongruencies provide opportunities for the members of the *majelis* to practice a “softer version” of Salafism and to even further negotiate between following the Salafi teachings and participating socially in offline and online life in ways that seem to contradict those teachings.

While the *majelis* communities conduct their studies offline, Islamic digital mediascapes are used to represent themselves online as well as to find suitable preachers and to initially learn about their teachings. Muslim women of both *majelis taklim* were not initially attracted to the Salafi teachings. Many of them came to the *majelis* with their life problems and hoped to find solutions. Only later they were attracted to the Salafi teachings, which were perceived as providing concrete answers to the members' daily issues. This has created a demand on the part of the Salafi preachers to preach beyond their closed community, even while this also can present challenges for them.

In the case of Majelis Mutia, the main challenges come from the members that negotiate the Salafi teachings. While it is true that they are influenced by the teachings, these women are able to select “their” Salafi preachers.

Inflexibility from the *ustadz* and *ustadzah* is unwelcomed by the *majelis*, and among those who are invited some of their teachings are modified or even rejected. Their clear statement that “even though they prefer Salafi teachings, they are not Salafis,” decenters an identity approach to Salafism. All these negotiations have urged Salafi preachers to adjust their offline preaching strategy, which often created incongruencies and ambivalence as they moved between online and offline spaces. These incongruencies and ambivalence have further created opportunities for the members to interpret Islamic teachings according to their personal life situation.

As compared to Majelis Mutia, Majelis Sahabat Cinta emphasizes the need to control the themes of Salafi preachers. During the process of inviting these preachers to the *majelis*, the female organizers have to consult with their male permanent teachers who would digitally check the credibility of the preachers and their preaching before giving their permission. This process has shown a sharing of authority between the female organizers, who are middle-class women, and their male permanent teachers, which strengthens their position vis-à-vis the Salafi preachers.

In addition, they negotiate the Salafi teachings by involving a group of preachers with a strong Sufi background in their *majelis*. This choice of inviting female Ba ‘Alawi preachers speaks against the common perception, which includes that of the Salafis, that authority in Islam is necessarily male and that women’s roles are primarily domestic and not public (Kloos 2019). More importantly, these female Ba ‘Alawi preachers have greatly influenced the *majelis* with regard to their offline and online activities. As a result, the Majelis Sahabat Cinta does not invite Salafi preachers to their *majelis* any longer and they also do not post Salafi preachers on the *majelis*’ social media accounts anymore. The negotiation of Salafism has resulted in rejection at the group level, whereas on the individual level, members of the group might still follow Salafi preachers privately. The members of Majelis Sahabat Cinta claim that they take what is beneficial and leave what they regard as exorbitant from the Salafi preachers, emphasizing their sovereign position with regard to Salafi teachings.

The relationships between online and offline *da'wa* within the context of Majelis Mutia and Majelis Sahabat Cinta extend beyond a mere “complementation” and “co-constitution” (Hew 2018). My findings demonstrate that in their online and offline encounters with Salafi teachings, these women have actively assembled their own pious inspirations and found a pragmatic approach to everyday Islamic teachings in ways that suit their priorities and lifestyles. The proliferation of preachers and Islamic digital mediascapes have created a far more pluralized and optative religious landscape. This has greatly enhanced the women’s ability to negotiate Salafi teachings, and it has allowed them to circumvent what is widely regarded as two of the most pervasive features of Salafism: subscription to a methodology of scriptural reading based on the scholarship and a *manhaj* of a recognized Salafi scholar, and disavowal of those who are non-Salafis often leading to social segregation.

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<sup>2</sup> The term *Salafi* is derived from the Arabic *salafa*, which means to precede or to come to an end. The term *Salaf* means ancestors or predecessors. Hence, *al-Salaf al-Salih* refers to the “pious ancestors” or “pious predecessors,” pointing to the followers of Prophet Muhammad from the first three generations. See Wahid (2014, 17–18).

<sup>3</sup> Although, several scholars, most recently Menchik (2016) and Mietzner and Muhtadi (2020), have challenged this idea of moderation as the key feature of Indonesian exceptionalism.

<sup>4</sup> *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI) is part of international *Hizbut Tahrir* movement that was founded in Palestine in 1953 by Taqiyuddin Al-Nabhani with the aim to establish a global caliphate. HTI was banned in Indonesia in July 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Felix Siauw and other preachers of his type, who can win the hearts of middle-class Muslim women, reflects a global trend that is related to the emergence of electronic and digital Islamic mediascapes. See, for example, Bayat (2010), Moll (2010), and Schulz (2015).

<sup>6</sup> The name *Dhuha* here refers to a specific prayer time around 8:00 to 11:00 a.m., suggesting the time when the *pengajian* takes place. They now refer to themselves as *Majelis Mutia*.

<sup>7</sup> Rully Surbakti, interview with author, October 16, 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Included in the lists are *Ustadz* Ransi Mardi Al Indragiri, *Ustadzah* Azizzah Ummu Yasir, and *Ustadz* Wira Mandiri Bachrun. The last two preachers were graduates of *Darul Hadith*, Dammaj, Yemen, which is a Salafi boarding school chaired by *Sheikh* Yahia al-Hajouri. Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Sita Nurhidayah (pseudonym), interview with author, February 19, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> The center is a *Salafi* educational institution with close links to Islamic organizations in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia.

<sup>14</sup> *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal, interview with author, May 23, 2016. Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328) is one

of the notable Muslim theologians of the classical period. His thinking is often quoted in Salafi circles.

<sup>15</sup> Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal (2017), preaching on *Busana Muslimah* (Muslim Dress).

<sup>17</sup> See his YouTube channel (Hidayat 2018a; 2018b).

<sup>18</sup> *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal (2018a), preaching on *Bakti Istri pada Suami* (Wife's Devotion to Her Husband).

<sup>19</sup> *One Day One Juz* is an activity where someone is committing themselves to read *juz* (one section) of the Qur'an every day, which is organized online usually through WhatsApp. See, for example, Muslim (2017), Nisa (2018), and Slama (2017c).

<sup>20</sup> *Ustadz* Andi Ardiyan Mustakim, interview with author, March 2, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Shafi'i *madzhab* is one of the four Sunni schools of Islamic laws, which is based on the teachings of Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Idris Al-Shafi'i (d. 820).

<sup>22</sup> Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017. *Muhammadiyah*, founded in 1912, and *Nahdlatul Ulama*, founded in 1926, are the two biggest mass Muslim organizations in Indonesia.

<sup>23</sup> Rima Nanda, interview with author, July 26, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Rima Nanda, interview with author, July 26, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Rima Nanda, interview with author, September 7, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> For an account of Indonesian female Ba'Alawi preachers, see Husein (2021).

<sup>27</sup> *Ustadzah* Halimah Alaydrus runs her own *majelis taklim*, Muslimah Al-Ikhwani, in Jakarta. *Ustadzah* Aisyah Farid BSA is the head of Majelis Nisa Banat Ummul Batul in Jakarta. *Ustadzah* Muna Al-Munawwar is currently the vice principle of Ma'had Daarul Hasanat Nuruzzahro in Semarang.

<sup>28</sup> For the importance of the *hati* (heart) in online-offline preacher-follower relationships, see Slama (2017b).

<sup>29</sup> *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal (2018b), preaching on *Nasihat untuk Para Istri: Cara Mudah Wanita Masuk Surga* (Advice for Women: Easy Ways for Women to Enter Paradise).

<sup>30</sup> *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal (2018a), preaching on *Bakti Istri pada Suami* (Wife's Devotion to Her Husband).

<sup>31</sup> Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Sita Nurhidayah, interview with author, February 19, 2016.

<sup>33</sup> Rully Surbakti, interview with author, July 10, 2017.

<sup>34</sup> *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal and Rully Surbakti, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

<sup>35</sup> *Ustadz* Abduh Tuasikal and Rully Surbakti, interview with author, August 8, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Rima Nanda, interview with author, September 7, 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Rima Nanda, interview with author, September 7, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Rima Nanda, interview with author, September 7, 2020.