


Promoting moderate Islam in a global community through the 'English for Ulama' programme

**Author:**Agus Ahmad Safei¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Islamic Community Development, Faculty of Da'wa and Communication, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati, Bandung, Indonesia

Corresponding author:

Agus Ahmad Safei,
agus.safei@uinsgd.ac.id

Dates:

Received: 28 May 2021

Accepted: 26 July 2021

Published: [to be released]

How to cite this article:

Safei, A.A., 2021, 'Promoting moderate Islam in a global community through the "English for Ulama" programme', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6878. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6878>

Copyright:

© 2021. The Authors.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

The rise of religious conservatism following the 1998 reformasi has altered the face of Indonesian Islam, which has historically been regarded as peaceful and inclusive, which is why the Indonesian government has advocated for moderate Islam on a regional, national and even a global scale. Using West Java as a case study, this article presents the 2019 'English for Ulama' (EFU) initiative, which intends to train ulama in West Java about the concept of moderate Islam before sending them to the United Kingdom to promote moderate Islamic discourse in a global setting. This study demonstrates that the EFU programme is a strategic project that not only benefits West Javanese ulama regionally, where they may develop networks with other Muslims on a worldwide scale, but also benefits from the national development of moderate Islamic discourse. On a global scale, this programme is one of the best examples of moderate Islamic discourse diplomacy as the nature of Indonesian Islam. Furthermore, supporting moderate Islam on a worldwide scale is likely to influence Western society's view of Islamophobia.

Contribution: Although the EFU programme is a local government initiative, it has contributed to the promotion of moderate Islam at the world level and is framed as global diplomacy.

Keywords: moderate Islam; *da'wa*; foreign diplomacy; 'English for Ulama' programme; Indonesia's foreign policy.

Introduction

Despite the fact that Muslims constitute the majority of the population, which numbers over 220 million people (Kettani 2010), Indonesia is a democratic state. Hefner (2000) discovers that Indonesia has built a democratic model consistent with the views of the Muslim majority, which is defined by the presence of civil and public institutions as one of the key criteria of democratic governments. In the 1990s, a number of Muslim scholars, including Abdurrahman Wahid, Nurcholish Madjid, and Dawam Rahardjo, were influential in defining Islamic discourse in the media. Similarly, Islamic social organisations such as 'Nahdlatul Ulama' and 'Muhammadiyah' play an important role at the grassroots level.

These religious organisations expanded swiftly with their respective movements, particularly during the New Order era. At the same time, the Indonesian reform marked by the fall of the New Order in 1998 has opened a new chapter in the public appearance of minority groups. However, the reformasi has created new issues, such as the growth of numerous religious ideas that contribute to populism and extremism. This dynamic also contributes to the rise of Islamic conservatism or populism (Azra 2017), which Van Bruinessen (2013) refers to as the 'conservative turn'.

Simultaneously, in a global context, the concept of moderate Islam is one of Indonesia's policies in relation to the worldwide political constellation since the 9/11 incident. Among scholars, the term Islamic moderation raises a number of questions and even calls it a Western invention aimed at identifying and supporting certain governments in favour of others and not a concept clearly defined or accepted by Muslims themselves. With the decline of socialism and pan-Arabism in the Middle East, the only real ideological competition against Islam came from nationalism. However, nationalism seems difficult to promote outside one's own country. This means that governments – even relatively secular and progressive ones – have interest in incorporating Islam into their foreign policies, using religious ideas to increase their prestige and promoting their interests abroad to spread the 'soft power of Islam' (Mandaville & Hamid 2018). Following the advent of extremist Islamic movements and terrorist groups in Indonesia, the concept of moderate

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Islam has become a popular discourse (Bakti 2005). Nonetheless, the definition of moderate remains contentious. In reality, moderate Islam is typically defined by a tolerant, contemporary, progressive, pro-democracy attitude, a secular approach, and an anti-violence stance in religious practices and sociopolitical life (see Cohen 2005).

After the Bali bombing in 2002, moderate Islamic discourse quickly gained popularity (Umar 2016). The thrill of this discourse is one of the answers because the Bali bombing has captured the attention of the global community to the point where the discourse has become one of Indonesia's international strategies. This debate represents a significant step forward in Indonesia's foreign policy. The major goal of the moderate Islam project in terms of foreign policy is to build a new image of Indonesian Islam in a global context and to open doors for moderate Muslim countries and the global community (Sukma 2009).

The Ministry of Religious Affairs also contributes to the moderate Islamic discourse by regulating religious preachers (Millie, Syarif & Fakhruroji 2020). However, the concept of moderate Islam is not new; several Indonesian Islamic scholars, such as Taher (1997), have advanced a similar idea through the concept of the *middle path*. The concept of religious moderation is becoming increasingly important in the context of Indonesia's Islamic community, which is mainly related to the local wisdom (Casram & Dadah 2019) and inter-religious forum (Miharja & Mulyana 2019). It is increasingly confronted with concerns of religious identity as global media exposure grows (Solahudin & Fakhruroji 2020), which in some contexts shows a view that is more fundamental and different from the multicultural characteristics of Indonesian Islam (Ibrahim, Prasajo & Sulaiman 2019; Kusumah et al. 2020).

In a regional context, one of the regions in Indonesia that progressively welcomes the discourse of moderate Islam is West Java Province. Moreover, West Java has interest in building a more positive image regarding the expression of moderate religion because since 2012, it has been reported as one of the provinces in Indonesia with the highest rate of violence against minority religious groups (see Assyaukanie 2009; Wahid Institute 2012; Zulkifli 2013a). This sociological background is one of the considerations for the West Java Government to build and promote moderate Islam, one of which is through the programme 'English for Ulama' (EFU). This programme is expected to be a venue where Ulama (Islamic scholars) from various backgrounds of religious mass organisations in West Java could gain a perspective on moderate Islamic discourse so that they can become agents who promote this discourse globally.

The goal of this initiative is to not only create opportunities for West Javanese ulama to gain experience but also to promote West Java as a model for implementing moderate Islam in worldwide societies. On a regional level, the EFU programme is a component of the 'Pesantren Juara'

(Pesantren the Champion) initiative, which attempts to build moderate Islam. On a national level, this programme connects with the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia's goal of religious moderate mainstreaming. Thus, the EFU programme can be viewed as part of Indonesia's global diplomacy through a multicultural *da'wa* (Islamic preaching) approach.

Although West Javanese ulamas' understanding of moderate Islam is highly qualified, one of the barriers is their English abilities as an international language, which is then thought to be one of the elements behind West Javanese ulamas' lack of involvement in a global context. This programme is a strategic step towards enhancing the role of ulama as peace messengers and participants in world issues from a moderate Islamic perspective. Furthermore, participants can help to develop the *da'wa* network and foster worldwide cooperation. As a result, this article covers the continuous execution of the EFU programme, which is centred on the experiences of ulama connected to their diplomatic obligations to promote moderate Islam in a global context and was carried out in the United Kingdom at this early stage.

Geertz (1960) recognises ulama as cultural brokers. This may be evident in the role and position of ulama in the society, which can be recognised by three factors. Firstly, consider the role of the ulama in the society in its original sense, namely, people who have extensive Islamic religious knowledge and share it with the society. Secondly, the ulama are in a position to solve the societal problems that have arisen. Thirdly, the ulama play a role as social change mediators, catalysts and executors, as well as a controlling aspect for social change. The position of ulama in the final two is likewise the same as persons who play a major role in interpreting government policies at the local community level (see Mansurnoor 1992).

Traditionally, ulama are authoritative persons who are thought to be the Prophets' heirs (Ar. *warathat al-anbiya*), whereas, theoretically, ulama are actors who are seen as possessing religious authority because of the depth of their religious knowledge (Fakhruroji 2019a, 2019b). It is hardly unexpected that ulama have always played a significant role in Indonesian politics. Ulama played a role in the development of sultanates in several parts of Indonesia during the pre-colonial era. Meanwhile, throughout the colonial era, they became involved in the fight for independence through religious groups that mostly resulted in educational reform. Furthermore, with the founding of the Indonesian Ulama Council [Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI)] on July 26, 1975, their role in the post-colonial and modern Indonesian era has become increasingly essential and significant in the political environment (Ichwan 2005).

These facts have bolstered the argument that the government (politics) and the ulama (religious authority) have had such strong ties for a long period of time (see Abidin 2017; Mansurnoor 1992; Witro 2020; Zulkifli 2013b). Even Hefner (2000) believes that Indonesia's adoption of a democratic and

pluralist Islam demonstrates the country's capacity to build a democratic model suited for its Muslim majority people. This is also shown up by the existence of Islamic mass groups that contribute positively to the advancement of democracy (Freedman 2009). On a more practical level, this is also evident in Indonesia's Islamic education system, which has always been structured to promote moderate Islamic understanding (see, Ni'am 2015; Subaidi 2020; Zuhdi 2018).

However, when the reformation occurred, the character of moderate Islam in Indonesia began to shift, resulting in the establishment of numerous conservative religious movements (Azra 2017; Zuhdi 2018). Van Bruinessen (2013) refers to this phenomena as 'the conservative turn', which was exemplified by the Indonesian Ulama Council's contentious *fatwa* (religious opinion) against anti-liberalism, secularism, and pluralism in 2005. It is critical to understand that the term 'conservative' refers to a rejection of current and contextual interpretations of Islamic teachings in this context (Van Bruinessen 2011).

Religious conservatism can be found not only in Indonesia but also all across the world. Several incidents of religious conservatism in European countries are frequently related to migration from conflict-torn Middle Eastern countries (Purwono 2016). The attack on the Charlie Hebdo office on January 07, 2015, and the attack on the Stade de France Paris Stadium on November 13, 2015, both of which killed more than 120 people and injured scores more, prompted President Hollande to declare a state of emergency. On a larger scale, this episode contributes to Islamophobia and misconceptions about Islam, as evidenced by the Prophet cartoon in the Danish magazine Jylland Posten (Makin 2015) and various other media, such as Geert Wilder's film 'Fitna'.

All of these occurrences suggest that the religious factor has rendered these situations not only a national matter but also a worldwide concern and that the religious dimension cannot be overlooked in the global setting. As a worldwide issue, all of these situations have a substantial impact on human interactions, social interactions, and human relations between countries, implying that this issue must be dealt effectively, which is the responsibility of actors, both personally and politically in a state setting (Purwono 2016). In other words, religious conservatism is an issue with a domino effect that necessitates a multiparty solution. In this context, moderate Islamic speech and theology are becoming increasingly important to be reflected.

On a national scale, moderate Islamic discourse began to gain momentum in the Indonesian post-reform in 1998 (Bakti 2005), which was begun by various Muslim scholars and grew increasingly popular after the Bali Bombing in 2002 (Umar 2016) because it was concerned with reinforcing democratic ideals in the face of conservatism (Van Bruinessen 2011; Zuhdi 2018). Conceptually, Islam describes moderation with the term *wasathîya*, which is a concept that has several meanings that are interconnected with each other, such as the concept of justice (*al-'adl*) and the concept of balance

(*al-tawâzun*). This is based on the hadith of the Prophet who interprets the meaning of al-washth with the meaning of *al-'adl*, as narrated by Ahmad ibn Hanbal and Bukhârî. Terminologically, the word *wasathan* can be understood as a balance between belief and tolerance. The conditions for realising a good *wasathîya* attitude certainly require faith and tolerance, while to be able to realise good faith and tolerance requires a *wasathîya* view. In this context, Islam *wasathîya* also means not liberal and not radical. According to Makruf (2011), 'moderate Islam' is the value underpinning the Islamic movement that supports democracy, which may be optimally used in the Indonesian setting because it is compatible with the state ideology. Furthermore, the characteristics of the moderate Islamic movement are founded on the importance of local and cultural values in the construction of the country and Nurcholis Madjid stated that the moderate Islamic movement embraced the values of inclusivism and pluralism (see Bakti 2005).

As a result, the concept of moderation in Indonesian Islam can be divided into the following characteristics: (1) employing an anti-violence philosophy in imparting Islamic *da'wa*; (2) embracing modernity, including science and technology, democracy, human rights and the like; (3) employing rational thinking; (4) employing a contextual approach in comprehending Islam; and (5) employing *ijtihad* (intellectual decisions in deciding legal opinions if there is no justification for the Quran and Hadith). This trait can be expressed practically in a variety of ways, including tolerance, harmony, and collaboration with various religious groups (Hilmy 2013; Musawar et al. 2019). Similarly, Cohen (2005) defines moderate Islam as tolerant, modern, progressive, pro-democracy, secular-like, and anti-violence in religious and sociopolitical practices.

Following the Bali bombings in 2002, moderate Islamic rhetoric gained popularity, ushering in a new pattern of Indonesian foreign policy. Prior to 2002, Indonesia rarely utilised the term 'Islam' as the primary basis of its foreign policy; even the New and Old Orders promoted democracy and neglected Islam in their foreign policies. However, during Soesilo Bambang Yudhoyono's presidency, Indonesia was more active in promoting moderate Islam in international relations framed by Islamic values, notably Islam rahmatan lil alamin (Purwono 2017).

As it is not surprising that the use of the term moderate Islam can be interpreted as the re-emergence of Indonesian Islamic identity in foreign policy, Hashemi (2009) believes moderate Islamic thought to be a political interpretation that places Islam in the discourse of liberal democracy. Indonesia's diplomatic approach to moderate Islam is often represented in intensive interaction at the levels of interfaith, interculture, and inter-civilisation, with the goal of creating mutual understanding between different religions, beliefs, cultures, and civilisations (Andriasanti 2014).

Maintaining a moderate Islamic perspective is an endeavour to avoid radical religious ideas in Indonesia and to behave

pragmatically as an identity with a larger representation in the international arena (Nugraha 2012). By analogy, more moderate Islam discourse is linked to the country's foreign policy, which equals to 'moderate Indonesian Islam' and 'acceptance of Indonesian principles'. In a global sense, Indonesia's introduction of a moderate strain of Islam is a revolutionary in its foreign policy. This can be viewed as a means of creating a fresh image of Islam on a global scale while also improving conditions in Muslim countries (Sukma 2009). As a result, Indonesia should serve as a model for the modern Islamic community in dealing with foreign relations concerning Islamic symbols (Anwar 2010).

Practically speaking, international diplomacy cannot only be carried out structurally by the government, but it can also be done culturally through various specific programs, as evidenced by several studies conducted by Amarullah (2015) on the Rumah Budaya programme, a programme of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia and the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republic of Indonesia in Germany, or Gabriella (2013). Furthermore, efforts to develop moderate Islamic discourse necessitate the participation of diverse actors from civil society, including ulama and preachers as religious leaders. Their engagement is not only just as messengers but also as an ideal model of moderate Muslim figures with a cosmopolitan viewpoint (Azizah & Azhar 2015; Jailani 2014).

Da'wa, as diplomacy, is a manifestation of cross-cultural interaction and communication that encompasses the idea of civilisation (*taqwīm al-hadhârah*), namely, an intentional and systemic effort so that the goal of *da'wa* can turn into *khayra ummah* (QS. Ali Imran [3]: 110, superior humans and civilisations with a high level of culture and civility). In accordance with Islamic teaching, this effort must respect the values of democracy, human rights, gender equality, and the preservation of nature and the environment while remaining devoid of violence, compulsion, and intimidation (see, QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 256). Normatively, Ismail (2017) contends that *da'wa* should be carried out with full civility (QS. An-Nahl [16]: 125) and based on public interests rather than preachers (QS. Ibrahim [14]: 4). This involves an understanding that a preacher must be able to adapt the conditions of the targets so that, in the context of a multicultural society, *da'wa* is presented as an interfaith dialogue.

As a result, the rhetoric of moderate Islam as a foreign policy for Indonesia must be advanced in a more realistic setting by involving the ulama. This has a critical role in reinforcing the identity and rebuilding the image of Indonesian Islam on a worldwide scale. Although the discourse of Islamic moderation has gained a lot of attention from academics and the media in both the West and the East, this phrase remains contradictory because different locations and contexts have different understandings (Islam & Khatum 2015). This situation poses a problem for Indonesia in terms of promoting moderate Islam to the global population, which is intended to improve the country's image in relation to the issue of terrorism.

This campaign has the potential to turn into soft diplomacy for Indonesia. Diplomacy framed as multicultural preaching through interfaith engagement is important not only for the country but also for ulama to play a role in echoing the message of peace and contributing to the country's image. Furthermore, this initiative is capable of highlighting other concerns such as education, gender, youth, and the economy as critical components in responding to terrorism and conservatism. Another advantage of interfaith discussion is the chance for Indonesian ulama to establish worldwide networks in order to promote cooperation and communication between the government and religious figures, both locally and globally.

Method

This article is a qualitative study that uses a case study methodology to describe the EFU programme and its follow-up, namely, sending the ulama who participated in this programme to the United Kingdom as one of the centres of Western civilisation. As a result, this study discusses not only the EFU programme but also the participants' experiences as diplomatic agents promoting moderate Islam in a worldwide setting.

The study was conducted intensively for 6 months to get an overview including the conceptual understanding of the programme, training curriculum, and the process of sending the ulama who participate in this programme to the United Kingdom to promote moderate Islam in the global community. The subjects of this study are the Governor of West Java as the initiator and person in charge of this programme, facilitators, participants, and the chair of the institutions involved such as British Council Indonesia, British Embassy, Indonesian Embassy in London, Association of British Muslim, and British Institute of Peace.

The data collection strategies used were in-depth interviewing, observation, focused group discussion, and documentation research, all of which are interrelated. In-depth interviews were performed to ascertain the programme's significance. Meanwhile, observations were carried out to elicit information on the curriculum and practical implementation of this programme, while focused group conversations with participants were held to get information on their experiences participating in this programme. Four people were chosen as key informants using a purposive methodology with criteria aligned with the research aims. Validation of the data was accomplished using triangulation procedures involving theoretical sources and key informants. Following that, data are interpreted using a theoretical framework and then narratively presented in many major subjects related to the research objectives.

Results and discussion

Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim country, has the potential to become a global centre for Islamic civilisation. The qualities of moderate Islam are currently under attack

from conservative interpretations, which have sparked a variety of religious populist organisations. While it is acknowledged that religious populism movements do not always have an extreme bent as long as they are connected to religious authority (Solahudin & Fakhruroji 2020), some of these movements have eroded the qualities of moderate Indonesian Islam that have been created throughout time through Pancasila and democratic norms.

The promotion of moderate Islam is significant on a deeper level because it corresponds to the widespread symptoms of Islamophobia on a worldwide scale. On the other hand, it is recognised that advocating for moderate Islam in a global setting requires not only mastery of moderate Islamic concepts but also proficiency in English. It should be mentioned that the majority of English speakers in Indonesia are academics and the number is still quite low. This situation was then addressed by the Government of West Java Province through the EFU initiative, which was launched in 2019 in collaboration with the British Embassy and British Council in Jakarta. Through this programme, West Javanese ulama from all religious backgrounds acquire information and English skills necessary to serve as agents of diplomacy for Islamic moderation on a global scale, beginning with the United Kingdom.

‘English for Ulama’ and the global network for ulama

The EFU programme is one of the Government of West Java Province’s strategic initiatives to improve the English proficiency of West Java ulama in order for them to communicate moderate Islam in a global context. One of the programme’s considerations is the fact that the role of West Javanese ulama is perceived to be suboptimal in worldwide discussions of Islam. Numerous international events related to Islamic discourses and advancements have largely been organised by Middle Eastern ulama, despite Indonesia’s near-limitless progressive and prospective resources. Several individuals were chosen for this programme to travel to the United Kingdom and deliver a message of peace on interreligious dialogue from a moderate Islamic perspective.

The visit’s objective is: (1) to foster greater understanding, cooperation, and tolerance between Muslims and other religious communities worldwide, (2) to enhance the bond of brotherhood between the Muslim community in West Java and the world’s other religious communities, (3) to increase awareness of pluralism and interreligious dialogue as a means of achieving a better world, and (4) to create avenues for connection and contact with other ulama and religious communities on a national and worldwide scale.

The EFU programme scheme begins with the selection process of participants obtained through the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) network in West Java with several general requirements: (1) The participants should be from

elements of ulama or pesantren leaders, (2) they should have a strong to moderate mastery of Islamic religious knowledge, and (3) they should be willing to actively improve their English skills. So far, the EFU programme is the only one in Indonesia and has inspired and motivated the implementation of similar programmes in several other regions in Indonesia so that in the long term it will be able to contribute to building a more tolerant, peaceful, and moderate life.

Following two weeks of rigorous preparation, selected participants were sent to the United Kingdom and stayed for two weeks to deliver speeches in dialogue forums planned by the joint programme’s sponsors. The participants were officially greeted at the British Parliament building, where various authorities, including several ministerial-level officials, were present. Following their reception, the five chosen ulama were scattered around five cities: London, Manchester, Bristol, Birmingham, and Glasgow. Similarly, their respective destination cities greeted them with open arms. The five delegations carried out a range of activities in accordance with the directives.

As an illustration, participants stayed in London, and for example carried out *da’wa* activities and visited various communities, such as Addison & Khan Solicitor, and the Business and Law Firm of Pakistani Community. Participants also visited the City Hall of London; met a member of Parliament, Unmesh Desai who is also the ‘right hand’ of London mayor Sadiq Khan; attended the Interfaith Dialogue organised by Qoissar Abbas, which included a Friday sermon and the commemoration of the Prophet’s birthday at the Madina Mosque. Participants also met the mayor of Barking; visited Lady Aisha Academy, the Moslem Council of Britain (MCB), and the East London Mosque; attended the Interfaith Dialogue at Feltham Forest; had interviews with honorary members of parliament and the mayor of Feltham; attended the Interfaith Dialogue at Central London Mosque; and visited the Catholic Church, St. Angela’s Ursuline School, and took part in a live interview on the TV Islam Channel.

Overall, this initiative was a success, exceeding expectations. Individuals such as Adnan Sohail, Mohammad Abbasi, Kurshid Ahmad, and Paul Salahudin Armstrong all lent their support to this effort. The participation of various British Islamic figures has also expanded networking chances for Indonesian ulama, particularly those from West Java. This is consistent with the programme’s long-term objective, which is to elevate West Java’s ulama to a position of prominence on the worldwide stage, as Governor Ridwan Kamil noted:

English for *Ulama* aims to prepare *ulama* in West Java to become agents of reform and support the vision and mission of the Government of West Java Province, namely realizing “Jawa Barat Juara Lahir Batin” (Comprehensive Champion of West Java). The English for *Ulama* program encourages West Java to be a competitive area and able to play a role in the international level. (Interview with Ridwan Kamil, the Governor of West Java)

While the EFU programme's pragmatic purpose is to bolster the West Java government's vision and goal, it is also a publicly oriented initiative, as it encompasses all West Javanese ulama who are pesantren-based. Thus, this programme not only has a tremendous impact on the image of Indonesian Islam, particularly in West Java, but also serves as a progressive and proactive vehicle for disseminating moderate Islamic discourse on a global scale. On the other hand, this curriculum teaches West Javanese ulama vital skills for being more tolerant, inclusive and capable of collaborating with other parties in a global setting. As active agents, they can fortify the worldwide network that the government has facilitated and ensure its continuous viability.

'English for Ulama' programme as foreign diplomacy

Although knowledge on the Islamic world is widely available, most British people, like those in other Western nations, are unaware of Muslims living in Indonesia. So far, people have learned about the Islamic world from the media, which frequently portrays Islam as Arab, with its different wars. Not to mention that the media's coverage of numerous wars and acts of Arab-Islamic extremism has formed the perception of Islam as an intolerant religion, giving rise to Islamophobia. In response, this programme expressed the grandeur and richness of Indonesian culture, particularly Sundanese culture in West Java, so that the EFU programme, ideally, can be a new means to exhibit a peaceful and tolerant face of Islam in the worldwide arena.

As the 'spokesperson' for Indonesian Islam and particularly West Java, the entire delegation was involved in dialogue with various communities. They were also interviewed by various media, both radio and television, and also visited Muslim and non-Muslim figures. Apart from that, they also visited schools to convey the understanding and practice of Islam in Indonesia. Beni Safitra, for example, a young ulama from Sukabumi, West Java, was assigned to Manchester. He visited several places such as Minhaj College, the Muslim Chaplain at Manchester Metropolitan University, Student Islamic Society at the University of Manchester, Methodist Central Church to attend an interfaith dialogue, and International Muslim Charity to deliver Friday sermons at Madinah Hall, featured in interviews with BBC radio, and participated in the Prophet's birthday celebrations at MCM (Minhaj College Manchester). Apart from Beni, Hasan who was assigned to London was also involved in various activities. This young ulama from Cirebon gave a speech at the Thurrock Interfaith Roundtable Dialogue, which was held in Thurrock by the Thurrock Labour Party and was attended by Qaisar Abbas and John Kent, Imams of Grays Mosque Salim Rahman and Abdul Rashid, as well as Pastor David Peterson from St. Clements Church and Matt Drummond of St. Stephens Church.

Aminudin Aziz, the Indonesian Education and Cultural Attaché in London, described the EFU programme as a new

form of Indonesian diplomacy on the global arena. This is evidenced by the enthusiasm of the British people who attended the delegation's reception at the British Parliament building. Various ministerial-level authorities, as well as Christian and Jewish luminaries, attended. A significant number of media outlets also contribute to the event's uniqueness, demonstrating how the Western community requires objective information on the lives of Muslims in Indonesia, and this is an opportunity that must be capitalised on.

Similarly, Paul Smith, the Director of the British Council Indonesia, contends that queries regarding Islam are frequently raised as a result of misconceptions about Islam. As a result, it is unsurprising that the majority of Westerners label Islam negatively. Indonesians regard Islam as more tolerant, kind, and peaceful. Paul added that the message of Indonesian Islam's warmth and kindness must be repeated in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, the Indonesian Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the International Maritime Organization (IMO) referred to the EFU initiative as a watershed moment in Indonesian diplomacy on a worldwide scale:

EFU delegation to the United Kingdom is a breakthrough for Indonesia's diplomatic efforts. As a country with the largest Muslim population, this is an important step taken by the Government of West Java Province to demonstrate, convey and spread a peaceful Islam from an Indonesian perspective to the world. (Interview with Paul Smith, the Director of the British Council, Indonesia)

This is in line with the statement of the British Ambassador to Indonesia and Timor Leste, which states that the EFU programme has made Indonesia an example in bringing the message of peaceful Islam to the world through the following statement:

We are proud and support the ulama in spreading peace to the international community from an Islamic perspective. EFU has marked the start of the program's mission to support ulama to become messengers of peaceful Islam to the international community and to make Indonesia as an excellent example of a Muslim majority country with high tolerance. (Interview with Owen Jenkins, the British Ambassador to Indonesia and Timor Leste)

A similar comment may be found in the testimony of Adnan Sohail, a local partner of the Minhaj Welfare Foundation. According to him, the EFU programme should be continued and expanded in the future because what the Indonesian ulama shown can be a positive response to unfavourable opinions of the Western society. In addition, he anticipated that this could be a strategy to eliminate Islamophobia in Western societies.

In practice, the EFU programme is the best example of moderate Islamic discourse in Indonesian foreign policy. The intercultural and interfaith dialogue is a great example of the Indonesian government's efforts to promote moderate Islam as an Indonesian Islam. Furthermore, unlike typical visits by

government officials or diplomats, this programme involves ulama, who have the authority of religious competence and experience in Indonesia. This initiative is likely to become a global soft power for Indonesia, as the Indonesian government, in this case the Government of West Java Province, will use it as a forum for the sharing of ideas, beliefs, customs and other aspects of culture or identity, as well as the promotion of national interests.

As a diplomatic strategy, this programme emphasises how moderate Islam is the most ideal view of Islam for the development of contemporary and civilised community life, particularly in the setting of Indonesia, which is diverse in religion, race, ethnicity, culture and so on. This initiative has strategic benefits because it can not only strengthen efforts to mainstream religious moderation on a national scale but can also repair Indonesia's image in the world after being affected by numerous concerns of religious extremism, conservatism, and radicalism.

Conclusions

For Indonesia, the 1998 reform marked a watershed moment in all aspects of Indonesian culture, including religious life. This transformation has created new issues, such as the spread of many religious doctrines, which has led to populism and even extremism. It also changed the features of Indonesian Islam, which had previously been peaceful and inclusive. A couple of religious extremists have questioned Indonesian Islam, which has responded by promoting moderate Islamic discourse, notably a more tolerant, contemporary, democratic, pro-democracy, secular, and nonviolent approach to both religious practice and social and political life, which has later become Indonesia's foreign policy. This approach has been bolstered by the Ministry of Religious Affairs' incorporation of religious moderation.

In a regional perspective, West Java is one of the provinces in Indonesia that embraces moderate Islamic speech through the EFU programme, which seeks to promote moderate Islamic discourse to the global community. Several young ulama from West Java stayed in the United Kingdom for two weeks to express moderate Islamic ideas in various settings. Pragmatically, this programme is part of the 'Pesantren Juara' (Pesantren the Champion) programme launched by the Government of West Java Province and aims to minimise religious radicalism in West Java. However, ideally, the ulama from this programme's delegation will have numerous opportunity to network with other ulama in the United Kingdom. This is evident from the joyful reception they received when they came from many communities and prominent figures. Of course, this is a possibility that should be pursued in the future.

On a national-global scale, ulama participation in the EFU programme is an ideal example of global promotion of moderate Islamic discourse and can become a best practice in the delivery of moderate Islamic discourse as targeted in Indonesia's foreign policy. The Indonesian government can

create this programme to promote national interests through exchanging ideas, values, traditions, and other topics. The strategic benefits of this initiative include not just strengthening attempts to mainstream religious moderation in the Indonesian context but also restoring Indonesia's and other Muslim countries' global image. In other words, the EFU programme is a new type of Indonesian diplomacy aimed at spreading moderate Islam throughout the world.

Recommendation

This research focuses on the EFU programme launched by the West Java Provincial Government to promote moderate Islam in Indonesian. As a result, future research can examine the evolution of Western societies' views on Indonesian Islam in greater depth to supplement this study.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contributions

A.A.S. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

References

- Abidin, M.Z., 2017, 'Ulama in Indonesian urban society: A view of their role and position in the change of age', *Jurnal Theologia* 28(2), 235–254. <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2017.28.2.1863>
- Amarullah, A.K., 2015, *Upaya Diplomasi Indonesia Melalui Program Rumah Budaya Indonesia di Berlin Jerman*, Universitas Muhammadiyah, Malang.
- Andriasanti, L., 2014, 'Identitas Islam Moderat dalam Kebijakan Luar Negeri Indonesia', *GLOBAL: Journal Politik Internasional* 16(1), 84–98. <https://doi.org/10.7454/global.v16i1.7>
- Anwar, D.F., 2010, 'Foreign policy, Islam and democracy in Indonesia', *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, 37–54. <https://doi.org/10.14203/jssh.v3i1.45>

- Assyaukanie, L., 2009, 'Fatwa and violence in Indonesia', *Journal of Religion and Society* 11, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1558/arsr.v21i2.145>
- Azizah, L. & Azhar, P., 2015, 'Islam di Tengah Masyarakat Multikultural Indonesia (Studi Atas Konsep Multikultural Abdul Aziz Sachedina)', *Toleransi: Media Komunikasi Umat Beragama* 7(1), n.p.
- Azra, A., 2017, *Islam Indonesia Inklusif Vs Eksklusif: Dinamika Keberagamaan Umat Muslimin, Makalah untuk Pengajian Ramadhan PP Muhammadiyah, Universitas Muhammadiyah, Jakarta.*
- Bakti, A.F., 2005, 'Islam and modernity: Nurcholish Madjid's interpretation of civil society, pluralism, secularization, and democracy', *Asian Journal of Social Science* 33(3), 486–505.
- Casram & Dadah, 2019, 'Posisi Kearifan Lokal dalam Pemahaman Keagamaan Islam Pluralis', *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama Dan Lintas Budaya* 3(2), 161–187.
- Cohen, A., 2005, 'Power or ideology: What the Islamist choose will determine their future', *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 22(3), 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajiss.v22i3.463>
- Fakhruroji, M., 2019a, 'Digitalizing Islamic lectures: Islamic apps and religious engagement in contemporary Indonesia', *Contemporary Islam* 13(2), 201–215. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-018-0427-9>
- Fakhruroji, M., 2019b, 'Muslims learning Islam on the Internet', in M. Woodward & R. Lukens-Bull (eds.), *Handbook of contemporary Islam and Muslim lives*, pp. 1–17, Springer International Publishing, Cham.
- Freedman, A.L., 2009, 'Civil society, moderate Islam, and politics in Indonesia and Malaysia', *Journal of Civil Society* 5(2), 107–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448680903154907>
- Gabriella, C., 2013, *Peran Diplomasi Kebudayaan Indonesia Dalam Pencapaian Kepentingan Nasionalnya*, Universitas Hasanudin, Makassar.
- Geertz, C., 1960, 'The Javanese Kijaji: The changing role of a cultural broker', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2(2), 228–249. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S001041750000670>
- Hashemi, N., 2009, *Islam, secularism, and liberal democracy: Toward a democratic theory for Muslim societies*, Oxford University Press, New York, NY.
- Hefner, R.W., 2000, *Civil Islam*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- Hilmy, M., 2013, 'Whither Indonesia's Islamic moderatism?: A reexamination on the moderate vision of Muhammadiyah and NU', *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 7(1), 24–48. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2013.7.1.24-48>
- Ibrahim, I., Prasjojo, Z.H. & Sulaiman, S., 2019, 'Preventing Radicalism: Islamic moderation and revitalization in the border', *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama Dan Sosial Budaya* 4(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jw.v4i1.4400>
- Ichwan, M.N., 2005, "'Ulamā", state and politics: Majelis Ulama Indonesia after Suharto', *Islamic Law and Society* 12(1), 45–72. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1568519053123867>
- Islam, T. & Khatum, A., 2015, 'Islamic moderation in perspectives: A comparison between oriental and occidental scholarships', *International Journal of Nusantara Islam* 3(2), 69–78. <https://doi.org/10.15575/ijni.v3i2.488>
- Ismail, A.I., 2017, 'Globalization of Da'wa (Initiating a New Paradigm of Da'wa in Global Competition Era)', in Al-Makin, B. He & L. Allison (eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd Annual International Seminar and Conference on Global Issues (ISCoGI)*, in Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, vol. 140, Atlantis Press, s.l.
- Jailani, I.A., 2014, 'Dakwah dan Pemahaman Islam di Ranah Multikultural', *Jurnal Walisongo* 22(2), 413–432.
- Kettani, H., 2010, 'World Muslim population: 1950–2020', *International Journal of Environmental Science and Development (IJESD)* 1(2), 143–153. <https://doi.org/10.7763/IJESD.2010.V1.28>
- Kusumah, E.A., Muhammad, N., Muhammad, A. & Abdul, I., 2020, 'Wahabi : Politik Agama dan Hasrat Kekuasaan Di Indonesia Secara kelembagaan Islam disebarkan oleh 2010, Islam ada diurutan kedua dengan jumlah Negara dengan komunitas muslim terbanyak', *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-agama dan Lintas Budaya* 1(September 2016), 58–63.
- Makin, A., 2015, 'Revisiting Indonesian public reactions against Danish cartoons depicting prophet Muhammad', *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 5(2), 195–229. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v5i2.195-229>
- Makruf, J., 2011, 'Islam, democracy, and the road to moderatism: Testing the political commitment of Indonesian Muslim activists', *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 2(3), 517–592.
- Mandaville, P. & Hamid, S., 2018, 'The rise of Islamic soft power religion and foreign policy in the Muslim world', *Foreign Affairs*, viewed 12 July 2021, from <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-07/rise-islamic-soft-power>.
- Mansurnoor, I.A., 1992, 'Local initiative and government plans: "Ulama" and rural development in Madura, Indonesia', *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 7(1), 69–94. <https://doi.org/10.1355/SJ7-1C>
- Miharja, D. & Mulyana, M., 2019, 'Peran FKUB Dalam Menyelesaikan Konflik Keagamaan di Jawa Barat', *Religious: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama Dan Lintas Budaya* 3(2), 120–132.
- Millie, J., Syarif, D. & Fakhruroji, M., 2020, *Islamic preaching and state regulation in Indonesia*, No. 18; Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society, Melbourne Law School, viewed 05 April 2021, from <https://law.unimelb.edu.au/centres/cilis/research/publications/cilis-policy-papers/islamic-preaching-and-state-regulation-in-indonesia>.
- Musawar, Sahid, M.M., Jihadi, A.N. & Gunardi, S., 2019, 'Moderate Islam as a solution to pluralism in the Islamic world: The experience of Indonesia', *Al-Shajarah* 2019(Special Issue Sharia Hand Law), 1–24.
- Ni'am, S., 2015, 'Pesantren: The miniature of moderate Islam in Indonesia', *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 5(1), 111–134. <https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v5i1.111-134>
- Nugraha, A., 2012, 'Moderate Islam as new identity in Indonesian foreign policy: Between global role aspiration and co-religious solidarity', *Jicsa* 1(1), 12–35.
- Purwono, A., 2016, 'Moderate Islam in Indonesia foreign policy towards cases with Islamic dimension in European countries', *Proceeding of the 2nd International Seminar and Conference on Global Issues (ISCoGI) 2016: European and Asian in the Age of Globalization: Cooperation and Challenge*, pp. 1–7, Universitas Wahid Hasyim, Semarang, Indonesia.
- Purwono, A., 2017, 'Islam in foreign policy: Promotion of Moderate Islam in Indonesia foreign policy 2004-2014', *Indonesian Journal of International Relations* 1(1), 15–30. <https://doi.org/10.32787/ijir.v1i1.10>
- Solahudin, D. & Fakhruroji, M., 2020, 'Internet and Islamic learning practices in Indonesia: Social media, religious populism, and religious authority', *Religions* 11(1), 19. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010019>
- Subaidi, S., 2020, 'Strengthening character education in Indonesia: Implementing values from moderate Islam and the Pancasila', *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 11(2), 120–132.
- Sukma, R., 2009, *Islam and foreign policy in Indonesia: Internal weakness and the dilemma of dual identity*, No. 11; The Asia Foundation Working Paper Series, San Francisco, CA.
- Taher, T., 1997, *Aspiring for the middle path: Religious harmony in Indonesia*, Center for the Study of Islam and Society (CENSIS), Jakarta.
- Umar, A.R., 2016, 'A genealogy of Moderate Islam: Governmentality and discourses of Islam in Indonesia's foreign policy', *Studia Islamika: Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 23(3), 399–434. <https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v23i3.3157>
- Van Bruinessen, M., 2011, *What happened to the smiling face of Indonesian Islam? Muslim intellectualism and the conservative turn in post Suharto era*, RSIS, Singapore.
- Van Bruinessen, M., 2013, 'Introduction contemporary developments in Indonesian Islam and the "conservative turn" of the early twenty-first century', in M. Van Bruinessen (ed.), *Contemporary developments in Indonesian Islam, explaining the "conservative turn"*, pp. 1–20, ISEAS, Singapore.
- Wahid Institute, 2012, *Laporan Tahunan Kehidupan Keagamaan*, Wahid Institute, Jakarta.
- Witro, D., 2020, 'Ulama and Umara in Government of Indonesia: A review of religion and state', *Madania* 24(2), 135–144. <https://doi.org/10.29300/madania.v24i2.3778>
- Zuhdi, M., 2018, 'Challenging moderate Muslims: Indonesia's Muslim schools in the midst of religious conservatism', *Religions* 9(310), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9100310>
- Zulkifli, 2013a, *The struggle of the Shi'is in Indonesia*, ANU E-Press, Canberra.
- Zulkifli, 2013b, 'The Ulama in Indonesia: Between religious authority and symbolic power', *Jurnal Miqot* 37(1), 180–197. <https://doi.org/10.30821/miqot.v37i1.79>