

GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS

AND

WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES:

*Interrogating 'Violent Extremism'
and political violence from
the standpoint of women*

**The Intersecting Currents
of Islamist Immersions:
Indonesian Women Claiming
Space in Social Media**



Women and Media Collective
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Published by:

Women and Media Collective

56/1, Sarasavi Lane, Castle Street,
Colombo 8, Sri Lanka.

Email: wmcsrilanka@womenandmedia.org

Web: womenandmedia.org

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/womenandmediacollective>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/womenandmedia>

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INTRODUCTION: INTERSECTING CURRENTS OF ISLAMIST MOVEMENTS

For over two decades, social media has been a dynamic site of political mobilization and contestation in a divided Indonesia. It has shaped – and been shaped by – the trajectory of the country’s journey since its 32-year authoritarian rule ended in 1998. This paper illustrates this dynamic at two distinct moments in the recent political history of this Muslim-majority country: around the early years of “Reformasi,” the period named for its spirit of political reform, in the late 1990s and early 2000s and after the ISIS 2014 declaration of the Islamic Caliphate in Syria which reverberated strongly among Indonesians. These two moments are particularly insightful in terms of showing how social media came to become a crucial site for exercising agency by a diversity of Indonesian Muslims, including women and youth, both as proponents and opponents of Islamist ideologies.

To fully recognize women’s agency in the vast array of Islamist political movements in Indonesia, this paper emphasizes the shared ideological missions across these movements and explores how they intersect with each other to shape the gendered dynamics of extremism. This is in contrast with studies on violent extremism that focus exclusively on political movements espousing violence as a means of achieving their goals. Even for the most prominent among these movements, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, violent attacks are not the only tool of the trade. A review of ISIS propaganda material identifies six recurring and interconnecting themes beyond brutality and war: brutality, mercy, victimhood, war, belonging, and utopianism (Winter, 2015) which, as a whole, construct a much broader and more complex ideological narrative. Indonesian Islamists who affiliate themselves with transnational movements undoubtedly do so in response to the multi-faceted narrative in its entirety. Hizbut Tahrir, a transnational movement to unite Muslims in a single global Caliphate through non-violent means, also has a strong following among Indonesian Islamists. Although their strategies differ significantly, the underlying mission of transforming the state and society align with Islamist ideology, including as it pertains to the good Muslim woman and gender relations. Recognizing the intersections on the ground among the varying Islamist groups is crucial for building an understanding of women’s agency in all its diversity and complexity, both online and offline, surrounding these political movements.

The paper is organized into four sections. The first section will demonstrate how, with social media, both pro-democracy and Islamist movements flourished during Indonesia’s moment of volatile political change; the second section looks into a particular historical moment in which varying Islamist movements intersect through a massive online-offline mobilization campaign; the third section focuses on women’s diverse agency in social media in relation to Islamist movements; the last section explores the role of the state in shaping the playing field for women’s agency online.

CYBER-CIVIC SPACE AT A TIME OF VOLATILE POLITICAL CHANGE

The internet came to Indonesia during the first half of the 1990s and became accessible for public use in 1995 when commercial service providers opened for business. Soon after, urban cities and university campuses were filled with *warnet* (*warung* internet), borrowing from the word for a street stall to create an Indonesian term for internet cafes. Observations from that period depict a bustling scene in Yogyakarta at that time:

For a week or more a bustling crowd of young people, and a thick bunch of parked motorcycles, and the odd bicycle outside a small *warung* (kiosk), drew attention to the highway's brand-new pit stop in Jalan Colombo: the *Maga warnet* (*warung* internet) or Internet cafe. When it opened on September 17, offering free access for the inaugural week, its seven booths were constantly in use throughout the opening hours: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Less than a kilometer away ... about three hundred meters from the university's own Internet computer, GAMA-net, another Internet cafe, Pujayo.C@fe.Net had opened on September 9. Its eight computer terminals were dramatically visible through the four glass walls, which carved out a third of the downstairs floor space of Pujayo's popular eatery and karaoke lounge. (Hill and Sen, 1997)

Within a year, there was an estimated 40,000 internet subscribers, although some believe the number was much higher given the common practice of sharing passwords and accounts (Hill and Sen, 1997).

The widespread use of the internet coincided with a rising tide of opposition to the New Order regime. Organizing among pro-democracy movements escalated after the Asian financial crisis of 1997 as students, activists, urban intellectuals, and opposition politicians who sought to expand their networks increasingly relied on the internet for political communication. Internet-based electronic mailing lists became the source of vital uncensored information during the final years of the New Order. When the headquarters of an opposition political party was attacked on September 27, 1997, reporting on the violence and arrests afterwards came first through one of the most popular mailing lists, named *Aapakabar* (translation: how are you). The mailing list of Apakabar was also the first to distribute a series of emails written by George Aditjondro titled "List of Suharto's [sic] Wealth" – a depiction of the systemic corruption of the New Order regime – which spread like wildfire as other progressive mailing lists took it up and then shorter versions were printed, photocopied, and sold cheap on the streets of major cities for non-internet users to read just as popular mobilization calling for Soeharto's resignation was escalating in 1998 (Lim, 2003). After the national parliament building was taken over by protesters – women's rights activists included – and mass riots broke out in Jakarta, Soeharto announced his resignation in May 1998 after 32 years in power. For its role during this moment of historic political change, the internet earned the title "cyber-civic space" in which "individuals and groups generate collective activism online and translate it into real-world movements in an offline setting" (Lim, 2013).

The mass riots in May 1998 that gave the final push for Soeharto's resignation involved attacks targeted against the Chinese-Indonesian community resulting in stores and businesses boarded up with signs saying *pribumi* (indigenous) to avoid destruction. Post-riot documentation efforts by civil society disclosed incidences of sexual violence by rioters targeting Chinese-Indonesian women. This galvanized the Indonesian women's movement, which called for accountability and support for victims' rights. To assist in their communications, the mailing list "perempuan@yahoogroups.com" was set up and came to play a central role in consolidating the movement across the archipelago.

Only seven months into Indonesia's Reformasi era, in January 1999, inter-religious conflict erupted in Ambon, the largest urban centre in the islands of Maluku. The mobilization of support for the warring sides quickly spread nationally and internationally via the internet, through electronic mailing lists and websites. Muslims directed their appeals to Muslim constituencies domestically and globally while Christians sent their calls for support to international Christian associations, the international community, and the United Nations (Braüchler, 2003). The main organization mobilizing support for the Muslims was FKAJ (Forum Komunikasi Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah), a self-described "communication forum" for the followers of Ja'far Umar Thalib, an Indonesian who had fought in Afghanistan in 1988-1989 and studied Islam in Pakistan. For this purpose, FKAJ set up *Laskar Jihad*, or Jihad Fighters, comprised of volunteers for battle in Ambon. An estimated 3000 people from various parts of the archipelago joined *Laskar Jihad* to fight the "holy war" in Ambon (Lim, 2005).

As a communication tool for Ja'far Umar Thalib's movement, FKAJ had a sophisticated media infrastructure. To spread information about the conflict in Ambon, raise funds, and recruit volunteers, FKAJ used print media, radio broadcasting and the internet. Each of its 53 branches around the country was purportedly equipped with an internet connection and email addresses, telephones and fax machines. *Laskar Jihad* also had a website, "Laskar Jihad Online," which was bilingual and regularly updated with news, photographs, and audio recordings on the conflict in Ambon. During the first year of its operation, this website featured stories and links to other like-minded websites outside the country, such as those in Chechnya, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan. Before this website was shut down, in 2002, it was also reporting and mobilizing for the inter-religious conflict in Poso, Central Sulawesi, which erupted not long after the conflict in Ambon (Lim, 2005). *Jemaah Islamiyah*, a violent extremist organization with links to al-Qaeda set up by Indonesians who had returned from fighting in Afghanistan, also set up an online platform, called Al-Bunyan, that shared information on the conflicts in Ambon and Poso as well as on the bombings of 11 churches on Christmas Eve in 2000 and of a popular nightclub in Bali in 2002 (Nuraniyah, 2017) as part of mobilizing online for the "jihad war."

In 1999, Indonesia had its first free national elections after three decades of authoritarianism. As many as 48 political parties participated, in contrast to the three state-controlled parties under the New Order. Among them, only one party utilized the internet as a tool in its campaign and this was the Justice Party, a newcomer in Indonesian politics fashioned after the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The Justice Party is noted to have maintained more than two dozen websites targeting voters in various parts of the country (Lim, 2017). Subsequent elections saw more and more political parties using the internet and social media, especially as the elections campaign industry became professionalized and commercialized (Saraswati, 2017).

To conclude, social media of the late 1990s and early 2000s played a central role in Indonesia's moment of political change. It facilitated the mobilization of both pro-democracy and Islamist movements as they navigated a volatile and violent beginning of Indonesia's Reformasi era.

VIRTUAL PATHWAYS TO ISLAMIST TRANSFORMATIONS

By the time the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was declared, in 2014, the face of democratic Indonesia had changed profoundly. Alongside the ratification of human rights conventions and parallel to a growing vibrant civil society there was an increase in incidents of violence and intolerance: bombings of churches, embassies, hotels and nightclubs by violent Islamists like *Jemaah Islamiyah* (affiliated with Al-Qaeda); persecution of religious minorities by Islamist vigilante groups like *Front Pembela Islam*; and a rise of blasphemy charges brought to the courts in the name of defending Islam. ISIS propaganda online had singled out Indonesia for recruitment through a video featuring Abu Muhammad al-Indonesi who spoke in the Indonesian language calling for Indonesian men to migrate to the Islamic State (Counter Extremism Project, 2021). Indonesia also had a media wing for ISIS support, called *Kabar Dunia Islam* (News from the Islamic World), which was managed by administrators based in Syria and Indonesia. Among them was a woman, Siti Khadijah, who used the online name Ummu Sabrina, after leaving Indonesia with her husband for Aleppo, Syria, in 2014. Through Facebook, Siti Khadijah shared her journey to Syria and, upon arrival, described living conditions far removed from the sad realities of public facilities in Indonesia: a furnished apartment, a monthly stipend plus free schooling and healthcare. Her Facebook account was immediately flooded with questions on how to get to Syria (IPAC 24, 2015). By 2016, there were 150 ISIS-related channels and groups that were active in Indonesia (IPAC 48, 2018) and between 1,000 and 2,000 Indonesians had pledged allegiance to ISIS, including through Islamist extremist groups like *Jemaah Islamiyah* and *Jamaah Ansharud Daulah*. The institutional infrastructure in support of ISIS recruits had also become more robust with as many as 15 pro-ISIS charities whose role was to provide support for the families of Indonesians ISIS fighters documented in 2017 (ibid.).

Economically, Indonesia experienced steady growth earning it the status of a confident middle-income country. The middle class grew from 25% in 1999 to 45% by 2010 when the population reached 250 million people. This Muslim-majority middle class was characterized by a growing interest in "halal consumerism" in which spending decisions – on fashion, health services, housing, tourism, entertainment – are approached as a means to assert one's Muslim identity (Rakhmani, 2019). The urban middle class were avid internet users whose numbers had climbed up to 80 million people by 2014.¹ Using various survey data from 2010, 2011 and 2016, a shift was detected in the correlation between education and income levels on the one hand and levels of conservatism and radicalism on the other among Muslim Indonesians. While in 2011 the higher a person's education and income, the lower the levels of conservative and radical attitudes, by 2016 the trend had

1. <https://dailysocial.id/post/apjii-internet-utilization-in-indonesia-in-2014> Accessed March 15, 2022.

reversed: Muslims with high education and incomes were more intolerant than those with less. For example, among those with tertiary-level education, 43.9% rejected non-Muslims as governors and, among those who had high income, 50.6% objected to a non-Muslim president (Mietzner and Muhtadi, 2018). Institutionally, Indonesia's national Council of Ulema (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* or MUI), a state-sanctioned body of Islamic clerics, came to play a more prominent political role. They effectively did so through anti-heresy fatwas which were used by Islamist vigilante groups to justify their attacks against religious minorities, such as the Ahmadiyah, Shiites and Christians. MUI then grew to become the arbiters of all that is halal for Indonesia's "sharia economy": not just food products but also hospitals, businesses, restaurants, and travel for the ever-growing world of Muslim consumers (Rakhmani, 2019).

In the final months of 2016, when internet users were estimated to have reached 132.7 million, including 92 mobile social media users and 106 million Facebook users (Lim, 2017), a massive online-offline campaign using hashtags such as *#aksibelaQuran* (Action to Defend the Qur'an), *#aksibelaIslam* (Action to Defend Islam) and *#tangkapAhok* (Arrest Ahok), brought hundreds of thousands of people in the Islamists' symbolic white robes to Jakarta's main thoroughway: 200,000 people in November and 500,000 in December. See the image captured and uploaded to the Instagram account of a supporter below (Beta, 2019).



Figure 1. The image in this Instagram post by Ukhti Sally captures the attendance at the 212 Rally at the National Monument in Jakarta on 2 December 2016. The caption is an emoticon representing tears streamign down a face, suggesting that the rally was emotionally moving.

This campaign was designed to unseat and delegitimize an incumbent and double-minority Governor of Jakarta – a Christian of Chinese descent popularly known as Ahok – who was running for re-election and opposed by a Muslim candidate of Arab descent with a strong political constituency among Indonesia's urban-based Islamists. The outcome was not only the defeat of Ahok as Jakarta's Governor but also a highly controversial accusation of blasphemy which landed him in jail for two years.

This 2016 hashtag-powered mass mobilization has been marked as the largest political demonstration in Indonesian history and is perceived as an “Islamist alliance” (IPAC 44, 2018). One of its hashtags, *#AksiDamai* (Peaceful Action), can be seen as an attempt to distinguish itself from violent extremists. It led to a post-event campaign called the 212 Movement led by three leading Islamists described in the following way: the Salafi-modernist network whose aim is to transform state and society from the bottom up along more puritan lines by shaping public opinion through education institutions, preaching (dakwah) groups, the media, and social organizations; *Forum Pembela Islam* (Islamic Defenders Forum) or FPI which is a vigilante group with ties to politicians and security forces and calls for restoration of a constitutional clause that would oblige all Indonesian Muslims to obey Islamic law; and Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia or HTI which is the Indonesian branch of a transnational organization committed to uniting Muslims in a global caliphate through non-violent means (IPAC 44, 2018). An array of other Islamist groups, including those led by former jihadist groups, were also part of the 212 Movement. They all distinguish themselves from violent extremist groups and ISIS even when their ultimate goals to transform the state and society align with Islamist ideologies.

Among the three main Islamist players in the 212 Movement, HTI in particular is interesting in its systematic targeting of Indonesia’s urban Muslim youth. Two HTI members – Felix Siauw and La Ode Munafar – have initiated mass followings in social media among the youth.

Felix Siauw is a Chinese-Indonesian convert to Islam and member of HTI, with four million followers on Facebook, two million on Twitter, one million on Instagram, and 20,000 subscribers on YouTube, as of 2017 (Hew, 2018). His call is to uphold Islam as a way of life and a political ideology while explicitly dismissing democracy, nationalism, and feminism as inferior products of the secular world. His particular aim is to spread Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia’s ideology among urban Muslim youth and does so by making his preaching “cool”. He is particularly interested in shaping the hearts and minds of young Muslim women and so, unsurprisingly, half of his audience is young women who follow him on Instagram and Facebook (Ibid.).

In applying his social media strategy, Felix Siauw developed a gendered approach regarding different platforms. He sees Instagram as a better fit to reach women, while Twitter is more attractive to men. In his view, “Twitter is text-based, while Instagram is a visual medium. Men tend to engage more with texts, and women like images ... Hence, the discussions on Twitter is often rougher (*kasar*) and the interaction on Instagram is softer (*lembut*).” The latter aligns with his view that women tend to be more emotional than logical. To reach out to more young women, he developed a preaching style that relies on visual representations, which he calls “visual dakwah.” He then teamed up with a young female visual artist, Emeraldal Noor Achni, to set up a production house that has published best-selling visual books, such as “*Yuk Berhijab*” (“Let’s Use the Hijab”), printed in pink and purple fonts with a pink-coloured book cover and eye-catching illustrations in conveying its ultra-conservative and dogmatic message to young Muslim women. When Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia was banned by the Indonesian Government in 2017, Felix Siauw continued to use his online and offline platforms, albeit with more nuanced messaging (Ibid.).

Another HTI member, La Ode Munafar, initiated a youth-oriented campaign with the hashtag *Indonesia Tanpa Pacaran* (Indonesia Without Dating) with, as of May 2020, one million followers on Instagram, 900,000 on Facebook, and 10,000 combined on Twitter and YouTube as well as local chapters in 67 cities around the country. The social media postings of *#IndonesiaTanpaPacaran* is mainly based on Munafar's writings published in 63 motivational books for young people focusing on building their social life and friendships. His books are published by an affiliated printing house whose name reflects a youthful spirit, combining the Indonesian word depicting the cool social life with an English word: Gaul Fresh. The narrative of *#IndonesiaTanpaPacaran* is that too many of the young generation have become "victims of dating" due to the dominance of secularism and non-observance of Sharia law. In 2018, Munafar declared dating as ruining the young generation and must be abolished for the sake of the future of the nation and the religion; denounced it as being against Islam and a product of secularism, liberalism, and human rights; and called for returning to Islamic Sharia to achieve *#IndonesiaTanpaPacaran*. He has also been documented as equating dating with alcohol consumption and drug use, and LGBT as causing moral degradation among the youth (Zaki, 2020).

This section has shown how social media played a crucial role in expanding various Islamist movements, violent and non-violent, in Indonesia, targeting and attracting young women and men from amongst a growing urban middle class.

YOUNG WOMEN'S AGENCY AND HIJRAH AMBITIONS

Social media has been credited as the equalizer for women's participation in Islamist movements, particularly those affiliated with ISIS (IPAC 68, 2020). Social media enabled the recruitment of Indonesians from diverse backgrounds into their fold, but, as these movements spread and grew, it also became the means for those whose mission is to oppose the rise of Islamist ideologies in Indonesia. Social media has been central to these divergent engagements. The ways in which women have responded to these movements are diverse and divergent, compelled by varying motives – social and political in nature but also with economic or financial ambitions. Women's responses to the call for hijrah is a case in point.

In Islam's historical narrative, hijrah refers to the big move that the Prophet Muhammad made from Mecca to Medina to avoid persecution in the year 622 CE. Since then, the meaning of the term has been extended by diverse Islamist movements and within the Muslim political discourse to include withdrawal from the un-Islamic path to a new "correct pathway" under Sharia law² (Nisa, 2018).

2. Eva Nisa provides the following elaboration on how the notion of hijrah is integral to Islamist movements: Yusuf (2009) argues that since the 1940s, this term "has been ideologized by neofundamentalist thinkers such as Sayyid Abū al-'Alā Mawdūdī (1903-1979) of the Jamā'at-i Islāmī of Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966) of the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn) in Egypt." Many Muslims in Indonesia who often use this term are also followers of Islamist movements, in particular the Tarbiyah movement, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, and Salafi groups. (Nisa, 2018)

The notion of hijrah has been used at various points of Indonesia's political history. The first time the term was used was in the context of an anti-colonial movement led by Darul Islam in West Java starting in the 1930s with the ultimate goal of establishing an independent nation under Islamic law. The term hijrah was also used in the 1980s in relation to the self-exile of leaders of the Negara Islam Indonesia (Indonesian Islamic State) after being hunted down by the New Order regime. The notion of hijrah re-emerged after the declaration of ISIS in 2014 in the form of a global call to Muslims to join the Islamic State in Syria. The call resonated with Indonesians, garnering interpretations and responses in different ways, including from women.

The following are three distinct responses which reflect women's agency in relation to the varying Islamist political movements in Indonesia and where social media plays a key role.

HIJRAH FOR VIOLENT JIHAD

Social media has been crucial for the radicalization of Indonesian women employed as domestic workers abroad. In 2017, IPAC documented 50 Indonesian women migrant workers in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore who joined extremist groups, including ISIS and its affiliates. Among them, four women established themselves in Syria, eight were deported from Turkey on their way to Syria, and 16 engaged in the movements by marrying jihadis (IPAC 39, 2017). Compared to other Indonesian women who join these movements, migrant workers abroad are considered uniquely positioned because they have the language skills to engage with non-Indonesian speakers, they have a more international outlook, have better computer know-how, and are generally more confident to act on their own accord (IPAC 35, 2017). Aside from themselves carrying out hijrah to Syria, women migrant workers also provide financial and technical support for others to get to Syria, contribute funding, and volunteer themselves in the plotting of bomb attacks in Indonesia. Hong Kong is a particularly active hub as 43 out of the 50 militant migrant workers were found here and, among over 200 Indonesian associations registered in Hong Kong in 2016, more than half were dakwah groups, including those with salafi and jihadi leanings (ibid.).

The stories of three women – Ayu, Ika and Dian – illustrate the role migrant workers play in violent extremist movements and the centrality of social media in it. When pro-ISIS social media users in Indonesia started to move from Facebook and Twitter to Telegram, in 2014, in search of a safer platform for their exchanges, the women migrant workers in Hong Kong were the first to make the shift.

Ayu was a leader of a pro-ISIS cell in Hong Kong while she was employed there as a migrant domestic worker (Nuraniyah, 2018). Before she was radicalized in Hong Kong, she had worked in several other countries as a domestic worker, namely in Malaysia, Singapore, and Macau. She had a challenging life as a migrant worker – running away from a difficult marriage in Malaysia, living in the street after being fired from her job in Macau, and getting caught up in drugs and alcohol during a time of deep depression in Hong Kong. As part of rebuilding her life, she joined Islamist campaigns against "christianisation" and sought out, through Facebook, information on Muslims in war zones following her past interest in the religion-based conflicts of Indonesia – in Ambon

and Poso – in the early 2000s. By following jihadi accounts in social media, she met an Indonesian jihadi online and then married him during a visit to Indonesia. This marriage widened her network with ISIS supporters, mainly through the private chat rooms of Telegram. Ayu became an active networker – online with Indonesian and international jihadis and offline with like-minded migrant workers in Hong Kong – posting her own analysis of the situation in Syria based on information received from her wide networks. She and her Hong Kong network once financed Felix Siau, the popular Hizbut Tahrir influencer, to preach in Hong Kong. As her reputation among Indonesian ISIS supporters grew, she became a “go to” person for those seeking the safest route for carrying out their own hijrah to Syria. Ayu also raised funds for individuals who needed financial assistance for their journey, which she is known to have done for two people for whom she raised USD 4,600 and arranged tickets and visas (IPAC 39, 2017).

Ika financed several militant trainings and bomb plotting for ISIS supporters in Indonesia while she was employed as a migrant worker in Hong Kong. When she was not able to renew her visa, she decided to volunteer herself to be a suicide bomber in Indonesia. She was radicalized when she turned to religion while struggling with her sexuality. Through Facebook, WhatsApp and then Telegram, Ika entered the jihadi world, made connections with jihadi sympathizers, and made her own jihad cell. She encouraged ISIS supporters in her cell to plan bomb attacks which she would fund. The plans never bore fruit due to poor execution and most of her cell members were apprehended, including one who was her online husband. When Ika offered herself as a suicide bomber, in 2016, her contact who was an ISIS recruiter working with a jihad operator in Syria, assigned her to a bomb plot for Bali. The plot was detected by the Indonesian authorities and Ika and her accomplice were arrested (Nuraniyah, 2018). At the same time, another radicalized woman migrant worker, Dian, was also being prepared by the same people to be a suicide bomber. Her target was the presidential palace in Jakarta but the plot was detected and Dian arrested (IPAC 68, 2020).

HIJRAH AS GAINFUL PIETY

One of the most popular Indonesian online preachers, with more than seven million followers on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube combined and an advocate for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, Felix Siau, says that “Islam is a way of life and a political ideology” (Hew, 2018). Preaching as a member of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, a trans-national Islamist movement using non-violent means, Felix Siau specifically targets the youth through his social media accounts. More than half of the followers are purported to be young women. He works with young content creators who produce “visual dakwah” (visual preaching), mainly with Instagram, designed to convey his message in casual and friendly ways. His postings focus on promoting his version of the Islamic way of life in ways that have been described as “fun yet radical, colorful yet conservative, down-to-earth yet hardliner, interactive yet dogmatic” (Hew, 2018). During one of Indonesia’s largest political mobilizations in recent history, which targeted Jakarta’s Christian Governor of Chinese-descent in 2016–2017, Felix Siau called on his followers to join the campaign under the banner of “*Aksi Bela Islam*” (Action to Defend Islam) based on the view a non-Muslim cannot lead the country. His young female followers took heed.

Young urban Muslim women have been building massive online communities that promote religious piety following a prescribed image of the good Muslim woman. Such personal transformation is their notion of hijrah. Their social media platform of choice is Instagram which allows optimal creativity in carrying out the “visual dakwah” in ways that attract fellow young women, often applying pastel colors and girly designs. A record of seven top Instagram accounts created and led by these young Muslim women counted more than five million followers in total (Beta, 2020). The primary preoccupation of these accounts is promoting the pious lifestyle for young women, which is reflected by wearing what is called the hijab syar’i, a large Sharia-compliant hijab covering the whole upper half of the body and combined with a loose long robe; avoiding dating and marrying young; and, upon marriage, obedience to the husband. See example below (Beta, 2019).



Figure 2. The veiled female character that often appeared on Peduli Jilbab Instagram posts. Source <https://www.instagram.com/p/3fx-c5mFz-D/> (Screengrabbed 20 July 2018)

This worldview does not prevent women from working, albeit only from their home base so as not to interfere with their main duties as wife and mother. The focus on dress code meant that many of these women were well-placed to develop their own online businesses, designing and selling different styles of the hijab syar’i on Instagram. A list of the top seven Instagram accounts created and led by women shows how their visual dakwah is part and parcel of their business ventures, not just in Muslim fashion but also as event organizers for their offline dakwah gatherings (Beta, 2019).

Table 1. Seven popular Instagram da'wa accounts administered by young women as a group or individual.

Instagram Account	Followers	Account Type	Business
Ukhti Sally	406,687	Group	Fashion, publishing, events
Dunia Jilbab	1,356,152	Group	Advertorial, publishing
Hijabers Community	111,137	Group	Events, advertorial, publishing
Peduli Jilbab	328,321	Group	Publishing, events
Dian Pelangi / Co-founder, Hijabers Community	4,830,646	Individual	Fashion, publishing, advertorial
Ghaida Tsurayya / Co-founder, Hijabers Community	435,739	Individual	Fashion, advertorial
Ayu Momalula / Founder, Ukhti Sally	71,835	Individual	Fashion, publishing, events

Source: The number of followers as of March 25 2019 from socialblade.com

The account “Dunia Jilbab” (World of Hijab), on Twitter and Instagram, with more than one million followers, was created by Fatiya who was inspired by preachers from various Islamist movements, including Felix Siau. She is a graduate of a local business school and a former discotheque jockey who used to enjoy wearing sexy clothes. Upon her own self-transformation, she decided to promote hijrah among young women towards the pious Muslim lifestyle. Most of her online followers range from the ages of 14 to 30 years. When she reached one million followers on Instagram, on November 3, 2016, there were more than 15,000 posts on that day alone (Nisa, 2018).

Another account promoting hijrah through hijab syar'i, Ukhti Sally, was created by Ayu Momalula who started to join the Tarbiyah movement when she was still in high school and then grew closer to the Salafi movement over time. The name of her account refers to a fictional character by the name of Sister (Ukhti in Arabic) Sally which, in turn, is constructed from the word “*salihah*” (pious in Arabic). Ukhti Sally also has a Muslim fashion business and encourages her followers, mostly aged 18–26 years old, to help market her syar'i products as part of their collective hijrah journey. Eventually she expanded her business to event organizing and publishing. In 2015, she held one offline event with her followers every three or four months which was attended by more than 2000 young women. She published a range of books on the subject of “pious love” with titles like *Diary Sally* (Sally's Diary), *Diary Cinta Sally* (Sally's Love Diary) and *101 Pesan Cinta* (101 Love Messages). Her message of love focuses on finding pious husbands and discourages dating as it is believed to be forbidden by Islam (Nisa, 2018).



Figure 3. A post of Duniacijilbab on hijrah.

NOTE: The visual content says, ‘My Hijrah is not a sign that I am now free of all shortcomings.’ This post and caption was liked by 6242 people. On 2 November 2016 it was uploaded again and received 2449 likes.

Source: This picture was taken from Duniacijilbab's Instagram account: <https://www.instagram.com/p/bmvxhzrg8ne/>, 3 November 2016, at 19:07

During the 2016 mass mobilization in Jakarta, popularly known as 212 (December 2), Ukhti Sally used her Instagram profile to demonstrate support for the Islamist agenda through the hashtag “Defend the Qur’an” (#*belaquran*) which was liked by 3,600 social media users. She posted a photo of the political show of force by Islamists and expressed being moved by it, as noted by Beta (see left picture below). A few months later, Ukhti Sally expressed support for the campaign to delegitimize and criminalize the double minority incumbent Jakarta Governor by posting a picture of roses on top of the Qur’an (see right picture below) (Beta, 2020). Ukhti Sally’s choice of visual imagery resonates with Felix Siauw’s approach to his social media postings, namely casual and colorful while hardline and dogmatic.



Figure 4. An image of the Qur’an used by Ukhti Sally to express support for the 212 Rally. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/bngbn2xjvnk> (Captured 26 March 2019)

As voting time approached, the founder of Ukhti Sally, Ayu Momalula, was also among the supporters of the candidate opposing the incumbent Governor, a former military commander accused of gross violations of human rights in East Timor who is a Muslim and who has aligned himself with various Islamist movements during his campaign, she made the rallying call of “Muslim Vote Muslim” as this posting illustrates (*ibid.*).



Figure 5. Ayu, the founder of Ukhti Sally, is seen here with their peers promoting #MuslimVoteMuslim on her Instagram account. The caption reads: Keep preaching kindness because we do not know which of our words can touch someones heart. Keep praying because we never know which of our prayers will be granted by God. Greetings from the angels of Bekasi. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BQS6kOqFpFQ> (Screengrabbbed 20 July 2018).

The hijab syar'i social media accounts have strong staying power also due to the commercial support they receive from businesses targeting the Muslim consumer. Commercial interest comes up during the offline events that are organized for these accounts' followers. Fashion designers of hijab syar'i promote each other's businesses, but large corporations from Indonesia's Muslim fashion industry and Sharia banking have also been documented as financial backers of these offline events (Nisa, 2018). Gift bags and gift vouchers are among the attractions of these events as demonstrated in the posting below (Beta, 2020). All are taking advantage of the Indonesian government promotion of a "Sharia economy."



Figure 6. A religious teacher with audience members holding giftbags from Zoya Cosmetics, a local brand of beauty products, and @louisaluna. id, an online vendor of hijabs, after a pengajian (Qur'an study group) organized by the Hijabers Community in January 2019. Source: <https://www.instagram.com/p/bs4ozillrel/> (Captured 28 March 2019).

HIJRAH AS COUNTER-NARRATIVE

A month after the Jakarta gubernatorial elections revealed the Islamists' candidate as the winner, Felix Siauw received a challenge to his Instagram posting under the hashtag "Defend the Qur'an" that went viral. The challenge came from a 25-year-old woman, Kalis Mardiasih, through her Facebook account which addressed Siauw directly and critiqued his views while presenting her own alternative view of a pluralist Islam. This challenge and counter-narrative came after a national gathering of women ulama, in April 2017, in which the legitimacy of women's leadership within Islam was claimed and declared. The gathering, called *Kongres Ulama Perempuan Indonesia* (Congress of Indonesian Women Ulama), or popularly known by its acronym KUPI, was the first of its kind in Indonesia in that it was an autonomous platform led by feminist Muslims³ and implemented in alliance with leaders of the secular women's movement. While violent extremism was discussed as one among many issues of concern alongside such issues as labor migration, child marriage and sexual violence, the main message of the congress was about establishing

3. Other national gatherings of women ulama have occurred but under the umbrella of male-led religious mass organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah.

the religious authority of women ulama and proclaiming the birth of an invigorated rights-based movement of young ulama dedicated to gender justice. KUPI marked a new wave of activism from within traditional Islamic communities and education institutions, carving new spaces to advance a feminist vision of Islam.

One of the many events during KUPI was the launching of an online media called Mubadalah.id. which eventually became a platform for young writers formulating their thoughts and ideas addressing current issues within the framework of Islam. *Mubadalah.id* is operated by a team of young men and women from Indonesia's traditionalist Islam background under the thought leadership of Faqihuddin Abdul Kodir, a young scholar of Islam who had built on the theological concept of mubadalah or reciprocity to create a foundation for advocating equal relations between men and women from within Islamic thought. In their website, there is a selection of writings that are tagged as the "Hijrah Archives" (<https://mubadalah.id/tag/hijrah/>) which conveys alternative viewpoints on the notion of hijrah from multiple perspectives: historical, psychological, theological, and sociological. The numbers of Mubadalah.id followers rose due to followers from secular feminists seeking religion-based narratives aligned to their point of view.⁴

Meanwhile, Kalis Mardiasih grew to become a prominent social media influencer bringing the progressive and gender perspectives into public discourse. In 2018, mirroring her Islamist ideological opponents, Mardiasih started publishing her own books directed at young readers. The first of these is titled '*Hijrah Jangan Jauh-jauh Nanti Nyasar*' (Don't Hijrah Too Far So That You Lose Your Way). In this book, Mardiasih presented a counter-narrative on the notion of hijrah through storytelling of her own personal journey as a young woman who learned about Islam in a local *pesantren*, the traditional religious schools indigenous to Indonesia, and by sharing her observations of daily life in Muslim communities with special focus on the lives of women and children. She also writes about her experience with online bullying in her book.

One of the initiators of KUPI is Rahima, an organization set up by Muslim and secular feminists as an information and education centre to empower women ulama. When Rahima joined a donor-funded Working Group on Women and Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism (WGWC), it chose to work with its network of women ulama who are grassroots preachers of Islam as well as educators in local Islamic universities to develop counter-narratives. They focused on five concepts within Islam that constitute the gendered face of Islamist ideology: hijrah, niqab (face covering), fitnah, polygamy and child marriage. The network brought together 25 women ulama from different parts of the country to develop alternative definitions of these contested terms. On the notion of hijrah, these women ulama criticized the reductionist approach to the concept and its reliance on symbols such as the niqab; they challenged the message of hate and intolerance inherent in how the term is used by the Islamists; and, they offered a new meaning to the term that reflects a commitment to non-violence, love and compassion. One ulama, Anis Suadah, referred to the words of a Javanese feminist from the late 1800s and early 1900s, Kartini, and linked hijrah to a current agenda of the women's movement to pass a bill on sexual violence. Her words are as follows (Rahima, 2020):

4. Focus Group Discussion.

From darkness to light; from discrimination to equality;
from violence to compassion;
advocating for the adoption of the bill on sexual violence is also part of
jihad to hijrah.

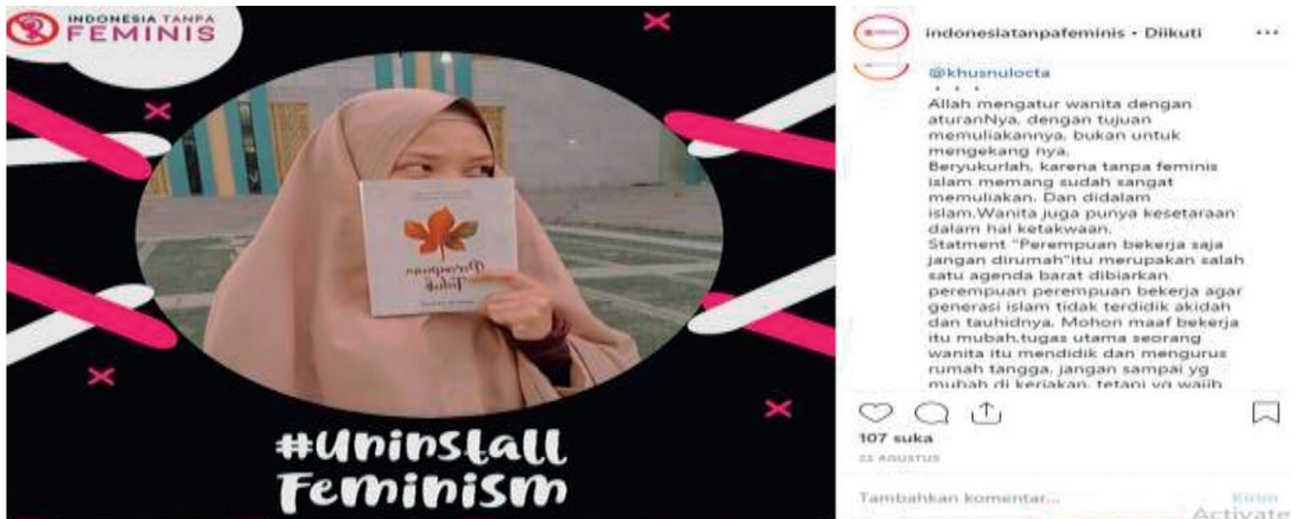
These words were then paraphrased for a campaign poster on preventing violent extremism (see below).



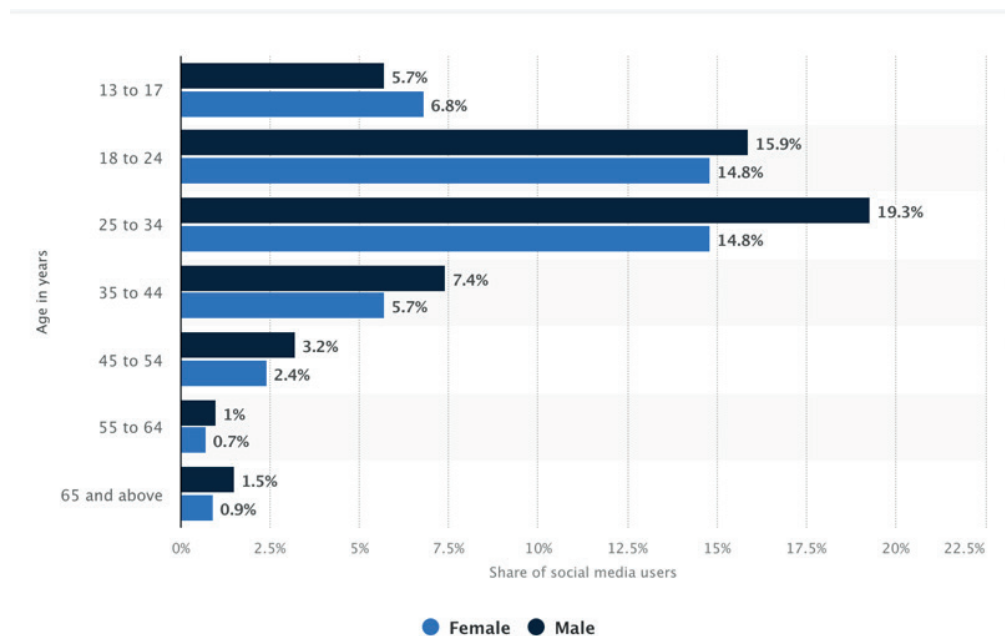
The online contestations in social media between Islamist and the rights-based groups escalated around the period of parliamentary debate on the sexual violence bill. At its peak, there were daily social media postings on why the bill was a threat to Indonesia and Islam vs why it was imperative to fulfill the rights of victims. Kalis Mardiasih described how she faced daily attacks in social media during this time from groups such as #starmuslimah,⁵ a product of an Islamist School of Islamic Thought (*Sekolah Pemikiran Islam*) that has constructed a multi-pronged campaign against the bill and against feminism. The Mubadalah.id online platform gained a rise in its followers at this time, originating from secular women who were seeking religious-based arguments to wage their own challenge to the Islamist campaigns.⁶ New platforms also began to emerge with a distinctively anti-feminist goal, such as the Instagram account @IndonesiaTanpaFeminis and the hashtag #uninstallfeminism (see picture below). In March 2019, @IndonesiaTanpaFeminis had more than 5,000 followers (Azmi and Bachri, 2019).

5. Focus Group Discussion, 9 December 2021.

6. Ibid.



By January 2021, Indonesia recorded 202.6 million internet users and 170 million active social media users, which, respectively, is 73.7% and 61.8% of the total 274.9 million population.⁷



The contestation in social media between Islamists and rights-based groups is still ongoing. While the number of followers of Islamist social media platforms is much higher than that of their opposition, studies on the behaviour of these followers indicate varying degrees of commitment to the Islamist narrative (Zaki, 2020; Triana et.al., 2021). Some agree with certain aspects of the Islamist ideology regarding the “good Muslim woman” while rejecting its other parts, such as the promotion of violence and hatred (Purwaningtyas and Wirastomo, 2021). Kalis Mardiasih, the influencer, also has niqab-wearing followers who agree with some of her ideas and views, such as on parenting, while disagreeing with others. In her view, many followers on social media are in fact “floating.”⁸

7. See <https://www.statista.com/statistics/997297/indonesia-breakdown-social-media-users-age-gender/> Accessed 20 March 2022.

8. Focus Group Discussion, 19 December 2021.

ONLINE CLOSINGS AND OPENINGS: STATE RESPONSES

As the use of the internet and social media accelerated, the Indonesian government took steps to secure their political and economic interests in cyber space. A law on electronic information and transactions (known as the ITE law) was passed in 2008 to regulate electronic transactions. On the eve of a fiercely fought elections for the position of governor in Jakarta, the government introduced amendments that made this law into a tool of repression due to overly broad provisions on defamation, hate speech, and indecency resulting in violations of freedom of expression. In the meantime, the government has also adopted an economic development policy along religious lines through its masterplan on Indonesia's Islamic economy and intent to increase its standing in the global Islamic economy. This masterplan considers the digital economy and small/medium enterprise among its key pillars.

REPRESSING EXTREMISM

In 2014, as ISIS' online recruitment began to flourish, the Minister of Communication and Information Technology published a ministerial regulation that would allow the government to block extremist online sites. This regulation was framed broadly, however, referring to internet sites with "negative content" which was defined vaguely as "pornography and other illegal activities" (IPAC 48, 2018). This minister, who was then also the leader of the Islamist Prosperous Justice Party, had been preoccupied with banning pornography online sites prior to a demand from the National Counter-Terrorism Agency to block extremist websites. This regulation allowed other government agencies and the general public to report such content with an emphasis on: violation of privacy, child pornography, violence, and ethnoreligious hate speech (IPAC 48, 2018).⁹ Equipped with the ministerial regulation, the Indonesian government banned 22 radical Islamist websites in 2015.

Alongside the legal instruments, the government also made direct requests to big tech companies, such as Facebook, Google, Twitter and Telegram, to take down several pro-ISIS accounts. In 2015, for example, Google removed 78 videos from YouTube (IPAC 48, 2018). When Telegram was unresponsive to the Indonesian government's request, in 2017, it was partially banned. According to IPAC, before the partial ban, the largest pro-ISIS Indonesian language channel in Telegram had approximately 8,000 subscribers. After Telegram started cooperating with the Indonesian government, the channel had only 900 (IPAC 48, 2018).

The government further enhanced its repressive capacity by setting up a cyber-patrol system, called Cyber Drone 9, which uses artificial intelligence to automatically detect "illegal content" online. According to IPAC, during an incident in which rioting occurred at a detention centre for those accused of terrorism, the 58-strong team of Cyber Drone 9 reported 22,000 pieces of radical

9. These issues are aligned with the offences criminalized by the 2008 Law on Electronic Information and Transactions.

content, up to two weeks after the riots, and claimed to have blocked 4000 radical sites using the cyber-patrol system (IPAC 48, 2018).

As the government increased their capacity to block online sites, extremist groups responded by creating new sites, using multiple online platforms such as filing systems and shifting to other apps. They also began to hijack the online sites of other Islamist groups, including moderate groups among university students (IPAC 48, 2018). This kind of response is similar to how members of the Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia and Islamic Defense Front reacted to the banning of their organizations by the government in 2017 and 2019, respectively. They regrouped under different names to sustain their political movements and went underground.

So, while the government's repressive measures have reduced the number of violent attacks by Islamists, these measures have merely shifted the form of mass organizing among banned Islamist movements.¹⁰

GROWING A SHARIA-BASED ECONOMY

The Indonesian government set out a master plan for developing its "Islamic economy" based on the Sharia for 2019–2024 that establishes promoting the halal marketplace and the Sharia-based digital economy as among its key programmatic pillars.¹¹ Indonesia orients itself following the ranking system of the Global Islamic Economy Index as it aspires to rise to the top echelons of this global platform on the Sharia economy. While Indonesia's first national Sharia bank was established almost three decades prior to this master plan, in 1991, the big push to promote this economic model occurred in 2016 with the establishment of the National Sharia Financial Committee (KNKS).¹² According to data provided in this master plan, currently, Indonesia is the world's largest consumer of halal food and among the top five consumers of halal fashion (ranked third) and halal travel (ranked fifth). As a producer of halal products, however, Indonesia's rank in the world is at number 10. The five-year master plan is designed to increase Indonesia's performance as producers in the global halal economy.

The institutional infrastructure to grow Indonesia's Sharia economy requires going beyond the conventional financial and economic bodies. In 2001, the Ministry of Religion produced a regulation that enhanced the role of Indonesia's Council of Ulema as the certification body for halal products as well as for conducting halal audits and producing fatwa in support of the halal economy.¹³ By 2014, the government made halal certification a requirement for all products through a law on halal product guarantee and, in 2019, the Ministry of Religion inaugurated a self-standing national body set up specifically for halal certification. The 2019–2024 master plan for Indonesia's Islamic

10. See IPAC reports number 65 on Indonesian Islamists in search for an issue (2020) and number 71 on the crackdown on Islamist radicals (2021).

11. The master plan has been developed by the Indonesian Ministry of National Development Planning and first published in 2018.

12. See Azizah Fitriyanti, "Indonesia and the Global Shariah Economy", *Strategic Review*, 15 April 2020. <https://sr.sgpp.ac.id/post/indonesia-and-the-global-shariah-economy>

13. "Sejarah Sertifikasi Halal, dari Label Babi Sampai MUI" <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/ekonomi/20191017145111-92-440390/sejarah-sertifikasi-halal-dari-label-babi-sampai-mui>

economy affirms the role of fatwa by the Council of Ulema as among the underpinnings of this economic model.

Among the beneficiaries of the government's commitment to growing a Sharia-based economy are Islamists who have taken up the call for hijrah and left their careers to participate in the Sharia-based economy as part of their opposition to the secular economy, be it capitalist or socialist.¹⁴ Young Muslim women who have set up e-businesses on hijab syar'i as part of the growing halal fashion industry (as described above) are also beneficiaries of the government's master plan on growing Indonesia's sharia economy, particularly its priority in supporting the Sharia digital economy and, more specifically, its commitment to support micro, small and medium enterprises in which women entrepreneurs predominate. To the extent that they are part of the mosaic of Islamist ideological movements to transform the Indonesian state and society, including its economy, the government's promotion of a Sharia economy in Indonesia opens new pathways towards their goals.

CLOSING

Social media and the internet have played a central role in facilitating the growth of Indonesia's multitude of Islamist political movements – those who espouse violence and those who do not. For women in these Islamist movements, they have been a game changer in terms of expanding women's opportunities for active engagement and even leadership. As challenge and opposition grew within civil society and repressive measures by the Indonesian government strengthened, the internet and social media had become the site of what essentially is a power struggle that continues to unfold today. This is an ideological battle for the nation's identity that is being fought by women on both sides, online and offline.

14. See Dahrun Sajadi, "Berhijrah dari Sistem Ekonomi Sekuler Menuju Sistem Ekonomi Syariah," *Al-Arbah: Jurnal Ekonomi, Bisnis dan Perbankan Syariah*, Vol. 1(1) 2018, As-Syafi'iyah Islamic University, Jakarta.

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