

Digitalization of Religious Content: The Disruption of Ulama Authority in Indonesia

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Abstract: Ulama plays an important role in the religious life of the community. Many religious affairs have relied on ulama as figures who are considered to hold religious authority in the community. Even in the setting of life in Indonesia, ulama not only has a position in the religious field but also in various aspects of life such as economics, politics, and so on. However, since the emergence of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era, the central role of the ulama has gradually shifted until it was disrupted. This disruption arises due to the process of digitizing religious content that has recently become more prevalent on the internet. Many parties have produced religious content in cyberspace, which in turn has become people's preference in seeking religious information. From this phenomenon, this article states that at this time the role of ulama has been increasingly distorted and replaced by other things such as the internet.

Keywords: Digitalization, Disruption, Ulama, Ulama Authority

Introduction

Since the advent of the Industrial Revolution 4.0, like it or not, ready or not, everything in life has undergone massive changes. Changes that do not only affect some aspects, everything, even down to the most basic and deep-rooted things, have all been forced to follow the pace of the times whose movements cannot be determined and predicted.

Revolutions happen so fast, including in terms of information. Everything is moving towards a screen-filled world with the internet as the driving force. This makes all movements in various lives have changed their faces, from what used to be conventional to digital, from what used to be offline to online. This massive transformation certainly did not escape the effects of the revolution that gave birth to disruption. Various agencies and institutions, whether public or private, have begun to digitize their operations, including religion.

The massive changes that occur in religion can be found in the many religious contents scattered on the internet. Not only content in the form of

knowledge, there have even been many applications that have functionally been able to represent a number of roles in religion such as prayer time reminders, digital Qur'ans, collections of prayers, and so on. Consciously or unconsciously, this will certainly also become people's preference in finding religious content.

An astonishing data released in 2000 by the Center for Research on Media, Religion and Culture, University of Colorado revealed that 25 percent of internet users or equivalent to 20 million people in America get religious information online (Hatta, 2019). In Indonesia itself, religious content is one of the 8 things most accessed by people. A survey in DKI Jakarta in 2019 showed that 20.77% of the content accessed by people on the internet was religious content (DISKOMINFOTIK DKI Jakarta, 2019). Looking at these figures and realities, a question then arises, where and what is wrong with the religious authority that scholars and religious experts have held? It is a disruption phenomenon when people's religious source preferences, which initially come from individuals or institutions that are said to have religious

authority, then change to something that may not be academically accountable for its basis.

Thus, there needs to be a study that specifically discusses the problem of religious authority that has been disrupted. In this paper, it is assumed that there has been a degradation of the religious authority of the ulama in Indonesia. This is a very important issue in the midst of a very heavy flow of misguided content. Perverted content in religion can be fatal to one's faith and belief. Even in one study, the religious content consumed by teenagers will have an impact on how extreme they are in religion (Ramadhan & Hapsari, 2021). Regarding this, of course, first there needs to be a discussion related to the digitization of religious content, the religious authority of the ulama, especially in Indonesia, until then it can formulate a phenomenon of disruption that occurs over the authority of the ulama in Indonesia.

Materials and Methods

This type of research is a qualitative research literature review. The references are taken from national or international journals, reports, and books that relate to the topic idea. This research is also take the Qur'an verses with the interpretation from exegesis literatur as argument enhancers

Results and Discussion

Digitization of Religious Content

As time progresses, digitalization seems to be an unavoidable reality. It happens in almost every field, and religion is no exception. Besides being a reality, it is also a challenge. For the dynamics of the religious community itself, digitalization is something that needs to respond to its presence. It is possible that if religious content continues to be disseminated and taught in conventional ways, then people will be increasingly reluctant to explore religious knowledge.

Like a necessity, social media users continue to grow along with many who consider the internet as a tool to facilitate all human affairs, including religious affairs. Communication between digital

media has undeniably come with erratic directions and patterns. People's desire to express themselves and show their existence more easily has been facilitated by the progress of the digital world so that people become easier to connect and connect with anyone in any part of the world. As a result, because everything is merged in the digital world without barriers and boundaries, the content that appears becomes diverse (Baihaki, 2020), including religious content.

The presence of religious content in cyberspace will inevitably also become people's preference in internet usage activities and in the end, religious content will become one of the things that people are interested in in the internet world. As reported in a study that although it does not reach the dominant level, religious information on the internet is classified as the most popular content for students after entertainment content. The students also constantly follow the various developments of religious issues that they like (Hatta, 2019).

This phenomenon includes what is termed as the phenomenon of *cyber-religion*, where many religious activities have emerged in cyberspace and the presence of religious institutions or organizations whose existence is on the internet (Dawson, 1998). The phenomenon of *cyber-religion* is more inclined to a religious movement that "migrates" from the real world to the virtual world, from the offline world to the online world, from conventional systems to digital systems as a form of adaptation to new community habits (Iqbal, 2016). The movement of religion towards cyberspace in the form of the presence of various religious institutions or organizations that make religious activities switch to a more digital form is a form of digitalization of religion itself, more precisely the digitalization of religious content.

The presence of religion in web pages and internet sites seems to be an interesting dish for people in this day and age where there has been a symptom called by Jhon Naisbitt as a symptom of "technology hangover". A tendency of society that cannot be separated from the use of technology (Naisbitt et al., 2004). Technology seems to have become another part of the human body that cannot be separated in daily life so the

digitalization of religion becomes a reality that cannot be avoided.

In Indonesia itself, technology has colored the spread and education of Islam in the community. Even some people have made technology to add to their religious experience (Pabbajah et al., 2021). Especially during the pandemic, technology has become a separate space for almost all religious people in the world in carrying out their religious practices because they cannot directly end religious rituals in congregation (Evolvi, 2022).

Digitalization is one of the impacts of technological advances, which is the process of changing the form of media from what was originally *hardcopy* or has a real form to a more digital or *softcopy* form (Sukma et al., 2019). This digitization process has existed and occurred in many things, including religion. There have been many sites, pages, and even applications that contain a number of tools used as a companion for Muslims in carrying out their religious activities. This change actually has the aim of making it easier for people to access, although on the other hand, there are also many side effects that are inevitable.

Rather than an offline to online migration, Heidi A. Campbell is more inclined to view the phenomenon of digitization of religion as the repression of digital media on the existence of religion that has been still traditional in order to become more adaptive to the times where people's needs for digital media are very high. It is more of a meeting between religious practice and the digital culture that develops in society. In fact, when the two meet and mix, then at a certain level it can give birth to something new and known as "digital religion" (Campbell & Tsuria, 2022). It is a new form of religious practice that transforms and changes its character to become more digital because it follows the trend of cultural development that occurs in society.

Digitalization becomes a transitional process that mediates between offline and online contexts in the discourse of religious life. Religion, besides being traditional, is also transformative. Religion with its traditional nature of rituals does not rule out the possibility that the form of rituals can be transformed into various models and forms. Today, many forms of religious life have shifted to

digital models, and this is where it feels necessary to divide the practice of religious life that stands online into two classifications (Siuda, 2021). On the one hand, digital media is used by people to find or get religious information or just issues and news related to religion. This is shown by the presence of various sites that provide information about religion. At another level, digital media has even entered and participated in the rituals and religious practices of the community, as shown by the presence of several applications that support Muslim worship.

In addition to these two classifications, there are also two factors that become the axis in the circle of the phenomenon of digitization of religion. The two axes become the main drivers in the pace of digitization and will determine the pace of digitization of religion whether it will go in a more productive or destructive direction. The two axes are religious influencers and digital media users. Religious influencers are those who provide religious content in the digital world, be it in the form of applications or just sites and web pages. Meanwhile, digital media users are people who enjoy religious content on the internet (Siuda, 2021). The relationship between these two axes is the gear that turns the wheels of the digitalization of religion today. Like the relationship between producers and consumers, in the digital world, religious life seems to run in a commercial corridor. This is certainly a challenge to be addressed.

Religious information circulating on the internet without a well-established clarification system will certainly have fatal consequences, considering that not all sources of reference can be accounted for. Thus, a professional attitude in religion needs to be emphasized and cultivated. The Qur'an has warned about this in Q.S. Al-Isra' verse 36 about the prohibition of following something whose source is not clear. Allah says:

وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا

"And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Indeed, the hearing, the sight and the heart - about all those [one] will be questioned." (Q.S. Al-Isra' verse 36).

Mustafa Al-Maraghi, in his tafsir, explains about this verse that what is meant by not following what is unknown is not following anything, whether it is words or actions that are not yet known in matters of religion or others. Al-Maraghi also emphasizes not saying or spreading something that is still a prejudice or estimate until there is a strong source or reference, especially for religious matters (Al-Maraghi, 1964). Whatever is spread on the internet in the form of religious content cannot be fully followed because it may not be based on strong bases and arguments from reliable sources. Moreover, the internet is a free land to spread various information, so of course we must be careful in posting something in cyberspace. This is where a professional attitude toward religion is needed, whether it is consuming or producing religious content on the internet and the digital world.

The Authority and Centrality of the Role of Ulama in Indonesia

In the socio-cultural context, the ulama has a very distinctive position in the eyes of society. They are highly respected and have great influence in society. Therefore, ulama are referred to as cultural brokers, i.e. figures who are able to provide penetration into cultural realities or even political dynamics that occur in society (Wahidin, 2014). The role of the ulama, who have a special position in the hearts of the community and the loyalty of the community to them, makes the position of the ulama very strategic in almost all areas of life.

The basic concept of the authority of the ulama in Islam is certainly inseparable from the assumption that the ulama are the heirs of the prophet. Although they do not inherit prophethood, the ulama inherits the authoritative function of the prophets as a reference to the laws of religion so that all issues related to religion will be returned to the ulama as a substitute for the prophet. In addition, the concept of man as God's representative on earth is also an argument for this concept of authority. In Islam, absolute authority is only owned by God, the Qur'an and the prophet Muhammad. However, when the prophet Muhammad died and there was no longer anyone who conveyed and received God's revelation

directly, the ulama became representatives or "agents of God" in religious matters (El Fadl, 2004).

Discussing religious authority, of course, will not be separated from the categorization compiled by Max Weber about three kinds of authority. Between legal-formal authority, traditional, and charismatic authority. Regarding the form of ulama authority in Indonesia itself, this is not only fixated on one typology. But personally, the authority of the ulama is closely related to the typology of charismatic authority in Max Weber's concept (Zulkifli, 2013), where the authority of this model is a form of people's trust in certain qualities of individuals who have abilities beyond other humans (Weber, 1947). The community's trust in the ulama in matters of religious life is certainly based on the ulama's extensive knowledge of the concepts and teachings of Islam. The special ability that not many people have makes the ulama has a high position in the eyes of the community. People entrust their religious affairs to the scholars because the scholars are the ones who understand it better.

The authority of the ulama in Indonesia can not only be seen personally, the authority of the ulama in Indonesia is also gathered into an institutionalized organization. Among these organizations and institutions are Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, Persis, or state institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI). Because there are many organizations or institutions that hold religious authority in society, in the case of Indonesia there is no such thing as a single authority. Religious authority spreads to various places by carrying the face of each organization and institution (Rumadi, 2012). But apart from that, the figures who drive these religious organizations or institutions come from among the ulama who are trusted by the community to have broad religious knowledge and be able to guide people in their religious affairs.

The important role of ulama in Indonesia can also be seen from the attitude of Indonesian Muslims who continuously provide support and trust to a number of existing ulama association institutions. A survey released by the Indonesian Survey Institute (LSI) showed that of the majority of Muslims surveyed, 71.7 percent said they were

close to NU, agreed and strongly agreed and supported various kinds of socio-religious activities and agendas of NU. In addition to NU, people also support other religious organizations such as MUI and Muhammadiyah (Burhanuddin, 2012).

From their own historical roots, the ulama has actually had a central role in society. This is shown by the ulama who fought against the colonials during the colonial period (Muzakka, 2018). They led their followers to fight the colonizers and uphold Indonesian independence. The emergence of names such as KH. Hasyim Asy'ari and KH. Ahmad Dahlan, who until now remain immortal in the hearts of the community, is proof that since ancient times the ulama have played an important role in Indonesian society.

On the other hand, the authority of the ulama can also be seen as a tradition system that has taken root in the social dynamics of Indonesian society. The ulama are appointed by the community either structurally or culturally to lead the people in almost all areas of life. Respect for the ulama has been passed down from generation to generation, especially in the cultural setting of traditional societies that strongly position the ulama as very noble people. They are served, revered, even glorified. The authority of the ulama in this setting can be classified as traditional authority (Weber, 1947), where authority is formed on the habits of individuals or a certain group that has been cultured and internalized in daily life and strengthened by customary law or traditions that are mutually agreed upon even though they are not formally written (Abdillah, 2014).

Ulama have played many important roles in Indonesia. In politics, society, economy, education, culture, and of course the most important role is religious (Zuhrah, 2016). Because of their knowledge, ulama are respected by the community. They are the ones who teach and spread the teachings of Islam in Indonesia. That's right, who else will teach people about religion, who will guide the religion of the community if not the ulama.

In the world of politics itself, there have been many clerics who have colored the Indonesian political scene. The most mentionable example is

the current vice president of Indonesia who is one of the famous scholars in the country, KH. Ma'ruf Amin. In addition to him, in each region, the political arena is also often colored by ulama, and not infrequently they can influence the community and dominate the movement of the political world. In such a context, it is possible that the form of religious authority of the ulama is closer to the typology of legal-formal authority, where trust is obtained by someone legally through legal or political processes that normatively have legitimate power in the government system (Weber, 1947).

Whether the authority of the ulama is to be read through any typology of authority is certainly not surprising given that in the Qur'an itself, the ulama are indeed described as special figures who exceed other humans in terms of their piety to Allah. This is mentioned in Q.S. Fatir verse 28:

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ وَالْأَنْعَامِ مُخْتَلِفٌ أَلْوَانُهُ كَذَلِكَ إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ

"And among people and moving creatures and grazing livestock are various colors similarly. Only those who fear Allah, from among His servants, who have knowledge. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Forgiving." (Q.S. Fatir verse 28).

Related to the mention of scholars in the verse, Sheikh Nawawi Al-Banteni explains in his tafsir why then only scholars fear Allah because the degree of knowledge of scholars exceeds other servants. Scholars have a lot of religious knowledge and know Allah better so that knowledge makes them fear Allah and hope only in Him (Al-Jawi, 2017). This privilege, which the Qur'an has legitimized as the holy book of Muslims, makes the position of the ulama in Indonesian society very central and distinctive both ideologically and sociologically.

Ulama Authority: A Disruption

In the midst of rapid technological advancement, those who do not equip themselves with innovation and creativity are likely to be overtaken. Old systems that are still conventional in style are slowly being abandoned and will only leave a name to be remembered in terms of economic, social, or even religious authority. It is a

big question mark when the position and role of the ulama are faced with the rapid progress of society. It has been widely witnessed that technological advancements manifest in various ways including the emergence of many digital platforms and applications that provide religious content instantly. Therefore, there is a thought that in the midst of the rise of the technological revolution 4.0, the dominant role of the ulama in society is suspected by some researchers to be over (Zulkifli, 2013). This means that this industrial revolution may challenge the authority of the ulama that has been established so far.

It is not an exaggeration when looking at the contestation in the era of the industrial revolution that occurred so violently. Rhenald Kasali in his book describes that the Industrial Revolution brought enormous changes in almost all areas of life. During this industrial revolution, the big ones will not necessarily rule, but those who are able to innovate and follow the flow of change will win. It has been found that a number of companies and organizations that were once powerful are now defeated by newcomers who are better able to offer innovation. It is said that anyone who still applies the old ways will be crushed by the times (Kasali, 2006). Thus, if the religious authority system still adheres to the old model, it will slowly be eroded by the times and will be replaced by a newer model. Moreover, in today's digital age there are many social media platforms that are starting to be loved by religious people and contain a lot of religious content.

The existence of communication and information technology, especially the internet, brings disruptive potential to the existing framework of clerical religious authority. This is due to the increasingly powerful transformative capabilities of globalization that have provided new spaces and avenues for the general public to contribute to religious discourse even though he is not an expert (Mohiuddin, 2023). That new space and path is social media which is the basis of the formation of digital culture. The development of digital culture can also be a threat and can even tear down the establishment of clerical authority that has been traditional. This can happen through the establishment of new forms of leadership based

on online visibility and digital expertise (Evolvi, 2020).

In a report, it is said that currently social media has become a friend and a place to ask for religious knowledge for most Muslim youth (Bamualim et al., 2018). In the study, from 18 districts and cities, it was found that the presence of social media has shifted the role of religious education in the family and in educational institutions or organizations. Compared to other religious figures, digital-friendly religious figures are easier to accept because of the ease of accessing their lectures or lectures anywhere and anytime. The sophistication and intelligence of young people to access technology makes social media widely used for various things, including religious learning, so it becomes natural that the position of digital content shifts the system that is still conventional in style. This is especially true for people in the age range of 17-24 years who have mastered technology and have the independence to look for information sources.

This is certainly inseparable from the development of the current reality, where along with technological advances, religious practices have also transformed. Religion has become very flexible and can be adapted to various forms of media, especially digital media. To get religious information and all the instruments of ritual worship, people no longer need to go to mosques, surau, or look for lectures and recitations everywhere. Through a small box called a *smartphone* and armed with internet quota, people will easily get and spread religious information at will (Setiansah, 2015).

Under these conditions, it would be very relevant to borrow Bryan S. Turner's thoughts on "discursive authority and popular authority". In the cultural development of a society that has moved towards digital, or what Turner calls a *network society*, discursive authority (thought) is formed through data that channels information. In other words, power, authority, and charisma will be determined by how much influence the religious and socio-political discourses are widespread and successfully viralized and have a hegemonic effect on internet users (Rustandi, 2020). This is certainly also inseparable from the shift in religious life from

the previous era where religion has become part of the culture of consumerism, lifestyle, and part of the market monopoly on people's existential needs for religion (Setiansah, 2015).

Apart from being an abstract doctrine, religion often appears in everyday life in a more material form. Religion, apart from being seen as a teaching and belief, can also be considered as a practice or ritual that contains certain concrete identities. The birth of religious attributes such as sarongs, headscarves, caps, and so on then form an image of cultural identity for certain religious adherents making it easier for people to understand and accept religious elements that have been materialized (Rustandi, 2020). Then the direction of materialization steps into a more complex form, namely the commodification of religious content which until now has been widely found in the internet and digital world. As a result, the practice of religion is not unlike the practice of buying and selling between consumers and producers who exchange material benefits. In such a stage, the authority in religion is no longer the ulama as previously established in the culture of traditional society, but those who are able to provide digital and instant religious content for the community through the internet. They are referred to as "religious influencers".

The recent shift in the model of people's religious life which used to be patterned "ulama centric" or centered on the role of *scholars* in all religious affairs has then changed to "internet and digital-centric". This seems to be very related to what the Qur'an has mentioned in Q.S. An-Nahl verse 43 about the appeal to ask people who are more expert regarding something that is not yet known. Allah says:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِكَ إِلَّا رَجَالًا نُوحِي إِلَيْهِمْ فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

"And We sent not before you except men to whom We revealed [Our message]. So ask the people of the message if you do not know." (Q.S. An-Nahl verse 43).

It becomes very interesting when reflecting on the verse. Especially with regard to "Ahl al-Dzikir". Muhamamd Al-Alusi Al-Baghdadi explains that *ahl al-dzikir* can be interpreted as people who

understand the Qur'an. Then who else can understand the Qur'an deeply if not the scholars. Thus, the meaning of the verse is an appeal to ask about something related to religion to people who have a lot of knowledge about religion, namely the scholars (Al-Alusi, 2014). Nowadays, many people have started to rely on the internet for their religious affairs in a simplified manner without any clarification, so the role of scholars has been reduced. Because the role of the ulama is no longer heeded or no longer sacred in religious matters, this phenomenon should be said to be a form of disruption of the role of the ulama authority itself.

However, it is important that religion or anything related to it be open to advances in knowledge and technology. Resistance to the progress of the times will only alienate religion from the development of the times (Bingaman, 2023). Therefore, to respond to this disruption phenomenon, it is necessary to increase digital technology expertise among scholars to be able to stem religious information on the internet. This is necessary so that technological progress cannot be a medium to support religious development in a society that has begun to sophisticated.

Conclusions

Through a number of such explanations, the role of ulama as religious authority in Islam has been disrupted. It cannot be denied that the internet and the digital world have begun to become the mecca for people's religious life. This is supported by various data and scholars' views that show a shift in people's preferences in fulfilling their knowledge needs and religious rituals. However, there are several points to note regarding the idea in this research.

The first is that the disruption occurs when the ulama and the internet are used as two opposing camps and compete with each other for the "throne" of religious authority. Second, the internet and the digital world itself is a very broad area and scope. More careful mapping and conceptualization are needed to see which side of the clerical authority is disrupted. Third, that among the people who enliven the internet

universe with religious content are those who belong to the ulama. In this context, it certainly cannot be said that the presence of the internet has disrupted the authority of the ulama. Although this may be the case, it may not be a form of disruption of authority, but rather another form of clerical authority that is more flexible. Fourth, it is also necessary to classify the form of disruption itself into two characters between negative and positive. As previously said, not all people who become "religious influencers" are not from among the ulama, so it is necessary to divide which areas of disruption are negative and which are positive. Finally, ulama are still part of civilization, so their existence and function are also dynamic. So it is possible that even though the phenomenon that is currently present in front of our eyes is a form and form of disruption of clerical authority, it is possible that in the future this disruption phenomenon will change into a form of reactualization of clerical authority in the future. This certainly requires further research to be able to describe the situation that occurs comprehensively truly.

In the end, technological capabilities also need to be improved among religious experts both personally and organizationally. This is very necessary because technological developments cannot be rejected and ignored, so the only way is how scholars can oversee technological developments in a positive and good direction for people's religious life.

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