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The Perception of Indonesian Youths toward Islamophobia: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT: Islamophobia has been on the rise in the twenty-first century. Muslims from all over the world have been subjected to prejudice, hatred and fear based simply on their perceived religious affiliation. This is the new reality facing Muslims, especially those living in the West. Scholars have debated this issue from the historical development of Islamophobia to the mistakes policymakers made in dealing with Islamophobia. It has been found that Islamophobia is the product of a systematic attack on Islam and Muslims by people who have an agenda to keep the world divided for their benefit. While this much we know, what is obviously missing in current literature is research from the perspective of non-Western communities. Through the conduct of a focus group and thematic analysis of primary and secondary sources, this research aims to discover the causes of Islamophobia in Indonesia in the twenty-first century and its impact. With the rise of Islamic extremism, there has been a parallel rise in Islamophobia in Indonesia. Moreover, the study discovers that Islamophobic sentiment can be found not only among non-Muslims, but also among Muslims towards other Muslims. In combating Islamophobia, it is important for us to understand the new trend of rising conservatism in a country that prides itself with its own indigenous culture.

Keywords: Islamophobia, Islam, Indonesia, radicalism, extremism, sectarianism

Before Islamophobia, there was Orientalism, the romanticizing and eroticizing of Arabs and Muslims as the “Other” (Said 2003). While both are inherently different, there is no denying that Orientalism continues to feed the Western (mis)understanding of Islam and therefore, the emerging discourse on Islamophobia (Bakali 2016; Allen 2016; Mondon and Winter 2017). This became more profound with the subsequent events on the morning of September 11, 2001 when 19 Arab men hijacked four planes in the United States and executed a coordinated terrorist attack on American soil. 9/11 as it is known, together with President Bush’s War on Terror, have been cited to have put Islam on the forefront of the political map (Byrd 2017; Helbling 2014; Morgan and Poynting 2015) and with it the introduction of Islamophobia—both the action and the term—as part of our new normal.

Nevertheless, we are living in a world separately different from the years immediately after 9/11. Today, we are living in a world that saw the rise and fall of a modern “caliphate,” the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in the Middle East. With the failure of Al-Qaeda previously, and ISIS today, Muslim extremists have retreated from a global network to local aspirations with the examples of Sri Lanka’s National Thowheed Jamath. The continuous presence of these Muslim extremists has further inflamed, and thus creating a challenge for the possibility of Islamophobia to be a remnant of the near past.

Furthermore, the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America in 2016 proves the effectiveness of an anti-Islam rhetoric. His immigration policies, which
effectively ban travelers from six Muslim-majority countries, together with North Korea and Venezuela, went into effect on December 4, 2017. A few days prior, on November 29, President Trump retweeted three videos allegedly of violence perpetrated by Muslims. The videos were first shared by Jayda Fransen, a leader of a British far-right party called Britain First. While Britain’s Prime Minister immediately condemned Trump’s Islamophobic actions, other parts of Europe have been less kind towards Muslims. One of the more well-known among a number of nationalist politicians is Geert Wilders, a Dutch parliamentarian and leader of the far-right Party for Freedom. He has campaigned for the halting of what he deems the “Islamization of the Netherlands” and supported the banning of new mosques. He also “aggressively advocated the banning of the Qur’an as a ‘threat to our society’ just as Mein Kampf was banned in the Netherlands” (Byrd 2017, 59).

The examples above and of many others have shown that Islamophobia is rampant on either side of the Atlantic. However, this research is taking a detour from the current literature on Islamophobia to investigate the possibility of Islamophobia rearing its head in a context that is different from the western world. In other words, this research aims to discover if Islamophobia is experienced by Indonesian youths and if so, who or what is responsible for it.

**ISLAMOPHOBIA**

Islamophobia is a phenomenon that intrigues academicians from various fields, from political science to anthropology. In its multifaceted dimension, Islamophobia can be discussed on a macro level among states and on a micro level based on individual experiences. There is also a robust discussion on the meaning of Islamophobia itself. In its simplest form, Islamophobia is defined in a report entitled *Islamophobia: a challenge for us all* as “dread or hatred of Islam—and therefore, to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims” (Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia 1997, 1). The Runnymede Trust is a British think tank created in 1968 to challenge racism and to promote a multicultural Britain. However, there have been arguments made by scholars that the term Islamophobia is problematic.

On one hand, it is argued that it is not Islam per se that is being feared or disliked, but Muslims. Therefore, it might not be wrong to simply use the terms racism or xenophobia to describe this phenomenon of hate towards Muslims in the West. It has also been argued that using a term such as Islamophobia stifles people’s freedom to criticize a religion, and in this case, Islam (Green 2015; Allen 2016). Another criticism, brought up in an ambitious book with little final word itself, is that there is little differentiation between Islamism the “phenomenon” and the “product” (Allen 2016). However, despite its own inability to discern what is considered Islamophobia, Allen made the point that at this point in time, Islamophobia is the best definition so far that goes beyond explaining either racism or xenophobia experienced by a group of people called Muslims. This is not the same as saying that Islamophobia is only a recent phenomenon. To the contrary, Bravo Lopez (2011) clearly showed that there has already been a certain (mis)perception about Islam in Europe from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century.

Another interesting debate on the term Islamophobia is brought upon by Mondon and Winter (2017). They argued that there is another dimension to Islamophobia which is between liberal and illiberal Islamophobia. By comparing the articulations of Islamophobia in France and the United States, the authors made the distinction based on the quality and acceptability of the discourse in mainstream media. While illiberal Islamophobia is described as crude racism against Arabs, Muslims, and people who look like either one, liberal Islamophobia is a new strain of bigotry against people perceived to be against western values of freedom and
democracy. As will be discussed later, liberal Islamophobia is what has been experienced by pious Indonesian youths. However, there is no escaping the reality that illiberal or liberal Islamophobia, both are steeped in prejudice on a group of diverse people.

Among anthropologists, Bangstad (2011) points to Islamophobia as evinced by Norwegian media in portraying the supposed morality police among Muslim communities in Grönland. There were reports that non-hijab wearing girls and gay men were being harassed by self-appointed moral police. These reports caused what is called a “moral panic” in which the minister of Children, Gender Equality and Integration voiced disapproval against “social control.” Moral panic theory is described as episodes of rage that evaporates after a while (Morgan and Poynting 2015). While they may seem disconnected, the authors argued that the ongoing presence of these Islamophobic episodes provide traction for the narrative of an Islamic threat. By studying eleven countries, the authors concluded that there were far right proponents that continue to provoke issues surrounding Islam such as the building of an Islamic center in Manhattan and the protests that broke out following cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper.

As mentioned, most of the literature on Islamophobia focuses on western countries. This is not entirely surprising given the fact that Islamophobia has often been described as the offspring of the “Us” (the West) versus “Them” (Muslims) narrative. Most studies on Islamophobia have been in America, Britain, France and the Netherlands. Based on fieldworks in Paris and the Nantarre Association, Beaman (2017) found that Muslims living in France, especially of North African origins, faced difficulty to be fully accepted as French due to their religion. The author argues that since race and ethnicity are not acknowledged in France, when a person is deemed to be un-French, his or her Islamic identity is thus referenced. The situation is made worse by a person’s gender, as females are more likely to face Islamophobic attack because they are deemed worthless by both their religion and gender (Perry 2014).

In the United States, Green (2015) argued that then-president Bush used Islamophobic discourses to make the case of a war in Iraq. Following 9/11, the United States received domestic and international support for its military occupation of Afghanistan as there is clear evidence that the mastermind, Osama bin Laden, had ties with the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, the same connection cannot be made to Saddam Hussein. Therefore, rather than an imminent threat to the United States, the administration proposed that the war in Iraq is justified to protect American values and freedom. There is nothing more Islamophobic than to propose that Islam is a monolithic religion that is violent, antidemocratic and misogynist. In other words, Muslims are the modern-day white men’s burden. Rather than acknowledging that the problems in the Middle East found root in the remnants on colonization, the writers chose to problematize Islam. What is seen in post 9/11 United States of America is a systematic and institutionalized Islamophobia.

In Britain, the discussion on Islamophobia centers around the development of multiculturalism in the country (Murray 2017). For example, Abbas (2012) argued that in unpacking the issue of political violence and extremism, the debate tends to focus on the (in)ability of Muslims to integrate into society. Multiculturalism is considered to have failed Britain, and to a larger extend, Europe. Even the German Chancellor Angela Merkel once stated “this [multicultural] approach has failed, utterly failed” (Byrd 2017, 71). According to Abbas, what these two countries have failed to realize is that radicalization in Europe has more to do with structural limitations to empower youths rather than their cultural practices. In interviews done with moderate Muslim figures, Modood and Ahmad (2007) found that Muslims are supportive of the idea of multiculturalism in Britain. They argued that multiculturalism is splattered all over Islamic history. The problem in Britain is that multiculturalism has yet to go beyond superficial cultural practices to faith and religiosity.
For Muslims, the most natural response is to condemn terrorist acts that were committed in the name of Islam. Through interviews and the analysis of press releases, Abdel-Fattah (2017) was interested in understanding the phenomenon of key Australian Muslim representative bodies releasing statements of condemnation when they, and most Australian Muslims, never committed a single act of terror. By employing Du Bois’s notion of the consciousness of the self, Abdel-Fattah discovered that most Muslims feel the need to offer reassurances as part of a religious duty. On the other hand, Bouma (2011) wrote that the Islamophobia discourse in Australia is one that is difficult to sustain due to Australia’s highly diverse religious profile. The everyday reality in Australia does not fit the chaotic reality of other countries facing Islamic extremism.

Furthermore, Islamophobia in Australia has been under control due to the relentless work by the multi-faith movement that has been gaining momentum since before 9/11 (Halaloff 2011). More importantly, it is argued that the multi-faith movement is highly responsive to crises and of providing support to communities at risk, in this case the Muslims. Multi-faith initiatives have also been supported by various governments such as the UK government which led to increased engagement between religious communities and the state. This is in direct contrast to the response by the FBI in the United States of America which increased civilian surveillance on innocent Muslims (Green 2015, 271).

Byrd (2017) argued that there are two main causes for the current form of Islamophobia. First, he argued that Western education only went so far in that while it allowed many people to be able to read and write, it failed to provide them the necessary tools to think critically and systematically. Secondly, technological advancement brought cultures and places that are worlds apart into the living room of these “half-educated” Westerners. As a result, the discourse on Islam had been steered into dangerous and basically wrong territories. Byrd gave the examples of the Charlie Hebdo attack in 2015 and the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004 to be caused not by Muslims disapproving free speech, but by the content of their “art.” As suggested by Green (2015), it is fine to be critical of Islam as long as criticisms do “not lapse into hate speech or otherwise endanger the safety of Muslim citizens” (p. 22).

The media as perpetrator of Islamophobia is a theme that is also shared by Bakali (2016). Also using Charlie Hebdo as an example, the author argues that instead of relating news neutrally to the masses, the media represents Muslims as hostile, misogynistic and prone towards terrorism. Bakali differs in Byrd in that he employs the critical race theory to make his point on the reason Islamophobia is so entrenched in western society. According to critical race theory, since white superiority is so embedded in society, people are unable to call out racism, or Islamophobia, even when it is happening right under their noses. In other words, Islamophobia has become normal.

Going beyond traditional media, Larsson (2007) did a research on Islamophobia on the Internet, specifically the anti-Islam portal WikiIslam. Unlike Wikipedia, WikiIslam only produces content that are critical to Islam. While the owner does not consider the website to be a hate site, the fact that there is nothing positive about Islam on it proves that it has a definite agenda. Furthermore, according to one of Green’s (2015) standards for acceptable criticism is that it “should be based on aspects of the religion that many Muslims recognize as a part of their faith and should avoid guilt by association” (p. 21). WikiIslam is of course promoting Islam as a monolithic religion that is violent and oppressive, and more importantly, does not represent how a majority of Muslims view their religion.

The inability of the Islamophobes to distinguish the causes of terror attacks will only lead to worsening relationship between Islam and the West. Byrd (2017) expects that relations between Muslims and Europeans are going to become worse due to “(1) the social-political
pressures felt by the European states to curb mass immigration, (2) the increasing alienation Muslims feel in secular, and seemingly anti-Islamic, Europe, and (3) the potential polarization that can be initiated through acts of terror” (p. 89). On the other hand, Islamophobia is also going to have an impact on the lives of Muslims living in the West. According to Voas and Fleischmann (2012, 537):

Public hostility could have one of three consequences for the religiosity of Muslims in the West: (a) Muslims might become more religious in response to negative external valuations of Islam; (b) they might be motivated (not necessarily consciously) to scale back their religious identity, belief, and practice; or (c) prejudice and discrimination might have no effect on religious commitment.

From these two scholars, it can be noted that a vicious cycle of Islamophobia leading to feelings of rejection and antagonism with the West might continue if nothing is done to manage the greater problem of Islamophobia itself.

When one turns attention towards the East, there is very little scholarship done regarding Islamophobia. An exception is an article by Mohamed Osman (2017) who writes on Islamophobia in Myanmar and Malaysia. He argued that Islamophobia in the context of these two countries is primarily the result of domestic socio-economic and political issues that came out of the colonial experience and not part of a larger narrative of Muslims and Islam as the root of all evil. In Myanmar, it is the historical role of Indian Muslims as British agents that led to Buddhists’ Islamophobic skepticism on Rohingya Muslims. Malaysia, a Muslim-majority country, invites the irk and Islamophobic reaction of its non-Muslim citizens due to what is perceived as rising Islamization within the political landscape and the encroachment of the private sphere. The same can be seen happening in Indonesia as it is also a Muslim-majority country that has grappled with its Islamic identity at the turn of the century following the Reformasi (Sidel 2010).

METHODOLOGY

This paper attempts to understand the phenomenon of Islamophobia in Indonesia through the lens of counterfactual analysis. Counterfactual analysis is a framework of studying a case by extrapolating what could have happened in a different scenario (Fearon 1991). While it does not seem very rigorous, counterfactual analysis has its own merit in that in the absence of other methodology, it provides a framework for conducting a small-N research. On the other hand, comparing Indonesia with another Muslim-majority country such as Malaysia may produce other problems as there might be many other possible variables that affect the causal relationship under investigation. To further strengthen the merit of counterfactual analysis, Nye (2005) proposes four important elements: plausibility, proximity in time, relation to theory and factual accuracy.

Since this is an exploratory study, we are not trying to generalize the analysis to the wider Indonesian population. Nevertheless, we are going to start by postulating that the rise of Islamophobia in Indonesia is the result of rising Islamist extremism. Extremism is here not defined by just being violent, but also by its social, political and discursive dimensions. If Islamist extremist such as the Jemaah Islamiyah was unsuccessful at inciting fear in Indonesians towards both moderate Muslims and non-Muslims, there would be little likelihood that Islamophobia would take root in its current form. Islamophobia would still be present due to the global rise of terrorism by Muslims; but it might have been able to be subdued had it not
been able to have a footing and thus cause harm domestically. While Islamophobia may be
termed as an irrational fear of Muslims, this understanding does not have the same connotation
in the West as it does in a Muslim majority country because the “others” in Indonesia are more
aware with Islam. Therefore, the fear for Muslims in Indonesia is caused by familiarity. The
argument, however, is that while Muslims have committed acts of atrocities, it does not mean
that every conservative Muslim is a possible terrorist.

Besides analyzing documents such as news story for cases of Islamophobia in Indonesia,
a focus group was conducted with Indonesian youths from different parts of the country. All of
them are Muslims because the researcher is interested to get first-hand experience of
Islamophobia, if any. The purpose of having the focus group is to understand the experiences
and perspectives of Indonesian youths from different backgrounds concerning Islamophobia.
The outcome of the focus group confirms that the experiences of Islamophobia is unique in the
Indonesian context and varies according to region. While it is expected that the forms of
Islamophobia in a metropolis such as Jakarta to differ from a suburb in Sulawesi, another interest-
ing finding is that there are different experiences within a region such as Sulawesi itself,
depending on the locals. Specific outcomes of the focus group will be discussed in detail in the
following sections.

**ISLAMOPHOBIA IN THE MOST POPULOUS ISLAMIC NATION**

It would sound counterintuitive to assume that Islamophobia, or the fear and hatred
towards Muslims, could still show its ugly head in a country populated by 225 million Muslims.
However, that is exactly what has happened and continues to happen today. This section would
argue that Islamophobia in Indonesia is caused by rising Islamist extremism in the country. In
relation to that, another argument to be made is that Islamophobia seems to occur in places
where there has been recent migration of people into mixed districts as opposed to places where
different religious practitioners have lived together for centuries. Based on the idea of liberal
Islamophobia, Indonesia is facing a threat to its Muslim communities who are viewed as fun-
damentalist due to their desire to practice a conservative version of Islam. The final argument
is that allegations of Islamophobia have been made against people who have different views on
Islam especially regarding the matter of implementing Sharia law.

**Extremism and Islamophobia**

Religious intolerance in recent times in Indonesia can be traced to the inter-religious
conflict between Muslims and Christians in Poso, Central Sulawesi and in Maluku between
1998 and 2001. In Poso, it started with brawls by drunken Christian and Muslim youths but
quickly escalated into all-out riots that left thousands of people dead. Similarly, violence in
Maluku was triggered by a fight between a Christian bus driver and a Muslim passenger. It
does not appear to be an act of Islamophobia, but the continuous violence can be explained by
feelings of unease towards Muslims.

It has been suggested that the transmigration of Muslims from Java to Poso, which
caused the Christians to become a minority, led to the unease (BBC 2004). In Halmahera too,
the Muslim Makianese migrants were attacked by Christians as a pre-emptive measure
(International Crisis Group 2000). In a counter-factual scenario, had Muslims not moved to
these Christian-dominated areas, there would not have been violence that borders on
Islamophobia. This belief was supported by participants from the focus group who came from
different parts of Sulawesi. Sofia, 19, who is from Manado, North Sulawesi, feels that there is
no conflict in her hometown because the demography has been unchanged for centuries, whereas Mursalim, who is from Polewali Mandar, West Sulawesi, believes that the recent migration of Muslims into the area caused the spread of Islamophobia. While the conflict in Sulawesi officially ended in 2001 with the signing of the Malino Accord, sporadic violence still occurs until today. According to Mursalim:

[t]hey are fighting. Using guns, they are killing each other, until now. The tendency is still there. They (Christians) really hate us, Muslims. In Indonesia, Muslims are the majority, so it is believed that Muslims always get favouritism from the government. In their mind, Christians are second-class citizens.

Mursalim believes that the Christians continue to hate Muslims, and this is a clear example of feelings of Islamophobia. Had migration not happened, there might not be Islamophobic sentiments but instead peace like Poso’s neighbour to the north.

The real threat of radical Muslims, however, only became apparent after the 2002 bombing of a Bali nightclub which killed 202 people. In consecutive years, there were bombings at the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta in 2003; outside the Australian embassy in 2004; and Bali again in 2005. All these acts of violence were perpetrated by the militant Islamists extremist group, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI). Therefore, it is not a stretch to infer that had the bombings not occurred, there might have been less Islamophobic behavior in Indonesia. Mursalim describes his views as follows:

If we talk about fanaticism, we should look back at history. In Indonesia, Islamophobia is caused by many cases. The suicide bombers said they are Muslims and related to al-Qaeda or JI. So, the people in Indonesia start to think that the Muslims that have beard or females who wear long black cloak or the niqab are terrorists or fanatic Muslims. They start to judge. They fear Muslims.

To make matters worse, the violence in Indonesia did not stop in 2005. There was a bombing in Jakarta in 2009 and since 2016, there has been at least one incident of either assault or suicide attack claimed by the so-called Islamic State (IS). Although Sidel (2010) has argued that violence by Muslims have narrowed down to a few attacks on foreign symbols, these events reinforced the idea that Muslims are violent and thus increases Islamophobic sentiment in society, as mentioned by Mursalim.

What are some examples of Islamophobia in Indonesia? The most prominent cases would be in Bali, which makes sense, as argued in this paper, Islamophobia is the result of actions by Muslim extremists. Unfortunately, Bali has been the location of attacks by Islamists. Therefore, it is rational to expect the people to fear and hate Muslims on the island. Following the Bali bombings, the majority Hindus in Bali have had a contentious relation with Muslims especially pertaining to job seeking (Quinn 2013). Not only had Bali experienced violence, but similar demographic changes were taking place in Bali as it did in Sulawesi. More Muslims migrated to Bali in search of employment and this has caused the Hindus in Bali to feel threatened with the possibility of becoming a minority. Thus, they have openly protested the building of houses of worship including mosques (Webb 2007). Another more obvious example of Islamophobia happened in 2014 when protests broke over PT Jasa Marga Bali Tol’s suggestion for Bali Mandara Toll Road workers to wear Arabic-style veils during the month of Ramadhan. The protests were led by the Bali Alliance of Hindus which claimed Bali should not be pressured to adopt a religious practice that is alien to the island. Invoking religious tolerance, ironically, the group denounced the suggestion of the toll operator to acknowledge the Islamic holy month.
Like Bali, Christian-majority Papua also experienced Islamophobia in the form of a protest over the enlargement of a mosque in the highland town of Wamena in March 2016. According to the US Department of State’s Report on International Religious Freedom (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2017), a group of church leaders also demanded to “ban the use of mosque loudspeakers, prohibit the wearing of headscarves in public, and stop forcing Papuan children to attend Islamic boarding schools.” This intolerance towards Muslims practicing their faith is not happening in the Netherlands, but in a country with the highest number of Muslim populations. Nevertheless, given the large territory and diversity of Indonesia, it is very important to note that Papua has a minority Muslim population, like Bali and North Sulawesi. But since there is no mass movement of Muslims into the region, the governor was able to prevent unwarranted violence by bringing the stakeholders together and hold an interfaith dialogue. In other words, had there been an obvious change in demography in Papua, it is conceivable for the Christians to feel threatened and hence lead to escalation of tension as happened in Central Sulawesi.

**Fundamentalism or Radicalism: Islamophobia towards All**

Besides violent acts of atrocities, radicalism and extremism in Indonesia can also be deduced by the people’s reaction to a non-threatening event such as a speech made by the former governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama, or better known as Ahok. He was alleged to have committed blasphemy in 2016 by mentioning *surah al-Maidah* during his campaign to get re-elected to the governorate that was interpreted as an insult on the Quran. This incident led to protests by extremists such as the *Front Pembela Islam* (FPI) and finally the sentencing of Ahok to prison in what is widely criticized as politically motivated to sabotage his campaign (Cochrane 2017). Because of the rise of fringe radical groups such as the FPI, Muslim and non-Muslim Indonesians are starting to exhibit Islamophobic attitude.

The relationship between the Ahok incident and Islamophobia may not be direct, but it is undeniable. As Sofia mentioned during the focus group:

> During Ramadan, we don’t care about Islamic tradition. But suddenly you are so angry with people mocking Islam. We see people joining demonstrations because they were angry with Ahok. You call yourself an Islamic person, but you are just a Muslim when someone mocks Islam. That’s the reality.

As a Muslim herself, Sofia is frustrated with the actions of certain groups of Muslims whom she believes are contributing to the rise of Islamophobia in Indonesia. Together with most of her co-contributors in the focus group, she feels that a lot of Indonesians, both Muslims and non-Muslims, cannot differentiate between moderate and radical Muslims, which caused people to have negative feelings towards the entire Muslim population in Indonesia.

An important factor that led to Islamophobia in Indonesia is the presence of intolerant groups such as the FPI. This group proclaims to be defender of Islam and can become hostile to non-practicing Muslims. For example, during Ramadhan they would raid businesses that are deemed disrespectful towards the holy month when Muslims are fasting. Their extra-legal measures of handling these cases cause them to be hated by moderate Muslims and non-Muslims who feel that as a secular nation, it is the right of businesses to operate as usual even in Ramadhan. Therefore, Islamophobia in the country—as elsewhere—can be somewhat attributed to the actions of certain groups of Muslims that are misunderstood, but more importantly, goes against the law.
Recently, the FPI has gained momentum to become a mass movement with the demonstration against Ahok’s appointment as Jakarta’s governor in 2014 (Lumbanrau 2017) propelling it into mainstream consciousness. Below is how Mursalim described the organization:

I won’t say they are good or bad. Some people would think they are good. For example, in Jakarta, there is prostitution and gambling. In Ramadhan, they will come and stop them by force without going through proper procedures. Some people would question why they force people to close their business. This cause people to hate Muslims.

While it can be argued that these comments might be feelings held by a non-representative group of Indonesians, it is important to acknowledge their experience as citizens of the largest Muslim-majority country. After all, they also share personal anecdotes of facing Islamophobia either first-hand or by other family members due to people’s perception of Muslims as being extremists. Roza, 21, shared that when her mother, who tried wearing the face veil or *niqab*, had to go to Tangerang in West Java, people were looking at her suspiciously. Similarly, Yusuf shared that while his own family members look at his mother suspiciously for wearing the *niqab*, they don’t harm her despite feeling uncomfortable with her presence. These anecdotes came from two people who live in Aceh in northern Sumatra and Makassar, South Sulawesi respectively. This exemplifies that Islamophobic attitude due to perception of extremism and radicalism is shared across Indonesia.

However, Sofia made an interesting observation in her hometown in northern Sulawesi in which she said “wearing a *niqab* is acceptable in society if you are Arab or you are some sort of really religious person like if you are a *kiai* (an expert in Islam) or a *kiai*’s wife. Or you have Arab blood.” It can be deduced from this that perception of extremism relates to cultural norms. Since the *niqab* is believed to have originated from the Middle East, those who wear it are considered radical Muslims for practicing what is essentially an alien culture, a similar argument made by the Hindus in Bali who objected to the wearing of the veil.

It is well known that European countries such as France and Belgium have banned the burka and *niqab* in the name of security. The argument is ongoing regarding how the ban on the burka and *niqab* leads to the institutionalization of Islamophobia while at the same time Europe fears the loss of its identity if they continue to allow Muslim women in the West to claim their freedom of expression (Carland 2011; Eskandari and Banfi 2017). Unbeknownst to most, there are also Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt and Chad which had banned full-face veiling in public places and government institutions. Indonesia has recently followed in their footsteps.

In March 2018, the Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University (UIN) in Yogyakarta, Central Java, imposed a ban on the *niqab* with counselling provided to students donning it. According to the rector, Yudian Wahyudi, “These girls must understand that the *niqab* is just a part of Arabic culture, therefore it is not appropriate in Indonesian society” (Muryanto 2018). Unlike the security argument in the West, the reason for disallowing students to wear the *niqab* in Indonesia is on the ground of culture—specifically how it is not part of Indonesian culture. Interestingly, following protests, the ban only lasted for a week. This is not the only incident of a *niqab* ban in Indonesia. Ahmad Dahlan University in Yogyakarta has also encouraged students to leave off the *niqab*, but it has not made it mandatory and with no penalty for those who ignore the guidance (AFP 2018). What makes the UIN case unique is the fact that it is an Islamic university. If an Islamic university could put a ban on a clothing item that is synonymous with Islam, it is not far-fetched to claim the rise of Islamophobia, specifically liberal Islamophobia, in Indonesia.
Islamophobia by Muslims towards Muslims

Another important argument to be made regarding Islamophobia in Indonesia is how Muslims who do not support conservative views such as the implementation of Sharia law are regarded as Islamophobic. It is confusing and dangerous because the self-professed moderates feel that the extremists are the ones who are Islamophobic for their manifestation of hate against Muslims who do not subscribe to their version of Islam. Mursalim, who is a self-professed moderate Muslim, feels that the fundamentalists are very extreme and judgmental in their actions. He said, “They call others as hypocrites and *kafirs* [infidels]. Most of them have beard and appear very Islamic but it is unfortunate that they are like that.” Roza supports Mursalim’s observation through her disappointment that some people may pray the *suhb* (dawn) prayer without reciting the *qunut* supplication are called Wahhabis, which is derogatory in Indonesia. On the other hand, as discussed in the previous section, the fundamentalists feel that the moderates are the Islamophobes for not supporting their rights to practice a version of Islam that they believe to be true.

Even in the focus group that was held for this research, there was an argument over how to define extremist and moderate Muslims, which shows that there is unease among Muslims in Indonesia. This is of course nothing unique as it is expected for people to disagree even if they profess to believe in the same God and prophets. Relevant to this paper is the rhetoric that was used to describe other Muslims which betray the person’s true feelings towards other Muslims that might be bordering on Islamophobia. Rivaldy, 23, argued as follows:

Extremists are people who practice the *sunnah* of the Prophet. The moderates, in my point of view, are not ready yet to practice Islam as taught by the Prophet. They are already comfortable with the culture, with what their ancestors taught them. That’s the problem, because people who call themselves moderates, are not ready to practice Islamic values.

From his argument, he feels the moderates are Islamophobic in their “reluctance” to practice so-called true Islam as how Prophet Muhammad did. Following his comments, Sofia made the argument that moderate Muslims would see the *extremists* as being un-Islamic in doing too much. To further stress his point against Sofia, Rivaldy discussed the matter of shaking hands between opposite genders: “To moderates, for example, if you want to shake hand with me and I don’t accept it, I would already be called an extremist. But it is truly Islamic teaching, but moderates are not ready to accept this value.” To diffuse the tension, Roza offered her explanation of an extremist:

I’m thinking about someone. . . extremism is more than that. For example, he calls others *kafir*. What Rivaldy said is Islam. Mursalim described real extremism; for example, women cannot argue with her husband. A woman may have a different perspective that doesn’t match with her husband, and because of that he calls her a *kafir*. That is what I call extremism.

Even though Roza tried to take the middle ground, her rhetoric is reflective of how Muslims view other Muslims. There are those who are quick to call other Muslims as infidels, and these same people are then labelled as extremists by the moderates. Thus, Islamophobia among Muslims in Indonesia goes both ways between the moderates and the
fundamentalists. This polarization of Muslims in Indonesia is discussed by the focus group participants as follows:

- “Islamophobia happen in religion itself. If we talk to Christians and Buddhists, they don’t care.”
- “As long as you don’t harm them (non-Muslims), they are OK. We, Muslims, are more scared.”
- “Conflicts would be between Muslims. Christians or other religionists don’t have specific conflicts like the Muslims.”
- “It is among us, between mazhabs, between ideologies.”

More than just Muslim sectarianism, it is argued by the focus group that it is pertinent to consider Muslims’ hatred or fear against other Muslims as part of Islamophobia. More problematic, Muslims hating on one another would eventually lead to wider Islamophobia in a specific country and in the rest of the world as how sectarianism in the Middle East has caused people to fear Muslims in general (Raj and Sarwar 2016). Sectarianism “emphasizes ascriptive community markers and shared culture while deemphasizing religiosity itself to construct religious identity” (Corstange 2012, 120). The priority that is given to sects, whether it be Sunni or Shia, over Islam as a religion, makes sectarianism vulnerable to Islamophobic behavior by Muslims who are outside of a specific community.

Shiites, along with Ahmadis, are among the persecuted groups of Muslims in Indonesia. While Shiites are only a fraction of the entire Muslim population in Indonesia, at about one to three million people (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor 2016), actions taken by them were misrepresented and thus led to Islamophobia by those who do not understand the difference between minority Shiites and majority Sunnis. For example, Shiites could enter into a contract marriage which is expected to last for as short as a few days. When others do not understand the concept of such marriages, they find it perverted that conservative Muslims were committing such liberal practice. The practice in and of itself is not a problem, but it is the misconception of others that lead to Islamophobia in Indonesia. Mursalim explains how this leads to Islamophobia:

One of the reasons people hate us, Muslims, is because of Shiism. They look like us [Sunnis]. They wear hijab, but they can get married with just a stroke of a pen, for just a one-night stand. People think, why these women who wear niqab are pregnant without a husband. That is strange.

According to the International Religious Freedom Report, there were multiple reports of Sunni-Shia clashes within the span of one year. For example, before Eid ul-Fitr, local Sunnis tried preventing Shia internally displaced peoples from returning to their homes in Madura, East Java. On April 1, 2016, a loose coalition of Sunnis called Aswaja demanded for the authority to stop some 100 Shia women from celebrating the birthday of Fatima, the Prophet’s beloved daughter, in Pasuruan, south Surabaya. While the authority fulfilled Aswaja’s demands, another similar protest just a few days later in Bondowoso, East Java, was stopped by the police and military from causing further disruption.

CONCLUSION

Islamophobia in Indonesia is a complicated issue to discuss because it is not straightforward. Some may call it sectarianism while others may just consider them as violent or
criminal acts in the name of revenge rather than on religious ground. However, there is no denying that there has been a rise in both rhetoric and action against Islamic practices in the country. The confusion is on objection to which issue is Islamophobic: the right of fundamentalists such as the FPI, the demand of moderates to keep culture separate from religion, or the difference in beliefs and practices of Shias and Ahmadis. According to the focus group held for this study, while Muslims, too, hold Islamophobic prejudices against other Muslims, Islamophobia by non-Muslims is on the rise in Indonesia because of what is perceived as a turn away from secularism towards an Islamic country that is unlike the so-called Islamic State Caliphate but more like the city of Aceh that implements Sharia law. This slippery slope is dangerous because it could lead to inter-religious violence such as that following the Islamophobic act of the burning of a mosque in Tolikara, Papua in 2015. As in any other country, the solution to Islamophobia is to create awareness and tolerance by bridging the gap between Indonesians through interfaith dialogue. As succinctly put by Rangga, 20, “In West Java, the leader of Purwakarta wants to encourage Muslims to go to church and learn about Christianity and vice versa. But his suggestion was faced with opposition. That is why non-Muslims don’t know Muslims.” That creates fertile ground for a spark of Islamophobia to lead to bloody conflict.

REFERENCES


