

PAPER NAME

**1. (2022) ASWAJA MOBILIZATION AND I  
NTOLERANCE Sub state ideology religio  
us vigilantism in Aceh Indon**

AUTHOR

**Nirzalin Nirzalin**

WORD COUNT

**10560 Words**

CHARACTER COUNT

**57652 Characters**

PAGE COUNT

**16 Pages**

FILE SIZE

**841.4KB**

SUBMISSION DATE

**Aug 9, 2022 11:27 PM GMT+7**

REPORT DATE

**Aug 9, 2022 11:28 PM GMT+7**

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# ASWAJA MOBILIZATION AND INTOLERANCE: Sub-state ideology, religious vigilantism in Aceh, Indonesia

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To cite this article: Nirzalin & Yogi Febriandi | (2022) ASWAJA MOBILIZATION AND INTOLERANCE: Sub-state ideology, religious vigilantism in Aceh, Indonesia, Cogent Social Sciences, 8:1, 2089382, DOI: [10.1080/23311886.2022.2089382](https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2089382)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311886.2022.2089382>



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Published online: 14 Jun 2022.



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Received: 04 April 2022  
Accepted: 09 June 2022

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Reviewing editor:  
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the end of the article

## SOCIOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# <sup>2</sup> ASWAJA MOBILIZATION AND INTOLERANCE: Sub-state ideology, religious vigilantism in Aceh, Indonesia

Nirzalin<sup>1\*</sup> and Yogi Febrindi<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** <sup>2</sup> This article examines the attack on a mosque in Samalanga, Aceh, Indonesia, by showing the relations between religious ideology, the state, and paramilitary groups. Intolerance studies in the Muslim world pay less attention to the ideology in the sectarian state, and its influence on attacking houses of worship. <sup>2</sup> Using the state-parallel theory to look at the case of the attack on the <sup>2</sup> Muhammadiyah Mosque in Samalanga, Aceh, this article argues that attacking the <sup>2</sup> house of worship cannot be separated from state ideology. Based on the case study, data are collected by interviewing actors, such as the Aswaja group, staff government in Sangso, and Muhammadiyah members in Sangso. In the end, the article concluded that intolerance in the Muslim world can be seen from the parallel relation between religious ideology, state, and religious paramilitary.

**Subjects:** Sociology of Religion; Islam; Human Rights; Practice of Islam; Religion & Violence

<sup>2</sup> **Keywords:** state ideology; paramilitary group; intolerance; Aceh; Indonesia

### 1. Introduction

This article aims to complement the study over the practice of intolerance and religious paramilitary in Muslim society by taking a case study of the 2017 Muhammadiyah Mosque attack in Samalanga, Aceh, Indonesia. Studies of intolerance in Muslim societies show the strong influence of the state in encouraging the practice of intolerance (Saikal, 2022; Yani et al., 2020; Mietzne & Muhtadi, 2018; Ansor et al., 2014; Burhanudin, 2014; Lar, 2015; Makin, 2016; Müller, 2015; Willemse & Bergh, 2016). This article looks further at the issue of intolerance in the Muslim societies by analyzing religious paramilitary which is connected to the state ideology in the attack on Muhammadiyah's mosque in Aceh. Muhammadiyah is a minority Islamic organization with a large number of followers in Aceh. Although this organization has been around for a long time

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Nirzalin is an Associate Professor at the Universitas Malikussaleh, Lhokseumawe-Indonesia. His research topic includes sociology of religion, sociology and developmentalism, and sociology conflict. This article is one of his research projects <sup>6</sup> sponsored by the Ministry of Research and Higher Education of Indonesia. Yogi Febrindi is lecturer in IAIN Langsa, Indonesia. His research topic includes state and society, political violence, and minority rights in muslim society. This article is one of his research projects <sup>6</sup> sponsored by the Ministry of Research and Higher Education of Indonesia.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Public interest statement: The author is responsible for the publication of the accompanying article. The article was submitted with the knowledge and permission of the department/institution concerned.

in Aceh, its presence has met with opposition from the traditionalist Islamic School (*dayah*) groups, which is the majority Islamic sect and is culturally closer to the Acehnese. Since 2012, when anti-Shia and Wahabism arose in Aceh, this group assembled followers bearing the name of Aswaja. They founded the assembly based on Shafi'i school of thought, the main school taught in Dayah.

The Aswaja in Samalanga was led by Tu Hanan. His brother, Tu Bulqaini, is one of the elites in the traditionalist movement in Aceh. With Rafsanjani, Tu Bulqaini formed Aswaja that has the goal of excluding Wahhabism and Shia influence in Aceh. This group believes that *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah* must be the only theology school in Aceh. *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah* had a long and important history in the Islamic-Sunni tradition. This school was initiated by Ash'ari and Maturidi to encounter the Mu'tazilite at the beginning of the development of Islam. This theological school is spread in almost all areas of Southeast Asia and has a strong influence in this region. In Aceh, the influence of this school has existed since the days of the Aceh Sultanate, so it is deeply rooted and becomes the identity of the Acehnese people. It is not so strange when Aceh got the right to implement Islamic law, this sect was affirmed in state regulation (Qanun number 8/2015). Since then, traditionalist groups have carried out the persecution of other groups with the argument to carry out government regulations.

The relationship between religion and the state is a core discussion for Indonesian Muslim scholars (Madjid, 2003; Wahid, 2018). In general, Muslim scholars such as Nurcholis Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid have a considerable influence in Indonesia on the theory of inclusiveness regarding the relationship between the state and religion. To Nurcholis Madjid (2003), the state and religion (which in his writings refers to Islam) have a mutual relationship. This view is not different from Wahid's view that Religion (Islam) and the state give each other functions (2018). Even so, issues of religion and State in Indonesia do not always run smoothly. Broad literature that examined the religious conflict in Indonesia shows that conflicts held in Indonesia occur because of the divergence of religious practice at the grassroots (Saikal, 2022; Yani et al., 2020; Ansor et al., 2014; Burhanudin, 2014; Makin, 2016; Willemse & Bergh, 2016). In this situation, Nurcholis Madjid (2003) and Abdurrahman Wahid's (2018) theory on religion and state relations had to rethink. Using the Samalanga case as an analysis in explaining the relationship between religion and the State in Indonesia, this article looks at the agreement between the state and religion practiced by Aceh-Indonesia harms the rights of religious minorities.

This article follows the arguments of scholars who say that religious paramilitary that occurs in Muslim societies shows the connection between the state and vigilantism groups (Aliyev, 2016; Arianti & Gunasinaham, 2022; Casey, 2007; Lar, 2015; Müller, 2015; Suryana, 2020; Wilson, 2014; Zenn, 2019). The main purpose of this study is to show that ideology is a necessary aspect in analyzing cases of intolerance that occur in Muslim societies. In general, the study of intolerance in the Muslim society of Aceh examines the role of state and ulama (Aliyev, 2016; Ansor et al., 2014; Burhanudin, 2014; Makin, 2016; Müller, 2015; Suryana, 2020; Wilson, 2014). These works use a structuralist approach that sees the capability of the state and the ulama as an elite structure to carry out a monopoly of violence. The perspective of the structuralism does not only narrow the understanding of conflict that occurs in the society but also neglects to see the potential for an ideology that grows in society as a driving force for intolerance actions (Astourian & Kévorkian, 2021; Bielefeldt & Wiener, 2020; Hedges, 2021; Jones, 2020; Koegelenberg & Hahn, 2020; Nobutaka & Helen, 2019). In Weber's classical theory (1930), religion determines the action and social behavior of the community. The Samalanga case shows that the practice of intolerance has emerged from this position. As shown in Samalanga, the Aswaja group (traditionalist Muslims that affiliate with *Dayah*) became the key actor in mobilizing the masses to attack the Samalanga Muhammadiyah Mosque using religious partisan sentiments. The Aswaja claims that the protests have insight because they have to protect *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah* theology from the Muhammadiyah. They claim that Muhammadiyah in Aceh is originated from the Wahhabism movement, and for some generations, this label affected the relationship between these two groups.

This article uses a case study approach by exploring intolerance action when Muhammadiyah mosque was burned by the Aswaja Group. Not only looking at the reasons behind the burning, this article also looks at how the state responded to the actions taken by the Aswaja group. The research project was carried out for 2 years with a focus on the analysis of the case of the Muhammadiyah Mosque in Sangso Village, Bireun district, Aceh. This article examines the role of paramilitary groups in carrying out oppressive actions against minorities in Aceh and the relationship between state and religious paramilitary in Aceh. Based on the field data, the author argues that religious intolerance cannot be separated from the state's ideological project. To demonstrate the argument, this article uses Aliyev's (2016) state-parallel paramilitaries theory which sees paramilitaries legitimizing themselves among the community by building an equal position with state actors in carrying out the state's political agenda. Furthermore, Aliyev (2016) formulated three main characteristics of the state-parallel paramilitaries, namely, a strong line of mass volunteers, relations with regime elites, and attracting mass legitimacy. In addition, this article opposes the theory of vigilantism which sees vigilantism as a form of community resistance to the legitimacy of the state in creating security (Pratten, 2008; Pratten & Sen, 2007) by arguing that the emergence of vigilante groups also appears to help run ideological project of the state in society. This article strengthens the theory of Henne & Klocek (2019), saying that the state's experience of religious conflict encourages the state to solve the conflict more repressively. The case in Bireun shows how the local government solves the problem by limiting the space for the Muhammadiyah group in Sangso.

In the first part, this article discusses the relationship between the belief protection project carried out by the Aswaja group and public acceptance of oppressive actions against Muhammadiyah in Samalanga. The second part discusses the relationship between sectarian ideological projects in the state bureaucracy and the attitude of protection that the state provides against the attack on the Muhammadiyah Mosque. In the end, this article wants to say that intolerance in the Muslim world is not only caused by the relationship between the majority religious group and the state in a patron-client manner (Permana, 2021; Wilson, 2014), strategic alliance (Müller, 2015; Wille, 2021) and the interests of access to power (Akah et al., 2020; Elischer, 2019; Fafore, 2019; Suryana, 2020) but can also be seen from the parallel relationship between the state and religious paramilitaries.

## 2. Methods

This article is based on qualitative research in Sangso Village, Samalanga District, Bireuen Regency, Aceh-Indonesia. The methods used in the data collection are observation, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and document review to build a sociological imagination about the worldview of religious beliefs and to identify the informants, we lived among the local community for 6 months. This article determined research informants as follows: (1) the leader of the attack actor, namely Tu Hanan and 10 of his followers representing the Aswaja group, (2) Ustadz Yahya, the leader of the attacked party with his 11 followers who came from the Islamic elite of Muhammadiyah, Samalanga branch, (3) Geuchiek (Village Head) Sangso, (4) the Regent and one staff of the National Unity, Politics and Community Protection Agency of the Regional Secretariat of Bireuen Regency, (5) one element of the Ulama Consultative Council (MPU), (6) two academics and observers of conflict based on religious understanding in Bireuen Regency, and (7) nine religious people who concern to the reality of radicalism in religious action in Aceh after the implementation of Islamic law.

<sup>1</sup> Through this live-in method, researchers can explore various dimensions of the social world including the dynamics of daily life, understanding, experience, and description of the subject studied, patterns of social processes, institutions, and developing discourse (Njie and Asimiran, 2014). The main attention in the observation is focused on the worldview of religious beliefs, religious practices, and the relation between state actors and the mass. On this side, we investigated the government's regulations and the elite in Bireun, especially how they are interpreted, how followers absorb them, and how followers obey their leaders. Applying in-depth interviews,

the main focus is directed at collecting data related to the basis of values, sources of social unrest, and reasons discrediting Muhammadiyah as a common enemy.

To avoid contradictory data during the in-depth interview, the informants were interviewed individually and then were brought together in a group discussion to focus the data. Therefore, in the observation and in-depth interviews, the data were obtained personally, while in the FGD, the information obtained became collective data. Documents related to the case of attacks on religious paramilitaries in Sangso, Samalanga, are used as secondary data to strengthen the analysis. As mentioned by Baškarada (2014), case studies can use several techniques in carrying out the data analysis process. The data analysis techniques are pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case analysis. Various explanations of the cases studied are based on conclusions from the results of comparisons of data matching found in the field. In this context, various explanations refer to the causality of how or why something happens. This data analysis process follows the opinion of (Patton, Sawicki, and Clark, 2015), carried out interactively since the beginning of data collection.

### 2.1. Religious vigilantism and state ideology

Studies related to the practice of intolerance in the Muslim world that discuss the relationship between vigilante groups and the state, although not abundantly available, have become the attention of many scholars (Bunzel, 2019; Khan et al., 2020; Muthuswamy, 2022; Prinsloo & Simons, 2018; Schulze & Chernov Hwang, 2019). Those studies discuss the relationship between the influence of religious regulation policies, both institutionally and structurally, with the ideology of vigilante groups (Ashrafun & Säävälä, 2014; Jentzsch, 2015; Müller, 2015; Nakissa, 2020; Nanninga, 2019; Pratten, 2008; Pratten & Sen, 2007; Willemse & Bergh, 2016; Wilson, 2014). There are at least three different cases that show the influence of religious regulation policies on the emergence of vigilante groups. First, in a country that openly supports the religious beliefs of the majority such as Malaysia, vigilante groups take advantage of state policies to deny the presence of minority groups. Müller (2015), in his research in Malaysia, saw that state support for the *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah* sect encouraged the arising of acts of intolerance carried out by the majority Muslim group against Shia and Wahabi groups.

Second, the relationship between the Vigilante group and the state in Nigeria that implements Islamic law shows that there is a contestation of authority in the enforcement of Islamic law (Casey, 2007). Casey (2007) sees the main goal of vigilante groups such as 'yan Dabba arising from the weakness of the state in enforcing Islamic law. The 'yan Dabba group targets not only minority groups but also Muslims who do not apply Islamic law. Vigilante groups in Nigeria use the issue of moral violations by non-Muslims and disobedient Muslims to gain legitimacy in enforcing laws outside the state system.

Third, in a democratic and post-authoritarian state, vigilante groups grow, influenced by local political factors and the open-access of the public to form civilian militias (Wilson, 2014; Suryana, 2019). After the reformation, the relationship between civilian, military, and elites at the local level exacerbated religious conflicts due to the tendency of local governments to protect the interests of the majority rather than protect the rights of minorities (Suryana, 2020). In Weber (1946), violence is a characteristic of the state. Through violence, the state controls the territory and regulates citizens. Recent studies on vigilantism show that the emergence of vigilante groups can no longer be seen how strong the state's legitimacy is in controlling violence (Aliyev, 2016; Fleisher, 2000; Pratten & Sen, 2007). As shown in Muslim-majority countries with strict religious policies, vigilante groups emerge and attach themselves to state ideology (Burhanudin, 2014; Jentzsch, 2015; Makin, 2016; Müller, 2015).

Coreferential to these studies, our findings in Samalanga also show that the Aswaja group that attacked the Muhammadiyah mosque linked their action to the state ideology. Tu Hanan, the main actor behind the attack, reveals that the attack on the Muhammadiyah Mosque was an obligation to preserve the *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* theology. Tu Hanan believes that the actions were not against the law because the attack was the reaction to the provocation carried out by



Muhammadiyah. The construction of a mosque, which has been banned by the community, is considered a form of provocation by the Aswaja group. The reason for the attack was due to the provocation of minorities, even though the minority in their capacity to protect their rights, according to Singh (2018), occurred because of suspicion of religious minorities who were seen as a menace. On Singh's (2018) work in India, the Islamic Fundamentalist Deoband group and the All India Muslim Personal Board, for example, in the name of "The reason for the obligation to maintain faith" carry out various acts of violence so that they do not hesitate to take them to court if they think that any party has offended their religious understanding.

In Aceh's literature, the "obligation to maintain faith" has long encouraged religious violence such as preventing church activities (Makin, 2016), mass punishment of groups labeled as heretical (Burhanudin, 2014), and moral violations (Kloos, 2014). Although these studies discuss obligations, they do not discuss the relationship between these consciences and ideology. According to In contrast to previous studies, this article shows that the violence committed by the community is not always in the frame of the state manipulation game. Our data in Samalanga show that the state did not coordinate the violence perpetrated by the Aswaja, and the state keeps a distance from the actors involved. The attack on the Muhammadiyah mosque also did not occur because of a political agreement between the elite and the masses, as in Permana's research (Permana, 2021), because there was no direct organization by the state.

In the Samalanga case, the acts of intolerance carried out by the community are related to the state's ideological project. The contrary situation in Ghana and Nigeria, Vigilantism is triggered by the despair of individuals and community groups against economic difficulties, political polarization, and the weakness of the state in enforcing the law (Mudasiru & Fatai, 2020; Asamoah; Adzimah-Alade et al., 2020). The discussion of intolerance in the Muslim world currently looks more at the role of the state by looking at the production of discriminatory rules (Ichwan et al., 2020). It does not look at the influence of ideology spread by the state on violence committed by the community. This article seeks to contribute state ideology analysis to the study of intolerance in the Muslim world.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. The samalanga case

In October 2017, there was an attack targeting a mosque that belongs to the Muhammadiyah organization in Sangso village, Bireun district, Aceh. Aceh is a province in Indonesia that implements governance based on Islamic law. This privilege was obtained after the process of peace agreement with the Indonesian government to end the long conflict between the separatist movement, GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka/Free Aceh Movement), and the Indonesian government (Kingsbury, 2007). Attacks on places of worship became a serious problem in Aceh after the implementation of Islamic law, but attacks on mosques began to increase as the Aswaja group supported by the local government elite became stronger. Reports of attacks on worship places in Aceh show the factors of the Acehnese government's policy in checking the spread of Christianity after the implementation of Islamic law. Now, after a dozen years of implementing Islamic law, attacks on places of worship have expanded to competition within the Islamic sects themselves.

The construction of the Muhammadiyah Mosque in Samalanga has been rejected by sympathizers of Aswaja since 2015. GAWA (Gerakan Ahlusunnah Wal Jamaah), an organization that was established by Tu Hanan, also rejected the construction of the mosque. As a central figure of GAWA, Tu Hanan sees the construction of the Mosque as becoming a threat to the local theological beliefs of the Samalanga community who hold the Islamic teachings of Ahlusunnah Wal Jamaah.

If the At-taqwa Muhammadiyah Mosque continues its establishment and development, it will breach the local wisdom of the Samalanga community. There are two basic reasons related to it. First, it relates to the existence of the Baiturrahman Grand Mosque in

Samalanga District which, intentionally facilitates the four villages, namely, Keude Aceh Village, Sangso Pante Rheng, and Meuliek. Second, so far, out of 21 prayer lines of the congregation capacity in the Baiturrahman Samalanga Grand Mosque, only 9 lines are there at the Friday prayers. It is because most of the prayers who attend the grand mosque are residents of Sangso and Pante Rheng since its population is greater than the other 2 villages.

The process of obtaining construction permits for the mosque has been carried out since May 2015 by the Muhammadiyah organization in Samalanga. Abdurrahman Isya, who represented Muhammadiyah, met the Samalanga sub-district head regarding the presence of a funder from Saudi Arabia who wanted to build a mosque in Sangso. At this meeting, he pursued permission to build a mosque in Sangso. During the process of obtaining this construction permit, Abdurrahman Isya did not get any obstacles from the Bireun government. A new problem arose when Tu Hanan and Muslim gathered several people in Meunasah (small mosque) Kandang in 2017. During the meeting at the Meunasah Kandang, they agreed that the construction of the mosque in Sangso should be stopped. Tu Hanan and Muslim believe that the establishment of a mosque is not following the teachings of the Acehnese people in terms of the “law” on establishing a mosque. The law for the establishment of mosques according to the *Dayahs* in Aceh must meet regional requirements. For one *Kemukiman* (settlement consists of four villages) only one mosque should be built. Sangso is part of the *Kemukiman* (district) Keude Samalanga. It already has a large mosque that is the Samalanga Grand Mosque.

This decision was then passed on to Abu Mudi, the *Dayah* leader of the *Ma’had al Ulum Diniyah Islamiyah Mesjid Raya* (MUDI MESRA), one of the three major *Dayahs* in Bireun. Abu Mudi’s decision was not so clear and was mostly silent. Abu Mudi’s silence was seen as a gesture to support the decision to cancel the construction of the mosque in Sangso. Seeing Abu Mudi’s silence, Tu Hanan and Muslim believed that their proposal to force Muhammadiyah to cancel the mosque construction was approved by Abu Mudi. In August, Tu Hanan and Muslim gathered and had a meeting with Muhammadiyah to discuss the cancellation of the construction. Despite the pressure from the Aswaja group, Abdurrahman Isya continued to build the mosque. Before the fire incident on Tuesday, 17 October 2017, Muhammadiyah had reported the threat of the Aswaja group to the Police and the Bireun Regency Government. At the first meeting between Muhammadiyah, the National Police, and the Bireun Government, the Police and the government ensured that the construction of the mosque would continue. The Bireun government’s commitment changed when the Ulama Consultative Council (MPU) of Bireun gave the Bireun government a recommendation to cancel the mosque construction permit. The MPU’s recommendation has strong implications for the mosque construction process because this institution is a government institution that has authority in religious matters. In addition to the authority in terms of religious bureaucracy, the MPU has strong political values because it is an institution that was born after the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh.

The MPU has the authority to determine Islamic understanding since the legalization of the implementation of Islamic law in Aceh (Feener, 2013). The enactment of mass law against perpetrators of violators of Islamic law is carried out without any court process and the form of punishment depends on the fatwa issued by the MPU. The mass judgment that led to the killing of Tengku Aiyub in Bireun in 2012 was also due to the fatwa of the MPU Bireun which stated that Tengku Aiyub’s teachings were heretical (Burhanudin, 2014). The attack on the Indonesian Bethel Church (GBI) in Banda Aceh in 2012 also occurred due to the influence of fatwas issued by traditionalist groups at MPU. The MPU’s position in Acehnese politics is important because it can intervene in public discourse, practical politics, and even government policies. The strengthening of the Aswaja group’s influence within the Bireun MPU occurred when Saifannur served as Regent in 2017. During the Saifannur administration, the MPU consisted of people from traditionalist groups such as Tgk. Nazaruddin, the chairman of MPU Bireun; Deputy Chair I Tgk Jamaluddin Idris; and Deputy Chair II, Tgk Sayed Mahyeddin. Saifannur also inaugurated the MPU Honorary Council, all of



which are traditionalist clerics, including Tgk. H. Muhammad Amin (Abu Tumin), Tgk. H. Hassanoel Bashry, Tgk. H. Nuruzzahri Yahya (Waled Nu), Tgk. H. M. Yusuf A. Wahab (Tu Sop), and Tgk. H. Yahya Abdullah (Yahya Keurumbok). This policy was taken by Saifannur considering the influence of Abu Mudi, Waled Nu, and Abu Tumin, as the three great ulama in Aceh. All members and the honorary council of MPU share the same view on the thought of the three ulemas concerning the presence of the Salafi-Wahhabi sect which is counted as a threat to traditional Islamic teachings in Aceh.

Prior to the burning in October 2017, the relationship between Muhammadiyah and the *dayahs* in Bireun was not that harmonious. The contestation of influence between the two groups within the Bireun government has been going on for a long time. Not only in Bireun, the contestation of influence between Muhammadiyah and traditionalist *Dayahs* also took place in Banda Aceh, the administrative center of Aceh province. The issuance of Qanun Number 8 of 2015 which mentions Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah as the official sect of Aceh and Qanun number 4 of 2016 which regulates the establishment of worship places changed the Muhammadiyah organization into a sect that is supervised by the Aceh government. The two Qanuns were issued when Zaini Abdullah and Muzakkir Manaf from the Aceh Party became Governor and Deputy Governor of Aceh. When the Aceh Party was the ruling party in Aceh, the influence of the *dayah* traditionalists in the Acehnese government strengthened. The relationship between these two groups is bound by the ideology of ethnicity and the memory of resistance to the Indonesian government during the Aceh conflict which lasted from 1975 to 2005.

Not only is campaigning against the Muhammadiyah similar to Wahhabism but, further, *dayah* traditionalists even mobilized the mass to seize some mosques that were previously managed and initiated by the activists of Muhammadiyah. The opposition to the construction of the Muhammadiyah At-Taqwa Mosque in Sangso Village is the culmination of the contestation between Muhammadiyah and the traditionalist *Dayah* group. Similar to the seizure of mosques carried out by traditionalist groups, in the case of Sangso too, the government affirmed the mass action. Ustadz Yahya, the leader of Muhammadiyah in Samalanga, said that the At-Taqwa Muhammadiyah mosque gets no support from Geuchieuk (Village Head), Imum Gampong, and local Mukim, and even neutral local figures after the attack of Tu Hanan in October 2017. According to Yahya, since the decision of the regent of Bireun says that the construction is breaching the common belief of Aceh people, it indicates that the state was on the side of the striker.

Moreover, the State Administrative Court decided that the establishment of the Muhammadiyah mosque has to be stopped because it was against the customs of the Acehnese people, even though previously the Bireun government had issued a construction permit. The government avoided the risk of a bloody conflict over this case. Therefore, the government must pay attention and prioritize the interest of the majority group (Heri, Kesbangpol Staff of Bireuen Regency, interviewed on 27 September 2020).

### 3.2. Aswaja's mob and anti-wahabi crusade

The attack on the construction of the Muhammadiyah mosque in Sangso is based on the background of the Aswaja's response to the development of Wahhabism in Aceh. The attitude of intolerance towards Muhammadiyah in Aceh started in 2012, marked by the forcible undertaking of the Aswaja group over the management of mosques in the provincial and district/city capitals from followers of Muhammadiyah. The elite of the local government, supported by Aswaja, paved the way for the forcible undertaking. This euphoria of Aswajaism appeared along with the peace agreement between the Free Aceh Movement and the Government of Indonesia through the Helsinki MOU on 15 August 2005. Since then, Aswaja has wanted to strengthen the influence of his Islamic understanding not only in gampongs (villages) but also in urban centres in Aceh. The primary motivation of the Aswaja Movement was to stem the development of Muhammadiyah and maintain the dominance of the influence of traditionalist groups in Acehnese society.

In Samalanga, Tu Hanan became the prominent leader of the Aswaja Group and affiliated with the *Dayahs* in Samalanga, Bireuen District. Tu Hanan was a student of Teungku Hasanoel Basri and Teungku Nurzahri, two scholars who had a strong influence in Samalanga. The two scholars also had a strong influence on the spread of the teachings of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah in Bireun. The thought of Tu Hanan was influenced mostly by the teachings of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah since he is a Samalanga student. The presence of Muhammadiyah in Samalanga, even though it has been in the area for quite a long time, is considered a threat to the teachings of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah because of similarities in religious practices between Muhammadiyah and Wahhabism. At the same time, the number of Saudi Arabian alumni increased. The leaders of the Anti-Wahhabi Movement of Aceh claimed that the leader of the Sub Branch (PAC) of Muhammadiyah Samalanga was a Wahhabi follower (Interview with Tu Hanan on 30 August 2019). So, on hearing that the government was going to permit the construction of Muhammadiyah Mosque in Sangso village, Tu Hanan saw that the mosque would potentially be used to spread Wahhabism in Samalanga (Tu Hanan, Leader of the An-ti-Wahhabi Movement Group of Aceh, Bireuen Regency, interviewed on 21 June 2020). Dr. Athaillah, a chairman of Muhammadiyah, Bireuen Regency, justified Tu Hanan's worries.

They (Wahabi) are blend in with the Muhammadiyah members and use Muhammadiyah for their benefit. This is detrimental to Muhammadiyah because they are not registered members of Muhammadiyah, apart from that, they have a different Islamic understanding from Muhammadiyah and begin to approach Muhammadiyah members with their teachings. Their presence in Muhammadiyah made confusion in which, others accused Muhammadiyah of being Wahabi (interviewed with Aslam Nur, Regional Leader Muhammadiyah of Aceh on 07/06/2019 and interviewed with Athaillah Muhammadiyah Leader of Bireuen Branch on 05/09/2020).

So far, studies that have looked at religious intolerance in Aceh have not explored the role of state ideology in transforming the masses in carrying out violence in the name of religion. A study on the role of ideology related to mass alteration in carrying out violence in Indonesia was initiated by Siegel (2006), who concluded that the violence that occurred in the villages after the fall of Suharto was related to state ideology. Siegel (2006) argues that although mass violence is carried out by mass groups formed by emotional ties, the ideology of the state, however, also has its influences. As this article shows, the people who attacked Muhammadiyah mosques are formed on emotional impulses, rather than political goals. The strengthening of the *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah* ideology at the instigation of traditionalist groups which can be seen in Qanun Number 8 of 2015 and Qanun number 4 of 2016 is the main factor in the emergence of mass groups that hold the Aswaja ideology. Narratives of fear that spread through rumors and gossip related to Muhammadiyah, Shia, Wahabi, and other minor sects provide a goal to engage in acts of violence to those who were sympathetic to the *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah*.

The background of the establishment of the Anti-Wahhabi Movement was due to the concern of the *dayah* group seeing Wahhabism in Aceh was increasingly widespread. It has grown quite rapidly in the last decade in Aceh, especially in large urban areas of Aceh such as Banda Aceh, greater Aceh, and has now started to enter the cities of Bireuen and Lhokseumawe. This puritan understanding of Islam began to dominate strategic mosques in these cities, especially certain mosques situated in the companies under the Ministry of State-Owned Enterprises (BUMN) such as oil and gas companies and Government Hospitals. Salafism in Aceh was popularized by Islamic scholars who graduated from the Middle East and mass media channels such as Rodja TV.

Apart from the influx of Wahhabi influence, the increasing number of Muhammadiyah followers in Samalanga also underlies the Aswaja group to oversee Muhammadiyah activities in Sangso. Since 2009, Muhammadiyah members have increased significantly in three villages, namely Gampong Sangso, Gampong Rheum, and Gampong Pante Ring (Interviewed with Ustadz Yahya on 5 September 2020). The growth in the number of Muhammadiyah followers was driven by the

influence of Ustadz Yahya who is the central figure in Sangso. Ustadz Yahya utilizes the assets owned by Muhammadiyah in his preaching movement. Currently, Muhammadiyah in Samalanga has assets in the form of productive land and buildings that are rented out to the community. The income from these assets is used for community economic empowerment programs through the mobilization of alms and charities. This significant increase in the number of Muhammadiyah followers was a concern for Tu Hanan and his followers.

The attack on the establishment of the Muhammadiyah Mosque was to stem the spread of Wahabism that had entered Aceh. They believe that Wahabism is brought by the Middle Eastern alumni who penetrate the Muhammadiyah organization. For this reason, the intention of the attack was as a political act of “cutting before it grows”. Maintaining the dominance and influence of the traditionalist Bireuen groups is very important. Samalanga has control over Islamic discourse in Aceh. Ulama in Samalanga has power and influence in the Acehnese government. As Permana (2021) shows, the relationship between the local elite and the ulama in Samalanga complicates the solution to the attack in Samalanga.

The relationship pattern of the attack in Samalanga resulted in the Bireun government’s decision to delay the mosque’s construction for 12 months. Despite the efforts of the Muhammadiyah group to bring cases to state courts, these efforts had to be stopped due to the decision of the state court that said the development could not be continued because of aspects of local wisdom. The phrase “local wisdom” is odd because it means that the government policy has to comply with the wishes of the masses and the ideology they carry. In this case, the government directly affirmed the ideology promoted by Aswaja. In the case of the attack on the construction of the Sangso Mosque, the Bireun Regency Government suppressed the conflict not by facilitating an open and intersubjective dialogue but instead by trying to oppress the existence of minorities.

#### 4. Discussion

##### 4.1. State ideology behind the mobs

Although violent groups existed throughout Indonesia, their form and relationship with the state cannot be explained in general terms (Barker, 2006). The emergence of this group had invited the attention of Muslim scholars in Indonesia like Abdurrahman Wahid and Nurcholish Majid. Those scholars observed the wave of transnationalism Islam and the reaction over traditionalism in Indonesia in 1980. A year later, the altercation between these two groups influenced the intolerance incidents in Indonesia (Yani, 2020). Furthermore, studies on intolerance in Indonesia look at the effects of the power transition after Suharto’s fall. It strengthened civilian influence and increased the power of local elites in Indonesia, but it opened up opportunities for people to build security systems apart from the state (Wilson, 2014). That was the result of the reforms after Suharto’s step down. Before the reform, the state was quite powerful, but the reformation changed the power structure. That is why the state actors were no longer the same and not concentrated in Jakarta. The changes were marked by the strengthening of the administration at the regional level and the emergence of local political power that are no longer dependent on political conditions in Jakarta.

This change has implications for the spread of state power that is no longer in Jakarta but the regions. Especially for Aceh, after a long period of conflict with the Indonesian government, the post-reform period also marks the opening of the Acehnese government’s opportunity to implement Islamic law. The implementation of Islamic law was not only signifying a change in the institution of Aceh’s government but also the ideology of Aceh’s government. Ichwan (2007), who saw the strong role of Ulama in the Aceh government, said that the position of Ulama and the state in Aceh was unlike other regions in Indonesia. That is what makes the fatwas of Ulama in Aceh can be used as the basis for government policies. This situation explains why the relationship between the state and the Islamist groups in Aceh is different from other areas that show policy confrontation. In Aceh, during the New Order era until the implementation of Islamic law in 1999,

the traditional Ulama tended to be used as a political instrument for the government elites (Nirzalin et al., 2020). The existence of Ulama in this state institution has prevented Islamist groups such as Aswaja from showing an attitude of resistance to the state. However, it becomes its associate in overseeing the implementation of Islamic sharia policies.

The situation in Aceh is not much different from Malaysia, where according to Müller (2015), the state plays a notable role concerning the acts of mass intolerance through regulations that support the Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah group. If Malaysia shows the significant role of the central government, the Aceh situation does not apply to all regions in Indonesia. After the Reformation, political decentralization made the struggle of the political elite at the regional level to open up roles for new actors who had no relationship with the elites in the central government. In this case, the position of the Aceh government is an anomaly from the Indonesian constitution that does not call it an Islamic state.

The situation in Bireun shows the overall condition related to intolerance in Aceh. The intolerance actions carried out by the lower classes are related to the state's ideological project. The encouragement to strengthen the teachings of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah carried out by the state gave the Aswaja group legitimacy to act against other groups. Cases of intolerance in Aceh are influenced by the milieu of the Aceh government which favors the Aswaja group. In his work, Ardi (2018) states that after the implementation of Islamic law, Aceh became a closed society because it gave birth to affirmative policies towards the majority Islamic group.

This study finds data that contradict Permana's (2021) argument that sees the relationship between Aswaja and the elite as being tied merely to electoral political interests. If you look at the backgrounds that encourage Aswaja members and the elites in the Bireun Government, it is found that there is a similarity in ideology, that is the Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah taught by the *Dayah* in Aceh. The two main channels for Aswaja's ideological sympathizers are <sup>14</sup> former members of the Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*) and the alumni of *dayah*. These two masses have the same ideology and political agenda towards the presence of Wahhabis, Muhammadiyah, and Shia which are seen as threats to the authenticity of Aceh's teachings. The political movement of *Dayah* is to make *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* the only Islamic teachings in Aceh and to influence dominantly the practice of Islamic Shari'a.

The state's involvement in supporting the *Dayah* political movement can be traced in Qanun Number 4 of 2016 and Qanun number 8 of 2015 which mentions the teachings of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah as the official teaching in terms of theology in Aceh. In these two Qanuns, the Aceh government firmly affirms the teachings of the Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah based on the customs of the Acehnese people. These two Qanuns banished other Islamic groups such as Muhammadiyah, Wahhabis, and Shiites. Apart from the explicit statement of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah, this teaching has so far been dominated by the thoughts of Acehnese traditionalist clerics as stated in the Circular Letter of the Governor of Aceh Number 450/21770 of 2019. The letter mentioned that the Aceh government only permitted the teachings of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah to have activities in Aceh's public spaces. Leaving aside the true meaning of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah, the two Qanuns above linked to the meaning of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah with Islamic traditionalism developed by the *Dayah* in Aceh.

The thought of the *Dayah* scholars in interpreting the teachings of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah was strongly felt in the statement of the Bireun FKUB (religious harmony forum) that referred to Abu Tumin's view which becomes the reason for the rejection of the construction of the Muhammadiyah mosque. The establishment of a mosque in Abu Tumin's view, as quoted from the FKUB's statement, is that on the condition where there is a need for the community in one village due to the absence of a mosque or the old mosque was no longer able to serve the congregation (praying at the mosque is obligatory for every Muslim). Based on Abu Tumin's fatwa, the Muhammadiyah mosque in Sangso did not meet the requirements because there is

a large mosque in Sangso which is still able to accommodate 1000 worshippers. In addition, Abu Mudi's letter asking <sup>3</sup> for the postponement of the construction of At-Taqwa Muhammadiyah Mosque to the Bireuen Regent also became the basis for the issuance of a letter to stop the construction of At-Taqwa Mosque. The two scholars' fatwas became the main reason for the Banda Aceh Administrative Court to reject Muhammadiyah's lawsuit over the termination of the permit <sup>3</sup> for the construction of the Muhammadiyah Mosque by the Bireuen Government because it was against the Islamic understanding of the local community.

The distribution of political actors in Bireuen also showed that they made common cause with Aswaja in the case of the attack on the <sup>3</sup> construction of the At-Taqwa Muhammadiyah Mosque in Sangso. The supporting political elites are mainly those who may get advantages in the next election from their proximity to the Ahlusunnah Wal Jamaah group, especially the leaders of the *Dayah* (Teungku *Dayah*). As a matter of fact, the map of Aceh's political geography shows that the political agency of the teungku *Dayah* determines the direction of mass inclination since they are charismatic leaders who are followed fanatically as well (Nirzalin and Febrinda 2020).

They generally belong to <sup>15</sup> PPP (United Development Party) and PKB (National Awakening Party) parties. The political elites of the two parties are generally coming from *Dayah* graduates who hold the ideology of Ahlusunnah Wal Jama'ah. Apart from these two parties, the support comes from the former partisan of GAM (Free Aceh Movement) combatants and a pair of political elites who are currently incumbent in the Bireuen Regency, although not blatantly. Meanwhile, the group that opposed the attack on the <sup>3</sup> construction of the At-Taqwa Muhammadiyah Sangso mosque came from the political elite that grew out of the Muhammadiyah like-minded, the political elite from the PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), and political elites who grew up from educational institutions in Java Island.

The political elites who supported the attack on the construction process of the Sangso Muhammadiyah Mosque did not show their partiality explicitly to the public, except for the political elite who came from former GAM combatants. Several political elites of former GAM combatants, especially those who live in Samalanga, were even very active and involved from the beginning in efforts to marginalize the Muhammadiyah group from the leadership of Islamic discourse in the Samalanga Regional Mosques. Meanwhile, the political elite who comes from *Dayah* graduates was active in providing support when meeting in internal and closed meetings with the attackers, but when speaking to the general public, they were moderate. However, the government elite who is currently ruling in Bireuen shows their alignment with the attackers through the politics of procrastination and neglecting this conflict without seeking a peaceful resolution.

Political elites who do not protect against attacks on the At-Taqwa Muhammadiyah Mosque construction process generally come from Muhammadiyah, actively clarifying and defending the construction of the At-Taqwa Muhammadiyah Sangso Mosque by approaching government elites. Meanwhile, the political elite from the PKS party, although opposed to Aswaja, tended to be less vocal in showing their defense in public. The clash of political support between those who come from ideological supporters of the PKS and sympathizers who culturally follow the Islamic pattern of Ahlusunnah Wal Jamaah becomes a warning for the PKS elite to maintain a safe point of voting in the General Election and Regional Head Election. So, for the political elite of the PKS, "silence" is the best tactical choice to deal with the public uproar in the case of the attack on the construction of the At-Taqwa Sangso Mosque. The Islamic landscape in Bireuen provides benefits for the Aswaja group to facilitate their political agenda. There are at least 139 *Dayahs* with the number of students reaching <sup>3</sup> 2,313 people (Source: Religious Affairs Office of Bireuen Regency, 2015). Not surprisingly, the political elite in Bireuen maintains good relations with the Aswaja group and tries to present themselves as part of this group.

The issue of the construction of the Muhammadiyah Mosque in Sangso Village also shows the vulnerability of the Bireuen Regency government's attitude. The attitude of the Bireuen government shows that it is not in favor of the development of Muhammadiyah in the Bireuen Regency. The



treatment given focuses on the specificity of Aceh which implements Islamic law according to the Aswaja principle. Like Keuchik (head of the village) Sangso, who questioned Muhammadiyah's teachings for refusing to read *qunut fajr* (one of the conditions for worship in prayer), not reading basmallah in the surah *al-Fatihah* while praying, and denying graves visit. That is why, Keuchik Sangso claimed, the existence of the Muhammadiyah Mosque would damage the habits of the people who had carried out the teachings of the Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah. He thought that the religious practices of the Acehnese people in the past were unlike Muhammadiyah. This perspective has implications for the perception that Muhammadiyah's presence has the potential to cause disunity and disputes.

center for spreading the teachings of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jamaah*, Tu Hanan convinced the *Dayah* sympathizers to urge the Bireun government to stop building the mosque. *Dayah* sympathizers who held the strike did not come from Sangso village or Samalanga sub-district. Some came from Jeunib and Ulee Glee sub-districts, two sub-districts that became the base of Tu Bulqaini's followers. According to Ustadz Yahya, among the sympathizers, neither followers of Abu Mudi, Abu Tumin, or Waled Nu were apparent at the time of the incident,

From the case of Samalanga, it can be concluded that the riots in the lower class were related to the ideology of the state. In the study of intolerance, often horizontal analysis that looks at conflicts between community groups ignores the position of the state in the conflict. This study shows that intolerance does not only occur because of the majority-minority position but also the role of the state through its policies. The inclusion of the teachings of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah in Qanun Number 8 of 2015 and Qanun Number 4 of 2014 benefited the Aswaja group to strengthen their influence and get rid of other Islamic groups.

This article argues that religious violence that occurs in a society that is strongly dominated by state ideology does not only occur because of state manipulation of the masses, patron-client relationships between political elites and the masses, but can occur because of the parallel ideology of the state and the masses.

## 5. Conclusions

<sup>2</sup> This article shows that the study of intolerance cannot be separated from the influence of ideology on society. The countries that apply religious ideology to their governance provide incentives for conservative groups that are in line with state ideology to take vigilante action. In the context of the relationship between the state and paramilitary groups as such, the analysis related to the phenomenon of intolerance in society no longer looks at the relationship in the framework of clientelism, patron-client, and strategic alliances, but through an analysis of the ideological relationship that is parallel in features between the state and religious paramilitaries. This relationship can be traced from the common ideological goals of the state and the political aspirations of religious paramilitary groups. The case of Samalanga shows that the intolerance movement of the Aswaja group is related to the project to strengthen the teachings of Islamic traditionalism in Aceh that has the support of the local government.

### Funding

This research was funded by the <sup>3</sup> Ministry of Research and Technology/The National Research and Innovation Agency, in particular the Directorate of Research and Community Service Republic of Indonesia.

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### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

### Citation information

<sup>2</sup> <sup>32</sup> Cite this article as: ASWAJA MOBILIZATION AND TOLERANCE: Sub-state ideology, religious vigilantism in Aceh, Indonesia, Nirzalin & Yogi Febrinda <sup>32</sup> *Cogent Social Sciences* (2022), 8: 2089382.

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