



ULAMA, SOCIAL ACTION, AND POWER DOMINATION: The Role of Yusuf Ahmad Lubis in Socio-Religious Movements

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Abstract: This article examines the socio-religious movements of Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis, an ulama who has received relatively little attention from researchers despite being an influential and charismatic figure in the North Sumatra region. The article employs a literature study with a historical approach, following Kuntowijoyo's historical writing model. To analyze the topic, Max Weber's theory of authority is utilized. The argument presented is that Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis successfully reformed his homeland. According to Max Weber's theory, he possesses two types of authority: charismatic authority acquired through genealogy, education, and a strong personality; and his charismatic authority serves as the primary asset in attaining rational-legal authority. His charisma and knowledge prove to be valuable assets in the realms of social-religious, and socio-political domains.

Keywords: ulama, authority, socio-religion, Al Washliyah, East Sumatra

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Introduction

Azyumardi Azra¹ admitted that the meaning of ulama has been reduced from “knowledgeable people” to “experts in the field of fiqh.” Ulama executes certain functions and duties among Muslims, and according to Azra,² they are heirs to the Prophets. They function as the successors, maintainers, and guardians of religious teachings. It was further stated that ulama are the guardians of the faith. Therefore, they prevent the enactment of certain religious deviations, distortions, and misunderstandings from both internal and external Islamic circles. Although Islam and Muslims in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, are often perceived by orientalists as peripheral forms of Islam, deviating from the original Middle Eastern version,³ Indonesia boasts a cluster of esteemed and authoritative scholars in the field of religious sciences. This fact has been substantiated by numerous research findings from experts. Indonesia is indeed home to many ulama, and not all of them have been extensively studied. Several influential and authoritative ulama remain unexplored. Within the context of Islamic organizations, ulama from groups other than Nahdlatul Ulama have received comparatively less attention from researchers. For instance, ulama from East Sumatra, including the founders of Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah⁴ and Al-Ittihadiyah,⁵ have not been adequately studied. Even foreign experts seem to have overlooked them. One such ulama is Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis, a co-founder of Al Washliyah.⁶

This study focuses on examining the role of Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis in socio-religious movements in Indonesia. He was a scholar who received scant attention from researchers. Only two researchers, Khairuddin bin Said⁷, Abdi Tanjung,⁸ and Ja’far,⁹ have introduced him thus far. Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis stands out as a unique figure for several reasons. Firstly, he was one of the founders of Al Jam’iyatul Washliyah,¹⁰ the third largest organization in Indonesia, following Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah. This

Islamic organization adheres to the Sunni school of Islam¹¹ (Ash‘ariyah¹² and Shâfi‘iyah¹³). Secondly, he possessed a deep knowledge of religion, having studied under Shaykh Hasan Ma‘sum, who himself was a student of the renowned scholar Shaykh Ahmad Khatib al-Minangkabawi at the Masjidilharam.¹⁴ Lastly, Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis was an exceptionally prolific writer, with his works encompassing various fields of Islamic sciences, including tafsir,¹⁵ hadith,¹⁶ Islamic law,¹⁷ creed (Islamic theology),¹⁸ sufism,¹⁹ and comparative religion.²⁰ These three aspects highlight the significance and intriguing nature of studying this remarkable scholar.

This article is a literature study that adopts a historical approach, utilizing Kuntowijoyo’s historical research model to structure the topic of discussion.²¹ The primary sources of data for this research comprise the works of Yusuf Ahmad Lubis, including books and articles, which have not been reprinted. The secondary sources include research findings from experts who have explored topics related to the study, particularly books and articles focusing on the scholars being investigated. The data will be analyzed using content analysis methodology. To uncover the source of the ulama’s authority, this study draws upon Max Weber’s concept of authority. Weber’s framework distinguishes authority into three categories: charismatic authority, traditional authority, and rational-legal authority.²²

Result and Discussion

1. A Brief History of Yusuf Ahmad Lubis

So far, there has not been much research on Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis. The younger generation of Al Washliyah is even less familiar with these scholars. Interestingly, some foreign researchers have recognized him as a significant subject of study, particularly to Islamic social movements in Indonesia and Southeast Asia,

including Malaysia, during his lifetime. One of these studies on Yusuf Ahmad Lubis was conducted by Khairuddin Said, a researcher from neighboring Malaysia. Published by the University of Malaya in 2012, this study can be considered a high-quality examination of Yusuf Ahmad Lubis' religious social movement during his lifetime. The findings from this study are also referred to as the main source of this paper.

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis was born in Medan on January 10, 1912, and passed away on July 9, 1980. His father was Haji Ahmad bin Haji Musa, and his mother was Hajjah Halijah. As a child, Yusuf Ahmad Lubis accompanied his father, Haji Ahmad, to Makkah, where his father passed away. He then lived in Mecca until the age of approximately six years. Afterward, he returned and was raised by his mother, although there are no records of his activities in the city following his father's death.

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis began his primary education in 1923 and later attended Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli (MIT) in Medan.²³ During his time there, he had the privilege of receiving direct education from Shaykh Muhammad Yunus. After completing his studies at MIT, he pursued further education at the Islamic High School, Madrasah Shaykh Hasan Ma'sum on Jalan Puri in Medan,²⁴ where he studied until 1935.²⁵ Not only did Yusuf Ahmad Lubis acquire knowledge through formal education, but he was also recognized from a young age as an avid reader of various books, particularly in the field of Islamic studies. The breadth of his knowledge is evident in the numerous works he authored. Yusuf Ahmad Lubis has written at least 55 works in the form of books or articles in magazines, encompassing various subjects such as Quranic exegesis, Islamic philosophy, comparative religion, da'wah (Islamic preaching), Islam and social justice, morals, creed, and Islamic history.

2. His Socio-Religious Movements

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis was a critical Muslim thinker. During his youth, he actively participated in Masjumi, and in 1945, he served as the chairman of the Gelugur branch of Masyumi.²⁶ According to him, the implementation of Islamic law necessitates political power within the Indonesian government. He emphasized the importance of Muslim associations in the da'wah strategy and the social development of the ummah. In line with his beliefs, he, along with M. Arsjad Th. Lubis,²⁷ Ismail Banda,²⁸ and Abdurrahman Sjihab,²⁹ played a pioneering role in establishing Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah on November 30, 1930.³⁰

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis was also an active member of the Indonesian Ulama Council of North Sumatra, and he was appointed as its Chairman in 1975. He held deep concerns regarding social and religious practices associated with superstitions (*khurafat*). For instance, he criticized the heretical practices of Sufism that claimed the ability to communicate with Jibril and perceive supernatural phenomena. These practices were widely believed by fervent followers of Sufism during that period.

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis also actively worked to propagate Islam in minority areas. According to his critical perspective, while Islam is embraced by the majority of Indonesia's population, the adoption of Pancasila as the guiding principle of the government system has created opportunities for the spread of other religions in certain regions. In areas such as North Tapanuli and Karo, where the Dutch colonials initiated a Christianization movement early on, Christians are actively propagating their religion. These regions have become competitive fields for the proponents of both Islam and Christianity.

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis encountered challenges while carrying out da'wah in these minority areas. The geographical factors, including

mountainous terrain, valleys, and cold weather, present difficulties in accessing villages that are scattered and distant from each other. Another challenge is the language barrier, as the rural population in these areas predominantly speaks their local dialect. The early success of Christian missionaries in spreading their religion in both regions was attributed to their strategy of translating the Gospel into the local language and adopting a flexible approach to teaching Christianity to the local population. Despite the prevalent animist culture, beliefs in nature spirits, ancestor worship, and the tradition of consuming pork, the local population embraced the Christian message conveyed by the missionaries. The missionaries emphasized that a Batak could be a devout Christian without forsaking their customs and traditions.

Confronted with the intricacies of the social landscape in religious propagation within the interior regions, Yusuf Ahmad Lubis implemented several proselytization strategies. Through Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah, proponents of Islam underwent intensive courses, received training in Islamic religious skills, and actively engaged in da'wah movements through book publishing. Yusuf Ahmad Lubis actively participated in endeavors to Islamize the Batak and Karo people, particularly during his active involvement in the Indonesian Ulama Council.

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis also played a significant role in the establishment of madrasas and Islamic educational institutions. He actively contributed to the construction of madrasas in Medan City, and even in Malaysia. One of his notable achievements was spearheading a fundraising campaign for the construction of Madrasah Tarbiyah Islamiyah in Perak. Additionally, he was actively engaged in da'wah activities through Islamic lectures in Medan City and various locations in Malaysia, including Kedah, Penang, Selangor, and Perak. The primary focus of his da'wah efforts

was on the purification of monotheism, the cultivation of noble character (*akhlâq al-karîmah*), and the promotion of gender equality by advocating for the rights of both women and men.

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis has a concept on renewal (*tajdid*). The renewal movement in Islam in Indonesia emerged in the 19th century and drew inspiration from the Wahhabi movement in the Middle East. According to Yusuf Ahmad Lubis's concept, renewal is a movement that aims to bring about social changes by rectifying corrupt beliefs and morals, eradicating heresy and superstitions, promoting knowledge, and eliminating ignorance, blind adherence to tradition, and group fanaticism. In terms of rectifying corrupt beliefs, renewal is primarily concerned with prohibiting the worship of saints, seeking intercession through deceased individuals or creatures, and seeking blessings through visiting graves. It is a social movement.

The renewal movements, within the socio-political context of Sumatra, transformed religion into a form of resistance against Dutch colonialism and opposition to traditions and social practices that conflicted with Islamic teachings. The establishment of Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah in Medan in 1930, spearheaded by Yusuf Ahmad Lubis and his friends, was a manifestation of the energy behind the renewal movement.³¹

The Washliyah renewal movement, primarily expressed through its modern-oriented education system, opposed all forms of superstition, particularly within sufism. Additionally, the development of da'wah in minority areas such as North Tapanuli and Karo Land continued even under the control of the Dutch East Indies colonial regime. The renewal movement of Al Washliyah successfully fostered a harmonious relationship between the older and younger generations of that time. The energy of renewal within Al Washliyah was formulated and utilized to resist Dutch colonialism and defend the independence proclaimed in 1945. For Washliyah ulama, it became a developed view that fighting to expel colonizers from the homeland was a

personal obligation (*fardhu 'ain*), and martyrdom in the process was legally permissible. Conversely, the blood of those who betrayed the independence struggle was considered halal.³²

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis' version of renewal encompasses various practices. In his thought, the renewal of *al-tawhid* focuses on two main issues: firstly, purifying the creed to glorify Allah and rejecting superstitious practices. In practical terms, freedom of faith is achieved when Muslims engage in worship without intermediaries between themselves and Allah. Muslims are encouraged to utilize their intellect and work diligently to reject idleness and unemployment. Work is not only related to material fulfillment but also viewed as a humanitarian responsibility.

Furthermore, Yusuf Ahmad Lubis refers to another aspect called the renewal of *al-sharia*. Practically, the renewal of *al-sharia* involves the implementation of Islamic law and leadership. Politics is considered a crucial part of the effort to establish an Islamic government in Indonesia, as an Islamic state is seen as necessary to uphold God's law. Therefore, it is important to enlighten society and garner support for this political movement.

To support the renewal movement, the development of identity, reason, and knowledge is crucial. According to Yusuf Ahmad Lubis, a Muslim must utilize his intellect in matters of both religion and the world. In this regard, he emphasizes the significance of critical thinking to improve the social situation of the Muslim ummah, which has endured prolonged colonialism, and to reject ignorance and blind adherence to tradition.

According to Yusuf Ahmad Lubis, there are three weaknesses within the ummah: delusions regarding the power of Islam's enemies, a paradigm shift that portrays Islam as an obstacle to progress, and a lack of belief in the ability of the ummah to change its destiny. These three factors must be addressed as prerequisites

for leadership and unity within the ummah, leading to the advancement of civilization. He emphasized the importance of independence and solidarity within the ummah. Building independence, in his view, begins with caring for marginalized social groups, opposing usury, and promoting a culture of generosity among Muslims.

In terms of religious practices, Yusuf Ahmad Lubis believed in the simplicity of worship. The concept of simplicity in worship entails that all actions and practices should be based on the teachings of the Quran and Hadith. He rejected the notion that difficulty in worship is a means to increase faith. Islamic teachings are easy and provide convenience.

Yusuf Ahmad Lubis also advocated for the mainstreaming of women's equality. One of his significant ideas related to progress and a high civilization was the concept of calm equality between men and women. The Quran offers a comprehensive perspective on elevating the status of women. He believed that the issue of gender equality should be based on the Quran and highlighted several key ideas, including the equal rights and responsibilities of men and women, recognizing this as a milestone in women's independence. Women also have the right to acquire knowledge and the freedom to work. He also emphasized the importance of providing special services for women and opposing customs that restrict women's freedom and hinder their education, which goes against religious teachings.

Conclusion

Firstly, the thoughts, work, and social movements of Yusuf Ahmad Lubis have had a significant impact on Muslims from North Sumatra to Malaysia. The concept of renewal is connected to various socio-religious dimensions of Muslims in Indonesia and the broader Islamic world. Through *Al Washliyah*, Yusuf Ahmad

Lubis played a crucial role in the context of Dutch East Indies colonialism, which imposed significant pressure on the warrior ulama and the Muslim ummah. Secondly, the work of Yusuf Ahmad Lubis highlights that the social structure of colonialism does not always restrict the cognitive structure and practices of individuals within the evolving social space. In fact, in certain situations, the social structure can also enable and shape the actions of individuals, as exemplified by Yusuf Ahmad Lubis' experiences. Thirdly, Yusuf Ahmad Lubis' case highlights the need for a critical examination of certain previous studies that address tribalism and overlook the comprehensive nature of the Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah movement in Indonesia. Such studies may not fully capture the actual conditions and the significant contributions of first-generation actors.

Based on Max Weber's concepts of charismatic authority and legal-rational authority, this study yields two significant conclusions. Firstly, the sources of the scholars' charismatic authority stem from genealogy, education, and a strong personality. Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis, for instance, was the son of a religious man and had early exposure to religious practices through his pilgrimage journey, which he embarked upon with his father. Following his father's demise in Mecca, Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis pursued religious studies in East Sumatra under the guidance of several charismatic scholars, most notably Shaykh Hasan Ma'sum and Shaykh Muhammad Yunus. During his education at Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli and Madrasah al-Hasaniyah, he had the privilege of studying Islamic sciences under the tutelage of charismatic scholars who themselves had been students of renowned scholars at Masjidilharam, such as Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Mandili and Shaykh Ahmad Khatib al-Minangkabawi. These teachers served as role models, contributing to the development of his personality and knowledge.

Secondly, the charismatic authority possessed by Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis served as a valuable asset in acquiring rational-

legal authority. His charisma and knowledge played crucial roles in the realms of social, religious, and socio-political domains. In the early years of Indonesia's independence, he was entrusted with the position of head of the Gelugur Branch of Masjumi. Later on, he held key positions such as Chairman of the Indonesian Ulama Council of North Sumatra Province (1975-1980) and Chairman of the *Dewan Fatwa, Penasihat dan Pertimbangan* of Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah (1978-1980). These appointments exemplify how Shaykh Yusuf Ahmad Lubis wielded both charismatic and rational-legal authority.

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²⁵ See also: Matu Mona, *Riwayat Penghidoepan Al-Fadhil Toean Sjech Hasan Ma'soem: Biografie Sedjak Ketjil Sampai Wafatnya* (Medan: Syarikat Tapanoeli, n.d.); Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, "Riwayat Hidup Almarhum Syekh Hasan Ma'sum (1884-1937)," in *Sejarah Ulama-Ulama Terkemuka Di Sumatera Utara* (Medan: Majelis Ulama Sumatera Utara, 1983), 119-137; Ja'far Ja'far, "Tarekat Dan Gerakan Sosial Keagamaan Shaykh Hasan Maksum," *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf dan Pemikiran Islam* 5, no. 2 (2015).

²⁶ Ja'far Ja'far, "Pemikiran Politik Islamisme Moderat Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah," *Al-A'raf: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam dan Filsafat* 16, no. 2 (2019).

²⁷ Mardian Idris Harahap, "Nationalism and Political Thoughts of Sheikh M. Arsjad Thalib Lubis (1908-1972)," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Keislaman* 45, no. 1 (2021); Ja'far Ja'far, "Peran M. Arsjad Th. Lubis Dalam Pengembangan Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman," *Dialogia: Jurnal Studi Islam dan Sosial* 18, no. 2 (2020).

²⁸ Ja'far Ja'far, *Biografi Dan Karya Ismail Banda* (Medan: Centre For Al Washliyah Studies (Pusat Kajian Al Washliyah), 2021).

²⁹ Ja'far Ja'far, *Sang Ulama Pemimpin: Biografi Abdurrahman Sjihab* (Medan: Perdana Publishing and CAS, 2021).

³⁰ Udin Sjamsuddin, *Chutbah Pengurus Besar Memperingati Ulang Tahun Al-Djam'iyatul Washlijah Seperempat Abad (30 November 1930-30 November 1955)* (Medan: Pengurus Besar Al Djamijatul Washlijah, 1955).

³¹ Chalidjah Hasanuddin, *Al-Jamiyatul Washliyah 1930-1942: Api Dalam Sekam Di Sumatera Timur* (Bandung: Pustaka, 1988).

³² For this fatwa, see: Ja'far Ja'far, *Dewan Fatwa Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah*, ed. Imam Yazid and Irwansyah Irwansyah (Medan: Perdana Publishing and Dewan Fatwa Al Washliyah, 2020); *Dewan Fatwa Al Washliyah, Keputusan-Keputusan Dewan Fatwa Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah 1930-2020*, ed. Ja'far Ja'far, Imam Yazid, and Irwansyah Irwansyah (Medan: Perdana Publishing and Dewan Fatwa Al Washliyah, 2020).