



CURRENT DEVELOPMENT ON AL WASHLIYAH ULAMA: The Problem of Ulama Tradition and Its Revitalization

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Abstract: Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah is an organization established by the ulama in 1930. This organization has garnered significant attention from Muslims due to the presence of ulama within its ranks. However, over time, the organization has faced challenges related to a scarcity of ulama. This study aims to investigate the factors contributing to the scarcity of ulama within Al Washliyah and highlight the importance of revitalizing the ulama for the organization. Employing a literature review with a historical approach, this study reveals two key findings. First, the scarcity of ulama can be attributed to a decline in public interest in acquiring in-depth religious knowledge and the secular nature of the political system. Second, Al Washliyah has not been adequately proactive in cultivating new ulama, thereby failing to uphold the tradition established by the organization's founders. This study complements the literature on the contemporary development of ulama studies in Indonesia.

Keywords: Al Washliyah, ulama, Sunni, Shâfi'iyah, tradition

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Introduction

Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah, the third largest Islamic organization in Indonesia,¹ following Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, was established by ulama from Medan City, North Sumatra. Throughout its history, the organization has produced numerous ulama.² However, in the contemporary era, Al Washliyah, like many other Islamic organizations in Indonesia, has been facing a decline in the number of ulama. The scarcity of ulama is a significant issue, as expressed by Professor Ramli Abdul Wahid, former Chairman of the Al Washliyah Fatwa Council (2015-2020),³ who stated, "Currently, all parties feel the scarcity of scholars... It has become difficult to find individuals proficient in reading classical Arabic texts. Furthermore, it is even more challenging to find those who possess expertise in the yellow book, encompassing religious sciences and the practical application of their knowledge... In this regard, Al Washliyah must contribute to the education of its younger generation to nurture future scholars."⁴ Therefore, the scarcity of ulama is a prominent challenge faced by the Al Washliyah organization.

The study of Al Washliyah ulama has garnered attention from various researchers. Many of these researchers have primarily focused on biographical aspects concerning Al Washliyah scholars. For instance, Ja'far has delved into this topic extensively.⁵ Similarly, M. Rozali⁶ has examined the role of Al Washliyah educational institutions in producing ulama, as well as the activities of Al Washliyah ulama and their significance within the Muslim community. However, this study aims to explore aspects that have not been thoroughly investigated by previous researchers. It will specifically identify the factors contributing to the scarcity of ulama within the Al Washliyah organization and analyze the effectiveness of Al Washliyah in cultivating future ulama. By delving into these unexplored areas, this study intends to provide new insights into the challenges faced by Al Washliyah and its efforts to address the scarcity of ulama.

Specifically, this study examines three aspects: (1) the role of ulamas in establishing Al Washliyah, (2) the problem of the scarcity of ulamas within the contemporary Al Washliyah organization, and (3) the revitalization of the tradition of ulamas within the Al Washliyah organization. Methodologically, this study adopts a literature study approach with a historical perspective. The data is obtained from primary and secondary sources. The main data for this study consists of various kinds of literature published by Al Washliyah that are relevant to the research topic. The collected data is analyzed using the content analysis method. In exploring the subject matter, Arnold Toynbee's cyclical theory will be employed, which suggests that great civilizations go through a cycle of birth, growth, collapse, and eventual death. This study is important and intriguing. Al Washliyah is a clerical organization founded by scholars, but the presence of scholars within this organization has become increasingly rare in recent times, despite the organization being supported by millions of Muslims who need scholars. Without the presence of ulama, it becomes challenging for Al Washliyah and its followers to uphold the original purpose for which Al Washliyah was established, namely, to advance, prioritize, and promote the spread of Islam.

Result and Discussions

1. Ulama and the Establishment of Al Washliyah

Al Washliyah has been proven to have made a significant contribution to increasing the dignity of the Indonesian people, particularly in North Sumatra. This organization was founded before Indonesia's independence, specifically in 1930.⁷ It was established in response to the socio-religious conditions stirred by the students of the Maktab Islam Tapanuli (MIT) and Madrasah Al-Hasaniyah.⁸ The debate on fiqh (jurisprudence) issues between the *Kaum Tua* and the *Kaum Muda* spurred its establishment.⁹ As a result, they developed

expertise in building arguments and exploring the knowledge inherited from the ulama.¹⁰ They also engaged in ijihad by synthesizing traditional and modern madrasa curricula, which were then implemented in educational institutions managed by Al Washliyah.¹¹ The organization's founders have made various efforts to produce proficient ulama in the Islamic field, meeting the needs of the *ummah*.¹²

Initially categorized as “young men” when Al Washliyah was founded, the students of Maktab Islam Tapanuli (MIT)¹³ later emerged as charismatic ulama in society. Among them, notable individuals include M. Arsjad Th. Lubis,¹⁴ Abdurrahman Sjihab,¹⁵ Ismail Banda,¹⁶ Yusuf Ahmad Lubis,¹⁷ Adnan Nur Lubis, Sjamsuddin, and Sulaiman. These ulama possessed powerful charisma and expertise in understanding the instructions of the Qur'an and Sunnah. They were skilled in solving problems faced by Muslims, not only as proficient preachers but also as experts in ijihad. This unique pool of human resources made Al Washliyah widely accepted by the people. Such ulama were not easily influenced by group interests or authority. They stood as independent individuals in their understanding and decision-making processes for ijihad. Building upon this foundation, Al Washliyah must uphold the tradition of the ulama as laid out by its founder. The sustainability of this organization relies on the ability of future generations to manage it and produce competent ulama. With the continuous growth of societal issues, people eagerly await Al Washliyah's contributions.

The ulama are regarded as the inheritors of the Prophets, entrusted with the responsibility of guiding people towards righteousness and deterring them from evil. However, if the ulama themselves yield to the temptations of worldly desires, it can lead to confusion among the people. This highlights the vital role of the ulama in the lives of Muslims. In the present day, the number of ulama affiliated with Al Washliyah is declining. However, this issue is not limited

to Al Washliyah alone; it is a widespread challenge faced by many organizations.

Al Washliyah is an Islamic organization founded by charismatic scholars in the city of Medan, North Sumatra.¹⁸ Before becoming scholars, they were religious students at Maktab Islamiyah Tapanuli (MIT) and Madrasah Al-Hasaniyah. Among the teachers at MIT was Shaykh Muhammad Yunus,¹⁹ while Shaykh Hasan Ma'sum taught at Madrasah Al-Hasaniyah.²⁰ Both of them had studied religion at the Masjidilharam in Mecca. Afterward, they established a discussion group aimed at discussing religious and social issues, which eventually developed into an Islamic organization called Al Jam'iyatul Washliyah. This organization aims to advance, prioritize, and spread Islam.²¹ The guiding principles of the Al Washliyah organization are the Shâfi'i school of thought in the field of fiqh²² and the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamâ'ah school of thought.²³ In the religious context, Al Washliyah formed the Majlis Al-Fatwa (Al Washliyah Fatwa Council) on December 10, 1933, with the purpose of "providing decisions on complicated problems in the field of religion and others."²⁴ Throughout the years, Al Washliyah has continued to receive support from charismatic ulama and its madrasas and campuses have been relatively successful in training future ulama.²⁵ This fact serves as proof that Al Washliyah was founded by several ulama and has produced many future ulama as well.²⁶ Al Washliyah also is a moderate Islamic organization in Indonesia.²⁷

2. The Problem of Ulama Scarcity

Why does this happen? The answer may not be limited, but at least two factors are causing the scarcity of ulama. First, there has been a decline in public interest. A change in human perspective regarding the world and their lives has occurred. Today's society tends to be materialistic and pragmatic, which can lead to a decrease in religious awareness. Consequently, the public's interest in sending

their children to educational institutions that produce Islamic scholars has been reduced. Undeniably, people are more interested in sending their children to schools that offer more promising future professions. This is evident from the decline in student enrollment at Al Washliyah madrasa. Some elementary madrasas are known to have closed due to a lack of students.

Second, the secularism of the political system plays a role. The secular political system diminishes the function and role of ulama. When ulama becomes involved in politics, they tend to be subordinated to the government system. This situation limits the ulama's space and platform to carry out their roles and functions optimally. Strong ulama will strive to maintain their position through a cultural approach. However, some ulama feel that they cannot perform optimally due to these limitations. Some even actively engage in practical politics.

These two factors are essential for Al Washliyah education experts to study. There are questions, such as why the current generation considers the lack of religious knowledge as commonplace or how the government system can integrate the clergy as an integral part of policymaking, that require definitive answers.

The findings further support the conclusions made by Professor Ramli Abdul Wahid, the Chairman of the Al Washliyah Fatwa Council (2015-2020), regarding the factors leading to a scarcity of ulama in Indonesia, particularly within the Al Washliyah organization. He made two important points. Firstly, "almost all madrasas and Islamic boarding schools in Indonesia used to focus on educating ulama, with their curriculum centred around religious sciences and Arabic reference books. However, after the 1975 Joint Decree issued by three ministers, the educational institutions for ulama gradually shifted their focus towards a combination of general education and religious studies." Secondly, "unbeknownst to many, the Islamic society has been influenced by Western secularism

and materialistic ways of thinking. The curriculum and syllabus of madrasas no longer consist of 30% religious studies and 70% general studies (sciences). In fact, religious studies now account for only 22% of the curriculum, and religious textbooks are exclusively in the Indonesian language.” According to Ramli Abdul Wahid, globalization has contributed to the secularization of the Muslim world.” The statement from the charismatic cleric above confirms that Al Washliyah is beginning to encounter a shortage of scholars, with the issues in the madrasah curriculum and the influence of Western secularism serving as contributing factors.²⁸

3. Revitalization of the Ulama Tradition

In response to this situation, it is crucial for all leaders and residents of Al Washliyah to focus on revitalizing the cadre of ulama, ensuring their continued presence in society, and addressing the scarcity of ulama. Religious and scientific education should be improved, along with an emphasis on memorizing traditions, engaging in discussions (*mudzakarah*), and conducting da‘wah (Islamic preaching). This effort must be given serious attention, particularly by the leadership of Al Washliyah. The absence of ulama in society can potentially lead to various behavioral deviations within the community. The founders of Al Washliyah had noble ideals of saving the people through education and da‘wah (Islamic preaching), and it is crucial to uphold and pursue those ideals.²⁹

For this reason, Al Washliyah should be led by ulama because they have the great responsibility of producing ulama who can contribute to the fields of education and organizational da‘wah. Al Washliyah needs ulama who are proficient in mastering the teachings of Islam, possess good morals, and serve as role models for the people. All residents of Al Washliyah will take pride if the organization, created by the hands of the previous ulama, continues to retain its distinctive characteristics. We should not limit the

movement of Al Washliyah cadres or restrict their potential contributions to the broader community, such as active involvement in practical politics or participation in the government structure. However, this paper primarily focuses on how Al Washliyah can produce genuine ulama, rather than ulama that are dictated by certain groups or influenced by specific interests with intense spirituality. Al Washliyah's leading clerics maintain the clarity of the Islamic creed, defend against attacks in the war of ideas, provide solutions to various social problems, and exercise control over those in authority. The reproduction of ulama is not an easy task. The title of ulama cannot be quickly assumed or merely displayed alongside one's name. It is a gift from Allah, bestowed upon those whom He chooses. The title of ulama cannot be pursued solely through higher education levels or attained by accumulating many loyal followers.

Conclusion

Al Washliyah is an organization founded by ulama. Its madrasahs and colleges were relatively successful in training several charismatic ulama until the 1980s. However, in recent times, Al Washliyah has been experiencing a scarcity of ulama. It has become difficult to find charismatic ulama within this organization. The founders of this organization were charismatic scholars and had authority in the religious field. This study suggests that two factors have contributed to the scarcity of ulama in this organization: a pragmatic and materialistic attitude toward life and the secularism of the political system. Both factors have contributed to the scarcity of ulama within the Al Washliyah organization. This opinion is in line with Professor Ramli Abdul Wahid, who argues that the madrasa education curriculum in Indonesia, along with a secular way of thinking, has led to the failure of Islamic educational institutions, including Al Washliyah, in producing future scholars.

The issue of the scarcity of scholars in the Al Washliyah organization can be examined through Arnold Toynbee's theory, which explains the rise and decline of civilizations based on interconnected concepts of challenges and responses. Al Washliyah, including its educational institutions, has faced various challenges since the colonial era, the Old Order era, the New Order era, and the Reformation era. According to Toynbee's theory, if a society effectively faces challenges and provides quick, appropriate, and wise responses, it will continue to thrive. On the other hand, if a society fails to respond to its challenges, it will regress. Strictly speaking, Al Washliyah, as an Islamic organization, seems to have struggled in providing quick, precise, and wise responses to the challenges it has encountered so far. Toynbee also asserts that all great civilizations go through a cycle of birth, growth, collapse, and ultimately death. According to him, several great civilizations in the world have experienced extinction. Based on this theory, Al Washliyah, as a large community, has the potential to follow a similar cycle. Although Al Washliyah was founded in 1930 and grew to become one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia, it must now recognize the possibility of a cycle of collapse and decline. For an Islamic organization to sustain its longevity, it must effectively confront the various challenges it faces and respond quickly, appropriately, and wisely.

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