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Cover illustration: Madrasah Nurul Iman, Jambi Seberang. Photograph by Annabel Gallop, 2013.

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Zulkarnain EL Madury and the micro-celebrity *ustaz* phenomenon

Tracing Muhammadiyah's struggle in maintaining religious authority in cyberspace

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ZULKARNAIN EL MADURY AND THE MICRO-CELEBRITY USTAZ PHENOMENON

Tracing Muhammadiyah's struggle in maintaining religious authority in cyberspace

Niki Alma Febriana Fauzi 

ABSTRACTS

The rise of the internet and social media has sharpened the fragmentation of religious authority. In the Indonesian context, the mainstream religious authority held by Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has been challenged and threatened by micro-celebrity *ustaz*. This article examines the emergence of the Syarah Himpunan Putusan Tarjih Muhammadiyah fanpage on Facebook, created and managed by Zulkarnain El Madury, who claims to be a preacher of the Muhammadiyah Central Board as it has threatened Muhammadiyah's religious authority. It analyses Muhammadiyah's efforts in maintaining its religious authority in cyberspace, by taking a closer look at what has been done by Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council, an assembly that has the exclusive authority to issue fatwas and official religious *ijtihad* within Muhammadiyah. This article also discusses lessons that can be learned from the case of Zulkarnain El Madury and the response of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council.

ABSTRAK

Kemunculan internet dan media sosial telah mempertajam fragmentasi otoritas keagamaan. Dalam konteks Indonesia, otoritas keagamaan arus utama yang dipegang oleh Muhammadiyah dan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) disaingi dan diancam oleh para ustaz mikro-selebritas. Artikel ini mengkaji kemunculan fanpage Syarah Himpunan Putusan Tarjih Muhammadiyah di Facebook yang dibuat dan dikelola oleh Zulkarnain El Madury, seseorang yang mengklaim sebagai ustaz Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah, karena dianggap mengancam otoritas keagamaan Muhammadiyah. Penelitian ini menganalisis upaya Muhammadiyah dalam mempertahankan otoritas keagamaannya di dunia maya dengan melihat lebih dekat pada apa yang telah dilakukan oleh Majelis Tarjih Muhammadiyah, sebuah majelis yang memiliki otoritas eksklusif untuk mengeluarkan fatwa dan ijtihad keagamaan resmi di Muhammadiyah. Artikel ini juga membahas pelajaran yang dapat dipetik dari kasus Zulkarnain El Madury dan respons Majelis Tarjih Muhammadiyah.

KEYWORDS

Fragmentation of religious authority; micro-celebrity *ustaz*; Muhammadiyah; religious authority; *tarjih*

KATA KUNCI

Fragmentasi otoritas keagamaan; Muhammadiyah; otoritas keagamaan; tarjih; ustaz mikro-selebritas

Introduction

The surprising results of the Alvara Research Center (2020) survey stated that the clerics most heard by the public, especially during Ramadan 2020, were not from the official Muhammadiyah board.¹ Shortly after the Alvara Research Center survey was released (IBTimes.id 2020), an Islamic website managed by young Muhammadiyah intellectuals, published a report ranking the 100 most popular Islamic websites in Indonesia. The majority of these sites are managed by or affiliated to Nahdliyyin (NU followers) and Salafi² groups with few such sites operated by or affiliated to Muhammadiyah. The Alvara Research Center survey and the IBTimes.id report show that Muhammadiyah, in terms of influence and religious authority on the internet, lags behind other religious groups which is ironic for an organisation claiming to represent the progressive Islamic group.

The rise of the internet and social media has sharpened the so-called fragmentation of religious authority. Eva F. Nisa (2019), for example, mentions that the proliferation of various digital platforms is directly proportional to the increasing fragmentation of religious authority. Islamic discourse is monopolised not only by an elite group of scholars or mainstream religious groups, but also by persons or groups that have not been considered in Islamic discourse. Furthermore, the presence of the internet and social media has led to the birth of what is called micro-celebrity. Theresa M. Senft (2008) defines micro-celebrity as a new style of online performance that involves increasing popularity on social media such as videos, blogs, and networking sites. These micro-celebrities unlike conventional celebrities, emerge from what is known as new media (Senft 2008).

Of course, not all new media users can be categorised by the adjective ‘micro-celebrity’. The label only applies to those who experience what Graeme Turner (2010) terms ‘the demotic turn’, namely, the increasing visibility of ordinary people to appear as celebrities in the media, especially online media. In turn, both conventional and micro-celebrity exist in various public spheres, and the discourse on them is characterised as influencers, stimulants of consumerism, enthusiasm, public debate, and various activism (Sadasri 2017).

By borrowing the theory of micro-celebrities in the study of new media, we can then read how these micro-celebrities have also come to the fore in the religious realm. The emergence of ulama, *ustaz* (religious teachers), and religious leaders who become influencers in new media can perhaps be seen as one form of micro-celebrity. Felix Siauw is a prominent example. A convert, who is now a preacher, Siauw has a massive following on social media. In 2018, for example, he had 2.6 million followers on Twitter, and in 2022 it numbered 3.3 million. Felix Siauw’s Instagram account has around 4.9 million followers. It can even be said that he is the *ustaz* who has the most followers on social media (Tirto 2018), making him one of the leading social media preachers in Indonesia today (Hew 2018). What Felix Siauw posts on his social media has to some extent influenced the map of religious authorities in Indonesia.

¹One of the 15 most popular clerics mentioned in the report, Ustaz Ali Hidayat, has since been included on the Muhammadiyah Central Board’s Tabligh Council (2022–2027; Muhammadiyah Central Board 2023). Prior to that, he did not convey official Muhammadiyah ideas in his lectures.

²For more comprehensive information on the activism of Salafi groups, see Chris Chaplin (2021).

The existence of the internet and the continuing development of technology has allowed for the emergence of many other micro-celebrity *ustaz*, both in the national arena more generally or more specifically in internal religious organisations such as Muhammadiyah, NU, Persis (Persatuan Islam) or others. In the case of Muhammadiyah, the largest modernist Islamic organisation, its religious authority began to be challenged by a preacher who was said to be part of Muhammadiyah itself, namely Zulkarnain El Madury. He claims to be a Muhammadiyah cadre and often introduces himself as a preacher from the Muhammadiyah Central Board. In recent years, El Madury has been noticed by Muhammadiyah administrators and Muhammadiyah cadres³ and the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council (Majelis Tarjih Muhammadiyah) has discussed him in a special meeting. This is because the posts on the Facebook page that El Madury manages, *Syarah Himpunan Putus Tarjih Muhammadiyah* (henceforth SHPTM), often differ significantly from – and to some extent delegitimise – a Muhammadiyah fatwa or official decision. Responses from grassroots or Muhammadiyah followers vary. This can be seen, for example, from the comments on each post. Some defend and remain adamant on the fatwa or official decision of Muhammadiyah, but not a few were affected and followed what was conveyed by El Madury on his Facebook page.

This is where it becomes crucial to see how Muhammadiyah attempts to maintain its religious authority in cyberspace, especially among its members and the public. By conducting web content analysis (Postill and Pink 2012) on SHPTM and official social media accounts and those affiliated with the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council, this article shows how El Madury builds his narratives and, in turn, how Muhammadiyah maintains religious authority on the internet. Additionally, field research was conducted and key actors were interviewed offline and online in a semi-structured format.⁴ Apart from El Madury, the key actors are members of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council, the chairman of the Muhammadiyah Digital Broadcast Centre (Pusat Syiar Digital Muhammadiyah), Muhammadiyah activists as well as Muhammadiyah grassroots.

Fragmentation of religious authority, new preacher and micro-celebrity *ustaz* phenomenon

Fragmentation of religious authority is a phenomenon that occurs in various religious communities and is not limited to Islam (B.S. Turner 2007; Campbell and Teusner 2011; Hope Cheong 2016). The fragmentation of religious authority is also a global phenomenon as pointed out by Gary R. Bunt (2003) who states that the new media have shaped diverse understandings among individual Muslims worldwide about e-jihad (electronic jihad). The definition of electronic jihad is understood and interpreted differently, ranging from online activism to Muslim articulation after the events of 11 September 2001. Bunt (2003) shows that each new media (in this case, new websites) has authority for its respective group.

The fragmentation of religious authority discussed here is from the 20th century to the present. Jajat Burhanudin (2004) points out that there has been a shift in religious

³This author's online and offline interviews with Amiruddin, Robby Karman, Muhammad Muflih, Ahmad Muttaqin Alim, and Arif Nur Kholis, 2019–2020.

⁴Data collection in this study was carried out between 2018 and 2020. As personal interviews were not possible during the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia, some interviews were conducted online.

authority in the historical phase of Indonesian religious thought in the early 20th century due to modernisation. His study, which focuses on the Islamic print media, further shows that there is a shift in religious authority that used to be in *Kitab Kuning*⁵ taught by *kyai* or *ulama* in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) to magazines, journals, newspapers, and books published by modernist circles or organisations.

Religious authority since the early 20th century has always stayed with Muhammadiyah and NU. These two religious organisations are often referred to by scholars as the authentic holders of religious authority in Indonesia (Burhani 2016; Akmaliah 2018). The shift in religious authority occurred again in the 1990s when national television stations emerged. The Islamic programmes presented by the television stations show the *ustaz* (religious teachers), which in turn build their authority through lectures delivered by these preachers. This phenomenon prompted scholars to come up with the term 'Islamic televangelism' (Akmaliah 2018). Abdullah Gymnastiar who is better known as Aa Gym is one example that falls into the category of a television *ustaz*, or a 'tele-dai' as coined by Greg Fealy (2008).

The most obvious and recent picture of the fragmentation of religious authority in Indonesia is the series of events of the Defend Islam Action (Aksi Bela Islam). Ahmad Najib Burhani (2016) hints that these critical events marked the peak of the fragmentation of religious authorities in Indonesia as they gave rise to new actors who challenge the established religious authority. Although it cannot be said to shift or match the role of Muhammadiyah and NU, the emergence of new actors such as Rizieq Shihab provides a new map of religious authority in Indonesia.

This phenomenon of the fragmentation of religious authority has increased sharply in the development of what scholars call pop culture, marked by the birth of many new media (Labiq 2019). The availability of internet access to every social class is the main factor for this fragmentation. As a result, many new media have emerged with each individual and group competing to spread ideas (Horsfield 2016; Nisa 2019).

Aa Gym is one of the early actors who emerged in the internet era in Indonesia. This can be captured in two interesting studies on Aa Gym by James B. Hoesterey (2008), and Maskur and Noor (2014). Although the use of the internet as a medium of da'wah during the early 2000s was not as massive as it is now, the emergence of Aa Gym as a new cleric on the national da'wah stage through lectures, seminars, and Islamic training is a phenomenon in itself. Hoesterey (2008) studies the journey of Aa Gym from his first appearance as a preacher, falling, and then successfully rebranding to restore his religious authority. This is evident, for example, from the number of Aa Gym's listeners (*Dakta.com* 2016). Popular culture has brought Aa Gym to also be seen by the public, especially by his followers, as also as a singer, actor, author, etc. Thus, he has transformed from an ordinary cleric to a celebrity cleric. Through a hypersemiotic perspective, Maskur and Noor (2014) show the various aspects of Aa Gym's personality.

Following the appearance of Aa Gym and with further rapid development of information technology, many other new preachers began to appear. Hew Wai Weng (2018) describes how Felix Siauw is another skilful religious preacher. Being a cleric with the most followers on the internet did not lead Siauw to neglect da'wah in the

⁵So-called because the books were printed on yellow paper. These were the Islamic texts used in the education of Islamic schools.

real world. Hew (2018) points out that Siauw has blended online and offline da'wah harmoniously. According to Hew (2018) and Farhan (2017), one of the keys to Siauw's success in preaching is his ability to present an entertaining and straightforward da'wah, even though its content is dogmatic and political.

Aa Gym and Felix Siauw are two micro-celebrity *ustaz* as a result of the new media. The term micro-celebrity *ustaz* was adopted and reconstructed from the theory of micro-celebrity. Most of these studies conducted from the perspective of pop culture (Senft 2008; G. Turner 2010; Khamis, Ang and Welling 2017; Sadasri 2017; Khomalia and Rahman 2018) describe the fragmentation of religious authority, marked by the emergence of micro-celebrity *ustaz*. By this term this author means an ordinary *ustaz/ustazah* who has skyrocketed in popularity and is celebrity on and because of social media so that he or she is able to influence certain people or communities. In other words, it means the *ustaz/ustazah* has experienced what G. Turner (2010) calls 'the demotic turn', when ordinary people are highly visible on social media and become celebrities. Challenges to established religious authorities by new religious personalities or groups in Indonesia have received little attention to date. One exception is Yanwar Pribadi (2019) whose study explains the efforts of 'local Islam' (*Islam lokal*) to defend its religious authority from the threat of 'foreign Islam' (*Islam asing*). However, his study differs from the research presented in this article which will trace Muhammadiyah's efforts to maintain its religious authority in cyberspace.

This study is on a micro-celebrity *ustaz*, Zulkarnain El Madury who is less well known when compared to Aa Gym or Felix Siauw but who has a strong influence on the internet. His identity as a preacher from Muhammadiyah who targets Muhammadiyah followers with postings that are often different and even delegitimise the official voice of this largest modernist mass organisation deserves to be investigated. This study, apart from showing Muhammadiyah's efforts in maintaining its religious authority on the internet, also seeks explicitly to fill the gap in previous studies. In his latest study, Akmaliah (2020) shows that Muhammadiyah and NU have different responses to the emergence of new religious authorities. While NU was strongly reactive to their emergence, Muhammadiyah seemed calmer. Akmaliah (2020) indicates there are some similarities between Muhammadiyah and those often referred to as new religious authorities, making Muhammadiyah's responses less hostile. Sammy (2022), Sanjaya (2022), and Saefullah (2022) came to the same conclusion as Akmaliah, claiming that Muhammadiyah is significantly less adaptive to the emergence of new media, and therefore its da'wah often loses to that of the micro-celebrity *ustaz*. This study focuses on the struggle of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council as the only assembly under Muhammadiyah that has the authority to issue fatwas and official *ijtihad* exposition within Muhammadiyah.

Overview of Zulkarnain El Madury and *Syarah Himpunan Putusan Tarjih Muhammadiyah* fanpage

The Facebook SHPTM fanpage was created by Zulkarnain El Madury. He was born in Sumenep on the island of Madura in 1963, with the name Zulkarnain bin Syamsuri. He claims to have studied in Malaysia at the Institute of Business Study and always introduces himself as a preacher from the Special Da'wah Institute of Muhammadiyah Central Board (Lembaga Dakwah Khusus Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah). He spent his

childhood in Madura and was a traditionalist Muslim like others on the island. He grew up in a milieu dominated by the NU traditionalist Islamic organisation. He used to perform *tahlilan* (ritual prayers for the dead), *ziarah* (pilgrimage to the grave), and other practices that, according to him, after becoming a member of Muhammadiyah, were not following the Sunnah of the Prophet. He received his religious education at the Islamic boarding school at-Taufiqiyah Sumenep Madura. In 1976 he became acquainted with Muhammadiyah. He became interested in the da'wah and religious understanding of the Muhammadiyah movement founded by Ahmad Dahlan after listening to a lecture by one of its preachers. In 1977, he officially joined Muhammadiyah.⁶

Since joining Muhammadiyah, El Madury has been active as a preacher who spreads Muhammadiyah's religious ideas and understanding. From 1990 to 2007, he was one of the Muhammadiyah preachers who was sent to remote areas by the Special Da'wah Institute of Muhammadiyah Central Board. His daily activities are now preaching at different places as well as creating content on for SHPTM fanpage. He now lives in Jakarta as the *tarjih* and *tabligh* council chair of the Pondok Gede Muhammadiyah Branch.⁷ El Madury states that he created SHPTM in 2014.⁸ However, in the digital history that this author can trace, the fanpage was created in 2015 as the earliest post that is currently traceable is dated 5 January 2015.

According to El Madury, the fanpage began with the WhatsApp group he created which he named *Tarjih dan Tabligh Institut* (Tarjih and Tabligh Institute) to provide a space to discuss and spread ideas related to *tarjih*.⁹ He included many Muhammadiyah figures and activists in this group, including (the now late) Buya Yunahar Ilyas. Over time, seeing that El Madury's posts on SHPTM were deemed inconsistent with the *tarjih* spirit of Muhammadiyah, several people, such as Fathurrahman Kamal and Buya Risman, sharply criticised the postings. El Madury, Fathurrahman Kamal, and Buya Risman were then engaged in a heated debate which was relayed later to Buya Yunahar Ilyas. The response by Buya Yunahar Ilyas at that time, according to El Madury, differed from that of his critics. Buya Yun responded quite positively because he saw El Madury's initiative as providing *syarah* (explanation) or further explication of the *Himpunan Putusan Tarjih* (Tarjih Decisions Compilation). Finally, he gave his permission to El Madury and Wahyudi Abdurrahim, an al-Azhar alumnus who now maintains the website tanyajawabagama.com.¹⁰

El Madury's early postings on SHPTM, were still relatively consistent in uploading Muhammadiyah fatwas in the question (from someone) and answer format from the fatwa division of the Tarjih Council. This is similar to the the original question and answer format administered by the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council, whose fatwas were later published in the *Suara Muhammadiyah* magazine. However, over time, SHPTM included posts that apart from the dissemination of Muhammadiyah's official

⁶Online interview with Zulkarnain El Madury, 18–20 October 2020.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Muhammadiyah's use of the word *tarjih* has changed throughout its development. In its early period, and following its usage in the principles of law (*usul al-fiqh*), *tarjih* conveyed the meaning of examining the various opinions of Muslim jurists on a particular question and evaluating them to determine which is most faithful to the original Shari'a sources. Over time this usage gradually included any intellectual endeavour used to study new cases that earlier jurists had not addressed. In short, in Muhammadiyah's perspective, *tarjih* is identical, or almost identical, to *ijtihad* (Anwar 2016).

¹⁰Online interview with Zulkarnain El Madury, 18–20 October 2020.

ijtihad included the personal opinions of El Madury. These opinions in inelegant words are often offensive to other groups. Not infrequently, his posts contradict the official stance of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council in particular, or Muhammadiyah in general, such as on the veil issue (see below). Since Facebook introduced its ‘live broadcast’ feature, El Madury has also availed of it to conduct live lectures. The SHPTM is popular with netizens. As of the time of writing (3 April 2022), it has been followed by 19,423 and is ‘liked’ by 8,868 people. His posts also often receive both positive and critical comments from viewers.

El Madury gave several reasons that brought about the creation of his fanpage. Firstly, it is aimed at fortifying Muhammadiyah followers against all forms of superstition, heresy, and myth as its posts focus on issues related to faith and worship. Secondly, he aims to counter those liberal Muhammadiyah activists and has openly responded to such views. His posts often openly attacks the religious practices of the the Nahdliyyin, resulting in several clashes between him and the Nahdliyyin figure, Idrus Ramli.¹¹

Despite having many followers El Madury and his SHPTM do have critics. Many Muhammadiyah followers are concerned about the SHPTM posts. Some have tried to convey their anxiety through the official social media accounts of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council and the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Centre (Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah).¹² Those concerned generally want to ask for firm action from the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council as El Madury has included ‘Tarjih Muhammdiyah’ in his fanpage name. The demands to the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council, when summarised, include: (1) that the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council reprimand or remind Zulkarnain El Madury not to use symbols or names that are closely related to Tarjih Muhammadiyah for or on his fanpage; (2) making and circulating an announcement that the fanpage is not a social media account of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council or the Tarjih Muhamadiyah Centre; (3) announcing the official social media accounts and websites of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council and Muhammadiyah Tarjih Centre, so that Muhammadiyah people at the grassroots are not deceived by the existence of the fanpage and know where to look for religious reference sites, especially on the internet.

Zulkarnain El Madury and his efforts in building religious authority

Zulkarnain El Madury and his fanpage SHPTM, have threatened the religious authority of Muhammadiyah, and specifically, the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council. Many of his posts affect Muhammadiyah followers in particular and Muslims in general as these posts often differ from the official stance of Muhammadiyah, and in some cases contradict the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council. This has stimulated public debate on social media, allowing El Madury to become a micro-celebrity *ustaz*. As a result of the general public and the online community attention, El Madury has been able to gradually build up his religious authority. From the Weberian perspective (Riesebrodt 1999), he has been able to do this in two ways. The first is through charisma (charismatic authority) and the second is traditional authority discussed later. According to Weber, charisma is a

¹¹Online interview with Zulkarnain El Madury, 18–20 October 2020.

¹²Interviews with Farida Fardhani az-Zukhruf and Ariful Hazam, November 2020 who are grassroots of Muhammadiyah, and social media administrators of Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah.

particular type of authority whose original form is based on a specific belief contained in a particular person (*ibid.*). El Madury claims he has the endorsement of Yunahar Ilyas, a very popular Muhammadiyah cleric respected by the community from within the Muhammadiyah circle and from Muslims in general which is a form of charismatic authority.

Yunahar Ilyas (1956–2020) or Buya Yun as he was popularly known, was an exegete (*mufassir*) born in Bukittinggi, West Sumatra, who died at the age of 63 (Ilyas 2012; N.A. and Chirzin 2021). He was an alumnus of Imam Ibn Su'ud University (Saudi Arabia) and an excellent lecturer in conveying religious messages. He was seen as a charismatic cleric by Muhammadiyah followers and Muslims, in general, and this reputation extended to neighbouring countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore (Abror 2020; *Gesuri* 2020). On his death in early 2020, many people flocked to pay their last respects to Buya Yun who held the chair of the Muhammadiyah Central Board for three terms (*Kompas* 2020; *Rakyat Merdeka* 2019).

By harnessing the charisma of Buya Yun, El Madury was able to increase his religious authority. On various occasions, including when this author interviewed him, Buya Yun's name was often mentioned as an argument and a shield.¹³ El Madury insisted that he created the SHPTM fanpage with the permission of Yunahar Ilyas.¹⁴ He added that Wahyudi Abdurrahim, an al-Azhar alumnus who now maintains the website *tanyajawa-bagama.com*, had similarly received permission from Buya Yun. Wahyudi Abdurrahim confirmed Zulkarnain's claims and Muhammad Muflih, a grassroots representative added that it is a form of fairness.¹⁵ In other words, Buya Yun's permission is a form of appreciation given by someone who is more senior and has a high social position in Muhammadiyah to someone who is more junior and classified as a grassroots Muhammadiyah member.¹⁶ Permission from Buya Yun, who has charisma within Muhammadiyah in particular, has become a tool used by El Madury in building his own religious authority.

In Weberian charismatic authority, charisma is not only about a belief in the existence of extraordinary or superpowers possessed by or contained in humans but also about particular objects other than humans (Riesebrodt 1999). We thus have an explanation as to why El Madury named his fanpage *Syarah Himpunan Putusan Tarjih Muhammadiyah*. The Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council is a highly respectable and crucial council in Muhammadiyah. Founded in 1927, the Council functions as an assembly that carries out its agenda of purification of religion and the dynamisation of social life. It conducts research and investigations towards this purity, and accordingly gives fatwas and compiles religious guidelines on faith (*'aqidah*) and worship (*'ibadah*) as well as social relations (*mu'amalah*) (Rahman et al. 1985; Anwar 2016). In addition, this Council makes efforts to resolve differences and disagreements on religious issues, which are

¹³This author's informants include Muhammad Muflih (grassroots of Muhammadiyah and initiator of the website *tanyajawabagama.com*), Robby Karman (secretary-general of the Central Board of Muhammadiyah Student Association [DPP IMM] 2018–2021), and several participants invited by the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council with the agenda 'Responding to Emergence of Syarah HPT on Social Media' on 25 September, 2020; interview with Zulkarnain El Madury, 3 November 2019.

¹⁴Interview with Zulkarnain El Madury, 3 November 2019.

¹⁵Online interview with Wahyudi Abdurrahim through WhatsApp, September 2020.

¹⁶Online interview with Muhammad Muflih through WhatsApp and Facebook, 20 October 2019.

usually referred to as *khilāfiyyah* problems, so that they are directed more productively (Anwar 2007, 2016).

The Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council is a body that is responsible for formulating the ideological basis of the Muhammadiyah movement (Anwar 2007, 2016) and is Muhammadiyah's representative in the religious field (Fauzi 2017). The Council produces three types of *ijtihad*, namely: (1) tarjih fatwa (*fatwa tarjih*), (2) *tarjih* decision (*putusan tarjih*), and (3) *tarjih* discourse (*wacara tarjih*) (Anwar 2016). *Tarjih* fatwa is the Council's answer to general questions on issues that require an explanation in terms of sharia law. Following the nature of the fatwa in general, the Council's fatwa is non-binding, on either organisations or members as individuals. Therefore, even the fatwa can be questioned and discussed. However, because the fatwa contains religious guidance derived from Islamic teaching sources (Anwar 2020), and the general public often does not actually understand the aspects of such a fatwa, it is still believed by Muhammadiyah members to be religious guidance. However, the *tarjih* decision is the official stance of Muhammadiyah in religious matters and is formally binding on the organisation and its members. But, in practice, sometimes Muhammadiyah members exercise their right to freedom not to be bound by the decision because they have different *ijtihad* (Anwar 2016).

Meanwhile, *tarjih* discourses are ideas or thoughts that are raised and put forward by the Council in seminars, *halaqah* (religious gathering or meeting to discuss the Qur'an or Islam), or other forums in addressing various developing issues and at the same time fostering a critical spirit of *ijtihad* and collecting materials or ideas on various actual problems in society. The nature of this *tarjih* discourse is non-binding and does not become a fatwa that must be followed. *Tarjih* discourse is contained in various publications of the Council, such as *Jurnal Tarjih* (Tarjih Journal) and various published books (Anwar 2016).

The *tarjih* decision and the *tarjih* fatwa, hold their strength within Muhammadiyah as these are considered sacred by some of its members. In short, it can be said that anything that 'smells *tarjih*' has authority in the collective memory of Muhammadiyah followers. In the perspective of Khaled Abou El Fadl (2014), fatwa and *tarjih* decisions have the power of persuasive authority, as these can influence or direct others because they believed in them. The *tarjih* fatwas are officially published through the organisation's magazine, *Suara Muhammadiyah*, and compiled in the *Tanya Jawab Agama* book. In comparison, the *tarjih* decisions are codified in a book called *Himpunan Putusan Tarjih* (commonly known as HPT). Thus, it can be understood why the attribution of the term *tarjih* to particular objects can give rise to charismatic authority, as mentioned by Weber.

What El Madury did can also be seen as identity politics which is defined as a political tool of a group whether it be ethnic, cultural, religious or others for specific purposes, such as a form of resistance or to show the identity of a group (Alfaqi 2015). Within this framework, identity is politicised through extreme interpretation, which aims to gain support from people who feel 'the same', through race, ethnicity, religion, or other adhesive elements. In the context of El Madury, the use of the *tarjih* label on his fanpage can be interpreted as a political tool to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the Muhammadiyah members. And, as seen in some of his sermon videos, El Madury also placed a flag with the Muhammadiyah symbol behind him. In this context, he wants to convince

the viewers that he is close to Muhammadiyah. He has introduced himself as a preacher from the Muhammadiyah Central Board on many occasions.

According to Ahmad Syafii Ma'arif (2010), identity politics is always related to members of social groups who feel excluded by the mainstream in a nation or state. Sri Astuti Buchari (2014) also finds that the emergence of identity politics is mainly caused by certain factors that an ethnic group sees as pressure from the political injustice. By looking at the observations made by Ahmad Najib Burhani (2013), El Madury, in this case, can be categorised as part of a group that feels excluded, threatened, and to some extent in need of justice within Muhammadiyah. Burhani (2013) explains the existence of two opposing schools of thought within Muhammadiyah which he refers to as 'Pure Islam' (*Islam Murni*) and 'Progressive Islam' (*Islam Progresif*). The conflict between these two schools of thought in Muhammadiyah began to surface at the 43rd Muhammadiyah Congress in Banda Aceh in 1995 (Burhani 2013).

The dominance of 'Progressive Islam' in Muhammadiyah strengthened after its 44th congress in Jakarta in 2000. This congress chose Ahmad Syafii Ma'arif as general chair. He is a progressive Muslim figure, an alumnus of the University of Chicago, and a student of the eminent progressive scholar Fazlur Rahman. At this congress, several names representing the 'Progressive Islam' group were included in the ranks of the central board of Muhammadiyah, such as Amin Abdullah, Dawam Raharjo, and Abdul Munir Mulkhan. During Ma'arif's leadership, progressive ideas not only dominated culturally but gradually became Muhammadiyah's official programmes (Burhani 2013).

Seeing the increasingly apparent threat from the ideas put forward by the 'Progressive Islam' group within Muhammadiyah, representatives of the 'Pure Islam' group did not remain silent. They compete and squabble over religious interpretations as to which is the most authentic. These two groups challenge each other through various channels, including seminars, discussions, publications. They usually have conflicting programmes. For example, as mentioned by Burhani (2013), when the Centre for the Study of Religion and Civilisation (PSAP/Pusat Studi Agama dan Peradaban) raised the theme of pluralism and multiculturalism in its journal, *Tanwir Journal*, the Tabligh Council¹⁷ responded with articles in opposition in its magazine, *Majalah Tabligh*. In Burhani's investigation, during the 45th Muhammadiyah Congress in Malang, this conservative group set up a Pojok Anti-Liberal (anti-liberal corner) booth, which sold books, DVDs, t-shirts, magazines, and other anti-liberal mementos. Strikingly, some of the t-shirts for sale displayed the words 'Muhammadiyah Anti-Liberal' (Burhani 2013).

At the 45th Muhammadiyah Congress, it seemed that the 'Pure Islam' group was gaining momentum to beat back the 'Progressive Islam' group. The quarrels between these two groups occurred within congress committees and in the external arena. Burhani (2005, 2013) noted at least three critical issues where the 'Pure Islam' group

¹⁷Muhammadiyah has many assemblies such as Majelis Tabligh and Majelis Tarjih, each with its own functions and responsibilities. Majelis Tarjih is responsible for producing religious thoughts through fatwas and decisions, while Majelis Tabligh is responsible for disseminating them. Historically, Majelis Tabligh is known in Muhammadiyah as the anti-liberal wing and thus there are at times poor collaboration between Majelis Tarjih and Majelis Tabligh. For example, some fatwas issued by Majelis Tarjih, in Majelis Tabligh's perspective, are the result of liberal thinking. See Burhani (2013) and Palahuddin (2020).

defeated the 'Progressive Islam' in the congress arena, namely: (1) leadership change; (2) the position of women; and (3) resistance to liberal thought.

After the 45th congress, the feud between these two schools of thought has continued though waxing and waning at different times. The form of the feud now looks more varied given the availability of the internet where the presence of social media has changed the battle arena from a conventional to a more modern one. El Madury represents the 'Pure Islam' group, and has heated online debates with figures considered representatives of 'Progressive Islam' whose actions he sees as unsettling. For example, El Madury and the secretary-general of the Central Board of Muhammadiyah Student Association (DPP IMM),¹⁸ Robby Karman, have openly and frequently castigated each other on for example, issues about the veil and the Wahhabi. According to El Madury, Robby Karman is a young liberal figure in Muhammadiyah who should be challenged. El Madury also often attacks the IBTimes.id website, as it frequently contains articles that are progressive and, to some extent, controversial. This website was initiated by former Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhammadiyah (JIMM/Muhammadiyah Youth Intellectual Network) figures, such as Hilman Latief, Azaki Khoiruddin, and Mu'arif. On one occasion, when the chair of the Tarjih Muhammadiyah Centre admonished El Madury for uploading provocative posts that contradicted the official stance of the Tarjih Council, he defended himself by stating that equally provocative posts from the 'Progressive Islam' group should be similarly reprimanded. If he is the only one selected for rebuke then he felt an injustice had been done.¹⁹ El Madury's attitude in the framework of identity politics reflects someone who feels excluded and threatened by certain parties. As such, his specific attributes and identity are a deliberate form of resistance to the domination of certain groups or thoughts that threaten him.

The second form of authority is what Weber calls traditional authority (Spencer 1970; Matheson 1987; Riesebrodt 1999). In simple terms, something can be considered as having traditional authority if it gains legitimacy based on beliefs or norms that have been established in a particular tradition (Chairi 2019). In other words, according to Spencer (1970), traditional authority is legitimised and, at the same time, constrained by traditional norms. Therefore, it is the opposite of charismatic authority. If in charismatic authority, it is the leader or someone who creates the norms, then it is the norms that create the leader or person in the traditional authority. In charismatic authority, the value of influence is generated by a person's personal qualities and is always associated with his personality. While in the case of traditional authority, it is generated by function and is related to someone or something that has traditional values (Spencer 1970).

In the context of the Islamic intellectual tradition, ulama and the classical books they wrote can be considered to have this traditional authority. Ulama in Islamic tradition are called heirs of the Prophets. The authority of the ulama is derived from the legitimacy of religious texts which state that the prophetic tradition will be passed on to them. Therefore, the religious ideas they convey in writings or books contain an authoritative value for the next generation. This is the uniqueness of Islamic scholars and traditions, as

¹⁸Ikatan Mahasiswa Muhammadiyah (IMM) or Muhammadiyah Student Association is a proponent of Muhammadiyah in student affairs with the basic mission of realising the real Islamic society as formulated by Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah (Widodo 2017).

¹⁹On 3 November 2019, the manager of Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah reprimanded Zulkarnain El Madury for his post on SHPTM on the veil which contradicts Muhammadiyah's official stance.

mentioned by Muhammad Qasim Zaman (2002) who states that one of the most prominent aspects of pre-modern intellectual culture is the articulation of religious discourse through the so-called medium of the commentary. This is manifested in various forms such *al-syurūh*, *hawāsyī*, *rasā'il*, and *fatawā*. The various genres of books that contain explanations, descriptions, or responses to a book or social phenomena are a way for scholars to shape the identity and authority of the school or tradition they adhere to. In addition, it is also a means to interpreting the meaning of the foundational sources of Islam, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah (Zaman 2002).

An example is the *hawāsyī* tradition in the Shafii school. Its emergence, according to Ahmed El-Shamsy (2013), shows the peak of the authority of two scholars in that school, namely al-Nawawī and al-Rāfi'ī. Al-Kurdī, as quoted by El Shamsy, called these two scholars 'the higher authorities in the Syafii school'. Those who want to know the authoritative opinion of the Shafi'i school have to go through the works of al-Nawawī and al-Rāfi'ī, and the books that explain further their works, namely the books written by Ibn Ḥajar al-Haitamī and Syamsuddīn al-Ramlī. These books have for later generations the value of traditional authority (Shamsy 2013: 292).

What is the connection between this traditional authority and El Madury? El Madury's posts on SHPTM and at religious forums where he speaks always rely on the Islamic intellectual tradition (*turāth*). According to Endang Mintarja, chair of the Jakarta branch of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council, this aspect has drawn many people to El Madury's lectures.²⁰ What El Madury did, which Muhammadiyah did not do in many of its fatwas was to cite the Islamic intellectual tradition. In many of its fatwas, Muhammadiyah often only quotes the Qur'an or hadith to strengthen its argument, without citing the opinions of other Islamic scholars. Perhaps this is a consequence of the modernist movement, which became the spirit of Muhammadiyah. The modernist movement initiated by reformers such as Jamāluddīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad 'Abduh, and Muḥammad Rasyīd Riḍā in the late 19th and early 20th centuries used the term *al-rujū' ilā al-qur'ān wa al-sunnah* ('back to the Qur'an and Sunnah'). According to Syed Junaid A. Quadri (2013), the most obvious indicator of this movement, especially in Islamic law, is its critical attitude towards the structure of pre-modern sharia authority symbols, which are articulated in the language and logic of the institution of *taqlīd*. Modernist groups always encourage reopening the door to *ijtihād* and invite Muslims to leave the interpretive monopoly that the ulama class has held (Quadri 2013).

Muhammadiyah, which is heavily inspired by the modernist movement, is oriented towards the Qur'an and Sunnah and tends to attach less importance to the Islamic intellectual tradition that has been built by the ulama. This can be seen from its *Manhaj Tarjih Muhammadiyah* (the methodology Muhammadiyah uses in conducting *ijtihād*), which asserts that Muhammadiyah is not affiliated to a particular school, but the opinions of these schools are only considered in determining religious norms (Anwar 2018). This means that understanding religion in the Muhammadiyah perspective is derived directly from its primary sources, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah through the *ijtihād* process. However, it should be noted here that the narration that confirms the opinions of the

²⁰Endang Mintarja voiced this at a Muhammadiyah Central Board Tarjih Council meeting of on the emergence 'Syarah HPT', 25 September 2020.

scholars is taken into account in determining norms is not that clear on how they are implemented in *tarjih* issues.

In some of its official *ijtihad*, the nuances of the opinions of scholars, especially the pre-modern ones do not appear, by choice or otherwise. Thus it appears that El Madury is filling the Muhammadiyah gap in presenting the authority of the Islamic intellectual tradition in religious narratives. For example, in the controversial veil case, the Tarjih Council issued three fatwas in 1993, 2003 and 2009.²¹ The fatwas issued in 1993 and 2009 emphasised that the veil has no legal basis either in the Qur'an or the Sunnah but that Islamic law commands women to wear the hijab. These two fatwas did not cite the Islamic intellectual tradition, which also accommodates opinions about the veil. Although the Tarjih Council kept in its stance and strengthened the opinion that women's *'aurat* (parts of the body that should go covered) are the whole body except the face and the palms of the hands, in the 2003 fatwa, the Tarjih Council provides space for those who want to wear the veil by expressing several opinions from the scholars who think so.

In contrast to the *tarjih* fatwas, El Madury's (2019) article *Siapa bilang cadar tak ada dalilnya dalam Islam?* ('Who says the veil has no evidence in Islam?') on the SHPTM fanpage refutes the *tarjih* fatwa. He cites various opinions of scholars in the Islamic intellectual tradition who support mandatory veiling as an effort to build religious authority. From this, it appears that El Madury, apart from attacking the *tarjih* fatwa, believes in maintaining traditional authority, in this case, the Islamic intellectual tradition (*turāts*).

What El Madury did in building religious authority can also be captured from what Burhani calls a conversion narrative. Some scholars define religious conversion narratives differently as for example, in the change from one religious tradition to another. William James, as quoted by Burhani (2020: 158), states that religious conversion can also be interpreted as the conversion of a person who is a sinner into someone pious. According to Burhani (2020), people who experience religious conversion, usually after embracing a new tradition or religious understanding, will be hostile to the previous religious tradition or understanding.

El Madury also experienced a religious conversion, in this case, from the NU tradition to Muhammadiyah's. On SHPTM as well as his views when interviewed by this author, he introduced himself as someone who had practised the *'kuburiyyun* tradition²² and other actions that did not have examples from the Prophet. To convince his followers, he posted information about his religious conversion from NU to Muhammadiyah. Besides condemning his previous practices, which were deemed to have no basis in the Qur'an and Sunnah, he has had acrimonious debates with the NU *kyai*, Idrus Ramli on various issues, such as *ahlus sunnah wal jamaah* and *wahabi, nahdliyyin* traditions that are often considered heresy, and so on.

Muhammadiyah's efforts in maintaining religious authority in cyberspace

Before the advent of the internet and the emergence of various new religious authorities, Muhammadiyah and NU were the two largest religious organisations and authentic

²¹Tim Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah (2009, 2019a, 2019b).

²²The tradition of visiting the grave with its associated practices.

holders of religious authority in Indonesia (Burhani 2016). However, following the emergence of the so-called micro-celebrity *ustaz*, these two groups, according to some scholars, began to face challenges and threats. The recent study by Wahyudi Akmaliah (2020) shows that the two organisations have responded differently to the emergence of new religious authorities. While NU was more combative about their emergence, Muhammadiyah seemed calmer. Akmaliah (2020) maintains there are some similarities between Muhammadiyah and those often referred to as new religious authorities, making Muhammadiyah's response look less aggressive. Akmaliah is correct on several points, but other perspectives deserve to be considered, especially Muhammadiyah's efforts, through its official religious assembly, in maintaining religious authority on the internet. The weak point, as shown in Akmaliah's study is that there is no adequate elaboration of the assembly that exclusively holds religious authority in Muhammadiyah, namely the Tarjih Council. To trace more precisely how Muhammadiyah maintains religious authority we have to look at the Tarjih Council.

This discussion starts from the author attending a meeting held by the Tarjih Council and Tajdid of Muhammadiyah Central Board in September 2020. The meeting was in response to the appearance of the *syarh* (explanation) on HPT (Tarjih Decisions Compilation) by El Madury and Wahyudi Abdurrahim. Whilst El Madury's comments were on his SHPTM fanpage, Abdurrahim (2020) aired his views in his book. He was earlier mentioned as having had permission from Buya Yun to give *syarh* on HPT. The initial background for holding this meeting, as revealed by the secretary of the Tarjih Council, Mas'udi, was purely in response to the SHPTM posts by El Madury. However, information about the SHPTM other than the one written by El Madury prompted the board of the Tarjih Council to include the book by Abdurrahim with the same title for the agenda.

For this meeting, the Tarjih Council invited nine related sectors to discuss concerns over the emergence of the SHPTM on the internet written by the El Madury and Abdurrahim. The nine sector participants were: (1) the executive board of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council; (2) fatwa division of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council; (3) chair/secretary of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council; (4) Endang Mintarja (Chair of the Jakarta Tarjih Muhammadiyah Council); (5) Fathurrahman Kamal (Chair of the Muhammadiyah Tabligh Council); (6) Budi Setiawan; (7) Arif Nur Kholis (head of Muhammadiyah Digital Syiar Centre); (8) the manager of Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Muhammadiyah Tarjih Centre; and (9) the social media assistance team of the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council.

During the meeting, there were at least four proposals from participants on how best to respond to the SHPTM, particularly El Madury's article about the veil. The first was to complain to Facebook about the SHPTM so that it could be banned for including an institution's name without permission. According to the chair of the Tabligh Council of Muhammadiyah Central Board, Fathurrahman Kamal, who was present at the forum, the fanpage is in the illicit category. This proposal was considered by the proponents as a firm proposal but that it risked unnecessary antagonism. The second was to use a persuasive approach in the form of clarification or an appeal to El Madury not to use the name *Himpunan Putusan Tajih* (HPT) or something that is associated with *tarjih*. Its proponents consider this approach to be softer and more reflective of being Muhammadiyah members in particular, and Muslims in general. The third proposal was to use

institutional authority in writing an official letter on behalf of the Tarjih Council to El Madury. The fourth idea that was considered more practical and efficient was to place the official account of the Tarjih Council and those affiliated with it on social media. This would avoid being drawn into unfruitful correspondence on SHPTM.

However, there was no agreement on which approach should be undertaken despite long discussions. It was agreed instead that there would be a follow up with another forum. Since this author started writing (3 April 2022) there has been no further meeting. The emergence of SHPTM on the internet and its effects have been considered a serious problem by the Tarjih Council. The meeting's participants were generally uneasy about the appearance of El Madury and his fanpage. In addition, they wanted El Madury to be warned or reprimanded since SHPTM is considered a threat to religious authority of the Tarjih Council. This illustrates that Muhammadiyah, through its official religious assembly, the Tarjih Council, is not passive in responding to the emergence of micro-celebrity *ustaz*. However, only certain cases and not all micro-celebrity *ustaz* who appear on social media have drawn the Tarjih Council's attention. Although there has yet to be a follow up meeting, the Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah as an official institution supporting the Tarjih Council illustrates how Muhammadiyah struggles to maintain its religious authority in cyberspace.

Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah is an institution that was founded in 2016 by the Muhammadiyah Tarjih Council in collaboration with Ahmad Dahlan University (Majelis Tarjih & Tajdid PP Muhammadiyah 2016). Despite being a new institution, its legality is clear, and it has formal authority. In the Muhammadiyah tradition as an organisation, such legality is essential. Thus when someone from Muhammadiyah speaks on another person's behalf or endorses an approach, the speaker's status is below that of the institution and cannot be assumed to be that of institutions within Muhammadiyah which, although new, have legality. In the context of El Madury and the SHPTM fanpage, this is important. Even though El Madury claims he has obtained permission to make *syarh* on the *Himpunan Putusan Tarjih* from a charismatic figure in Muhammadiyah, Buya Yunahar, legally it is not valid. In that context, Buya Yunahar spoke on behalf of himself, not on behalf of Muhammadiyah.

Fronted by young Muhammadiyah cadres, the majority of whom are alumni of Pendidikan Ulama Tarjih Muhammadiyah (Muhammadiyah Tarjih Ulama Education, PUTM),²³ Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah plays a role in supporting the Tarjih Council programmes. These are relatively under-performing and facing obstacles, particularly on using social media to disseminate their official *ijtihad*. The members of the Tarjih Council, who are relatively old, need support from young cadres. The Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah plays an essential role in assisting the Tarjih Council in maintaining its religious authority on the internet. It responded to El Madury and SHPTM, by being pro-active with a poster (Figure 1) on social media and in print form, containing information related to the official account of the Tarjih Council and those affiliated to it.

²³PUTM is an educational institution under the Tarjih Council and Tajdid of Muhammadiyah Central Board designed to produce a cadre of Muhammadiyah scholars. PUTM organises a special programme that educates and prepares Muhammadiyah *tarjih* scholars who are competent in the religious field. The birth of PUTM was based on the concern of some Muhammadiyah leaders about the increasing scarcity of ulama in and from Muhammadiyah (Fauzi 2020a).



Figure 1. Poster with information on the official social media accounts affiliated to the Tarjih Council. Source: Tarjih Muhammadiyah Centre, 2020.²⁴

Although the poster above does not directly mention the SHPTM fanpage created by El Madury, the main message in it is clear and firm, namely to inform the Muhammadiyah followers about the official accounts of the Tarjih Council and those affiliated to it. This would hopefully let Muhammadiyah members understand how its official religious voice is disseminated on the internet. Following this, Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah successively uploaded other, more varied posters to indirectly counter the SHPTM fanpage. Some other examples of these posters are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

The use of informal language and emoticons typical of millennials indicate the audience that the Tarjih Council wants to target. The Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah team understands that informal language will appeal to its target audience. This is aimed at

²⁴Translation of Figure 1: Are you often confused about finding sources of reference about Islam from the perspective of Muhammadiyah? There is no need to be confused anymore because various social media are straightforward for us to access. Tarjih (Council) has come with a more trendy look: Easy to read anywhere; Provide updated fatwas; Discuss current issues. As members of Muhammadiyah, let's get used to reading the decisions and fatwas of Muhammadiyah. Here are some media that can be accessed very easily. So don't be confused anymore. Web: fatwatarjih.or.id; Facebook: fb.me/fatwamu; Instagram: [@pusattarjih_muhammadiyah](https://www.instagram.com/pusattarjih_muhammadiyah); Telegram: t.me/fatwatarjihmu; Youtube: [tarjih channel](https://www.youtube.com/channel/tarjih). Let's spread it to all Muhammadiyah people!



Taukah kamu?

Bahwa Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid PP Muhammadiyah mempunyai Channel resmi di YouTube.

Tarjih Channel

Sudah Subscribe belum? 😊

tarjih channel
majelistarjih
pusattarjih_muhammadiyah
Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid Muhammadiyah

Figure 2. Information about the official Youtube Channel of the Tarjih Council. Source: Tarjih Muhammadiyah Centre, 2020.²⁵

not only establishing the authority of the Tarjih Council but ‘millennialisation’ i.e. to reach out to the younger generation familiar with social media. Suyadi and Widodo (2019) note that millennialisation is an alternative way to develop knowledge that will synergise with various online media and digital technology. In the context of *tarjih* millennialisation,

²⁵Translation of Figure 2: Do you know? The Tarjih and Tajdid Council of Muhammadiyah now have an official YouTube channel, (namely) the Tarjih Channel. Have you subscribed yet?

FATWA TARJIH



fatwatarjih.or.id

Fatwatarjih.or.id merupakan website resmi Majelis Tarjih dan Tajdid Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah (MTT).

Tim Media Fatwa Tarjih, melalui website ini telah, sedang dan akan terus berupaya secara konsisten untuk mempublish berbagai produk-produk tarjih. Hingga kini, kumpulan-kumpulan fatwa-fatwa tarjih mulai dari tahun 1997 hingga 2018 telah masuk tahap editing dan beberapa tinggal menunggu waktu publishing.



Figure 3. Information about the website fatwatarjih.or.id, an official website affiliated to the Tarjih Council containing fatwas. Source: Tarjih Muhammadiyah Centre, 2020.²⁶

Muhammadiyah's official *ijtihad* that tend to be disseminated in a conventional, monotonous, and uncreative manner are now communicated through social media in more contextual packaging. This means that that the Tarjih Council and its various official *ijtihad*, which previously were always identified with the 'old', now consciously aim to include young people.

The religious authority of the Tarjih Council in cyberspace, especially when connected with the appearance of El Madury and SHPTM, was greatly helped by the presence of Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah and its young Muhammadiyah cadres. It manages

²⁶Translation of Figure 3: Fatwatarjih.or.id is the official website for the Tarjih and the Tajdid Council of Muhammadiyah Central Board (MTT). The Media Team of Fatwa Tarjih, through this website, has been, is and will continue to strive consistently to publish various *ijtihad* products from the Tarjih Council. Until now, tarjih fatwa collections from 1997 to 2018 have entered the editing stage, and some are just waiting to be published.



Figure 4. Information on the official website of the Tarjih Council. Source: Tarjih Muhammadiyah Centre, 2020.²⁷

various social media platforms with large numbers of followers, and has helped maintain Muhammadiyah's religious authority by balancing and suppressing the presence of micro-celebrity *ustaz*. Its contents are fatwas and decisions of the Tarjih Council with more appealing visualisation to reach out to the millennials (Figure 4).

Although the number of social media followers of the Tarjih Council is less than that for the NU and Salafi groups, at least the presence of Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah acts as a compass for Muhammadiyah followers who question its religious authority, especially with the emergence of El Madury's version in SHPTM. The administrators of Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah's social media have received many messages either through the comments column or direct messages in its inbox, which question the authority of SHPTM.²⁸ Here, the vital role of Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah is increasingly finding its momentum.

²⁷Translation of Figure 4: Do you want to know the full history (of the Tarjih Council)? Or do you want to look for ijthad products from the Tarjih Council? Come on; you can find out on this website: tarjih.or.id

²⁸Interview with Ariful Hazamn, Ilham Ibrahim, and Farida Fardhani az-Zukhruf, September 2020. They are *Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah* social media administrators.

Conclusion

Although it can be said that Muhammadiyah's religious influence and authority on the internet are inferior and lag behind other religious groups, Muhammadiyah is still trying to manage its authority, especially when facing threats from micro-celebrity *ustaz*. By focusing on Zulkarnain El Madury and his SHPTM social media page, this article offers a different perspective from previous studies by analysing the work of the Tarjih Council as the only institution in Muhammadiyah that has the authority to issue fatwas. This article shows that Muhammadiyah has its own way of responding to the emergence of new religious authorities. With the help of Pusat Tarjih Muhammadiyah as an institution in its fold, the Tarjih Council has made continuous efforts through social media and its official website to counter new voices that threaten its authority. Muhammadiyah's response was neither aggressive nor radical but it clarified its stance without mentioning who precisely was being targeted. What Muhammadiyah did was in line with the Javanese proverb *Ngluruk tanpo bolo, menang tanpo ngasorake* ('win without defeat, win without humiliation [of others]'). The form of Muhammadiyah's response is inherited from its founder, Ahmad Dahlan. As seen by James Peacock (1978), Ahmad Dahlan brought about many social transformations through discussions and education systematically, not in anarchic and aggressive ways.²⁹ This can be seen, for example, from how Ahmad Dahlan and the early generation of Muhammadiyah fortified Muslims from various superstitions, heresies, and myths by explaining the unacceptability of such popular beliefs and practices.

In a broader context, the case of Zulkarnain El Madury also provides a lesson that using the name Muhammadiyah to justify personal opinions or legitimise particular interests is wrong. Muhammadiyah has the reputation of a very well managed organisation (Barton 2014; *Suara Muhammadiyah* 2019) which is its strength and gives it clout compared to other religious organisations in Indonesia, such as NU. In short, Muhammadiyah's authority lies in the institution itself and is not based on personality. It differs from NU, where power and authority tend to reside with personal figures, such as *kyai* or *gus* (Fauzi 2020b).

Muhammadiyah followers who understand its basic rules are not easily influenced by the emergence of micro-celebrity *ustaz*. They are aware that Muhammadiyah's official religious stance is only be issued by the Tarjih Council and that those external to the Tarjih Council or even specific Muhammadiyah figures who give religious opinions, speak only for themselves as individuals and not the organisation. This would be the case, for example, even if the religious opinion emanates from the chair of the Tarjih Council as an individual. This did occur when Syamsul Anwar, the current chair of the Tarjih Council, differed from the official religious stance of the Tarjih Council on the issue of *iftitāḥ* prayer (opening night prayer [*qiyām al-lail*]).³⁰ While Anwar's

²⁹For example, Ahmad Dahlan and the early generation of Muhammadiyah explained to Muslims the unacceptability of popular beliefs and practices that had their roots in superstitions, heresies, and myths. Rather than resorting to anarchist practices, they have built hospitals, orphanages and schools, one of the purposes of which is to counter such practices (Shihab 1995; Peacock 1978).

³⁰For Anwar (2013), the *iftitāḥ* prayer comprises two short *rak'ah* prayers that are performed before *qiyām al-lail*, with the condition that it must be preceded by sleep, otherwise there is no need to perform the *iftitāḥ* prayer. However, the Tarjih Council holds that the *iftitāḥ* prayer consists of two short *rak'ah* prayers performed before *qiyām al-lail*, whether preceded by sleep or not (Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah 2011; Tim Majelis Tarjih and Tajdid Pimpinan Pusat Muhammadiyah 2019a).

opinion clearly differs from the official religious stance of the Tarjih Council, the prevailing opinion in Muhammadiyah is that of the Tarjih Council, not the chair of the Tarjih Council. Within Muhammadiyah, such religious differences of opinion are common as usually happens in *fiqh* discourse in general. The difference between El Madury and Anwar is that the latter does not act in the name of Muhammadiyah or the Tarjih Council when he has a different view. Instead, on many occasions, he urges Muhammadiyah followers to abide by the opinion of the Tarjih Council on the *iftitāh* prayer.³¹ Thus Anwar has shown he can compromise his personal religious opinion with his professional attitude in the organisation. In this case, he understands that using the name Muhammadiyah to legitimise individual opinions or interests is not justifiable.

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³¹On several occasions, this author has heard Syamsul Anwar's direct appeal to Muhammadiyah members to follow the opinion of the Tarjih Council on this aspect of the *iftitāh* prayer.

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