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Ibnu Nadzir

*Research Center for Society and Culture, Indonesia Research and Innovation Agency (PMB-BRIN)*

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# The Uncomfortable Subject: Situating Cultural Relativism and Conservative Movements in Indonesia

**Ibnu Nadzir**

Research Center for Society and Culture, Indonesia Research and Innovation Agency  
(PMB-BRIN)

## Abstract

To study conservative groups, or community whose identity marker is defined by a strong sense of rejection toward other groups, whether based on ethnicity, religion, or any other identity markers, has always been a delicate matter for an anthropologist. Departing from the premise of cultural relativism, anthropologists are trained to empathize with their research subjects. However, similar empathy could not easily be exercised to research subjects whose conservative views contradict cultural relativism. The dilemma might explain why research on hate, racist groups, is relatively rare in anthropology or social sciences in general. Even if anthropologists are able to sympathize with the point of view of such groups, the research presentation poses another problem: how should they present their point of view without justifying their subjects' actions? Moreover, since conservative groups are often stigmatized socially or politically, how should anthropologists position themselves and their research when discussing the issue particularly to non-academic public? Despite the conundrums, some scholars dare to take the risk of studying the 'uncomfortable subjects.' Drawing from several studies and my own research on FPI in South Sulawesi, this article examines the limitations and the contributions of anthropological framework in studying conservative movements.

Keywords: anthropology, conservative movements, cultural relativism, far right, Islamism

## Introduction

In November 2020, the charismatic leader of the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI), Habib Muhammad Rizieq Shihab returned as a political fugitive from Saudi Arabia. His return was followed by strong oppositional stance from the government. He was pursued for multiple legal cases. Not too long after his return the organization he led was also forbidden by the government. Moreover, six members of the organization were also shot during what police claimed as a car chase in a freeway area. Following the government's proscription of FPI, its social media accounts with significant number of followers were removed. This series of incidents happened in less than a year after Habib Rizieq Shihab's return to Indonesia.

The pursuit on the organization was extended to other regions outside of Jakarta as well. On May 2021, Counterterrorism Special Detachment 88, a police unit specifically created to tackle terrorism, raided a house in Makassar. In a press conference, the police stated that the house was previously used by FPI. During the raid, the police captured three leaders of the organization claimed to be connected with Munarman, one of FPI's main leaders, who was



already indicted for another case of terrorism. The raid of FPI leaders in Makassar was one of the final nails in the organization's coffin.

While many people—particularly human rights activists—condemned the government for their unlawful action towards FPI, many others considered these actions as necessary or even long overdue. Public survey showed that the majority of people supported the ban of the organization (Candraditya, 2021). Likewise, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, also defended the government's decision (Laeis, 2021). The support to the government's action stems from the fact that the organization has been notoriously known for their vigilante acts. FPI has many records for illegal attacks against religious minorities, activists,<sup>1</sup> as well as business establishments. It is then not surprising when government officially banned the organizations, the action was supported by many people.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, public reaction towards the arrest of Makassar FPI leaders could be explained for the same reason.

Nonetheless, personally, I felt the dilemma when I heard about the government's decision in banning FPI. The decision seemed like an easy way for the government to scapegoat FPI and other Islamic organizations as the source of political problems in Indonesia,<sup>3</sup> while understating the state's contribution to the democratic decline in Indonesia (Power, 2018). On the other hand, it is hard not to admit that the organization is problematic for Indonesian democracy. For years, FPI and many other conservative Islamic organizations has openly discriminated against minority groups. In some regions, these organizations also pushed their religious point of view into legislation, which further alienates minority groups systematically. My point of view is arguably quite common among social scientists or anthropologists studying Indonesia. In his piece on civil Islam in Indonesia, Hefner (2000) raised concerns that the democratic culture in Indonesia would be threatened, should the conservative groups dominate the public sphere. Bruinessen (2013) proposed the term 'conservative turn' that captures the change in public representation of Islam where the conservative groups gained a much upper ground. Meanwhile, the rise of mass mobilization under the banner of Islam in 2016 is considered to be the manifestation of political populism (Hadiz, 2016). The standing points and arguments raised by these scholars might differ in many aspects, but they shared the assumption that conservative groups like FPI should be a source of concerns.

The problem is even more complicated when many Indonesian scholars hold a point of view that conveniently fits the position of the state regarding conservative groups. In democratic Indonesia, the position was developed since the war on terror triggered by the 9/11 terrorism in the US. Conservative groups such as FPI, HTI, and ISIS were often easily lumped

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<sup>1</sup> Among the most infamous incident was the attack toward National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Belief in 2008 during the peace rally against the violence toward religious minorities.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that the support toward FPI has been changing over the years, however by the time the government banned the organization the majority of public supported the decision (Fealy & White, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Mahfud MD for instance claimed that the disbandment of the organization has made the Indonesian public happier while the political situation to be more stable (Akbar, 2021).



into demonizing terms such as terrorist, radicals, or the recent popular one, *kadrun*.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, recent public narratives by major organizations and research institutions seem to perpetuate the idea that conservative groups are legitimate risk in Indonesia. For example, UIN (Islamic Indonesian University) in collaboration with UNDP regularly publishes research to map the rise of radicalism in Indonesia, particularly in educational institution (CONVEY, 2018). Research by me and other colleagues at LIPI (Nadzir et al., 2018; Pamungkas & Permana, 2020), also reinforces the arguments that conservative groups contribute to the rise of intolerance in Indonesia. Meanwhile, NU also plays an active role in battling the so-called radical expressions of Islam (Ali, 2015). Therefore, the positioning of this FPI and other conservative groups as a national threat has become a dominant public discourse that to some extent is reinforced through social science research.

The term ‘uncomfortable’ in the title of this article not only refers to FPI as a conservative group but also to myself as a researcher. On the one hand, working as a researcher on state institution, I often feel like I am expected to produce a ‘distant and objective’ analysis that would reinforce the political position of the government. On the other hand, the distant analysis seems to contradict the ethical position of modern anthropology in representing the voice of the weak. Although, as I have raised, it is not easy to apply the ‘weak’ label to FPI.

These dilemmas, I would argue, raise at least three concerns for an anthropologist regarding their research. *First*, how should a researcher reconcile the principle of cultural relativism with research subjects whose actions contradict the very notion of cultural relativism? *Second*, should anthropologists extend the principle to the conservative movements? If so, how should they present their findings without normalizing the violent or discriminatory actions? *Third*, considering that social science research might be used to justify the demonization of conservative groups such as FPI, how should anthropologist position themselves politically and their research when they communicate their work to general public?

To examine these conundrums, I will be drawing from several works and my research experiences in South Sulawesi. The article is organized into three sections. In the next section, it will discuss the issue of cultural relativism that contributes to discomfort felt by an anthropologist studying the ‘uncomfortable subject.’ The following section will focus on the case of FPI in Makassar to discuss my effort to reconcile the dilemma in studying conservative groups. Afterward, on the final section I will focus on the tension between my position as an anthropologist who carries out the ethical stance of anthropology and also as a researcher whose work entangles with government’s policies that often contradict such ethical stance.

Through the discussion, I would argue that the framework of anthropology, including cultural relativism, could contribute towards enriching the comprehension of conservative groups. Particularly, on the anthropologists’ ability to gain insider’s point of view while not necessarily supporting the ideology of groups like FPI. At the same time, it is important for anthropologists to always consider the larger social and political context in reflecting on the impact of their works, in particular, when the research deals with powerful stakeholders such as the state or corporation. In this regard, a critical approach should be applied by the

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<sup>4</sup> An abbreviation of *kadal gurun* (dessert lizard), an arbitrary term used by many Indonesian Internet users to mock those perceived as radicals.

anthropologists not only towards the conservative groups but also towards the state. It is also crucial for anthropologists to be open to reconsider their political positioning to maintain the commitment in presenting the voices of the weak.

### **Cultural Relativism Dilemma**

One of the most fundamental dilemmas in conducting research on conservative groups lies in the idea of cultural relativism. The principle, proposed by Franz Boas (Brown, 2008), is one of the cruxes in anthropology. It argues that it is important for anthropologists to perceive culture from the point of view of its subjects. Consequently, it is imperative for researchers to set aside prejudices and to be more open to differences in cultural expressions. The principle was raised to counter both prejudices that comes particularly from colonialism, but also the works from earlier generation of social scientists and anthropologists as well. Nowadays, while rarely discussed, the principle still holds a fundamental position within the discipline of anthropology.

Since its inception, cultural relativism has been criticized for various reasons. For advocates of human rights, gender equality, or liberal democracy, cultural relativism contradicts the notion of universal values. The emphasis of local specificities in cultural relativism might be used to exempt cultural practices to have any accountability despite negating what perceived to be universal values such as human rights. For instance, in the past, Saudi Arabia has defended their position not to give similar rights to women since it is considered to be 'Western' values (Brown, 2008: 366). Many similar instances have raised questions among international bodies, governments, or even academics. To what extent should people tolerate social and cultural practice differences, particularly if the practices contradict human rights?

Anthropologists deal with this kind of conundrums all the time. Amidst the campaign on war against terrorism, Abu-Lughod (2002) criticize the Western narratives that justify the war in Middle East as crusade to save Muslim women from the oppression of Muslim men. Such proposition, while often veiled under the guise of human rights, was not just ignorant to the position of Muslim women as subject, but also resonates with the narratives of colonial pasts. These nuances as presented by Abu-Lughod, exemplifies the contribution that Pasiaka (2019) has argued to be the strength of anthropology as discipline. The anthropological frameworks could provide important nuances regarding cultural practices, while at the same time being able to be critical of what are considered universal values such as human rights.

Outside the academic realms, the issue was raised under different tone. Among conservative groups in the United States, the positioning such as the one proposed by Abu-Lughod, raised criticism that cultural relativism applies double standard. Scholars accused of being highly critical towards other citizens in the United States regarding race or religion, while being an apologist for cultural practices perceived as oppression in their research area (Brown, 2008).

The idea of cultural relativism is tied to the way anthropologists are trained to sympathize with their research subject. For an anthropologist, passing the judgement and trying to learn the point of view of the 'natives' in their research is almost inseparable. This process seems to be natural for anthropologists since their research subjects are traditionally



communities or groups whom the scholars perceive as marginals or voiceless. In the past, this translated into the study of indigenous people living in remote areas. The more recent and contemporary researches expand the focus to other marginalized groups such as refugees, sexual minorities, or religious groups. This fundamental training shapes the way anthropologists design their research very early on. They tend to choose to study groups or progressive social movements that they already sympathize with. Consequently, the study of conservative groups is relatively nascent (Edelman, 2001).

The avoidance among scholars to study conservative groups is understandable, since it is hard to sympathize with groups whose identity is often tied to the acts of discrimination or even violence. It is not to say that issues of violence or other controversial matters are rare in anthropology. The discipline, after all, was developed from the curiosity to explain social and cultural practices that many people would consider strange or unfathomable. Cannibalism, for an instance, while being a cultural practice that is unacceptable by the standard of many modern societies, has been a topic of interest to anthropologists. The understanding towards cannibalism could only be attained if anthropologists drop their prejudices and extend their empathy towards the community practicing it (see Conklin, 1995; Lindenbaum, 2004). However, such sympathy is not always easy to apply when the conservative groups are part of anthropologist's own community.

For those who practice cultural relativism, it is difficult to reconcile a belief in cultural equality with communities that oppose the principle. This is especially the case, since anthropological knowledge is occasionally translated into personal standing in real politics. When Hefner (2000) cautiously mentioned the threat of conservative groups, it implies the hope that Indonesia will be in better situation if the country could maintain democracy as its political system. Likewise, the involvement David Graeber in Occupy Wall Street was informed by his belief in anarchism that corresponds to his research as an anthropologist. The situation is similar to other political commitments such as social justice that resonates with the research of many scholars. Anthropologists' political commitment thus complicates their practices in studying conservative groups (Tretjak, 2013).

The dilemma, however, doesn't stop scholars to study conservative groups with various outcomes. In a research on far-right groups in Germany, Shoshan (2014) is critical to the neoliberal frameworks used by the government in managing the groups. He demonstrates how such framework reinforces the existence and beliefs of these groups. In an attempt to understand debates surrounding abortion issue in the US, Ginsburg (1989) elucidates that the pro-life group (opposition to abortion) is beyond simply uneducated and irrational people contradicting progress. Rather, their stance is based on the belief that abortion represents the destruction of the traditional role of women which has been jeopardized due to economic and social changes.

In the case of Indonesia, many scholars have conducted research on FPI, albeit with various findings and political standings. Woodward et al. (2014), for instance, conducted study on the way the organization uses hate speech as an integral feature of the organization. The article strongly argues that the hate speech and violent actions conducted by FPI could make the organization be labeled as terrorist. However, supports from many political factions, including discursive legitimation by the Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* or MUI), have provided impunity to the organization. It is clear that these scholars position



themselves to be very critical of the organization. At the same time, the article also advocates for stronger actions from the government. The stance, as I mentioned earlier, would be very problematic nowadays, since it aligns with the government's agenda to demonize FPI in recent years.

Other scholars take a more nuanced approach to study the organization. Jahroni (2004) studied the followers of FPI and found that many were left behind by development and modernization projects in urban areas. FPI in this regard offers an instructive path with Islamic symbolism to reclaim their pride and sense of identity. Likewise, Seto (2019) in his study on Islamist buzzers, argue against the perspective that online activism were mobilized by economic interest. On the contrary, the Islamist buzzers spent a large amount of money from their personal budget due to their belief on the importance of Islamic cause in social media. In other words, just like their counterparts of progressive movements, conservative groups are more than capable to engage on rational strategy to advocate their causes.

The differences in these approaches comes from various reasons. The strong antagonism as presented by Woodward et al. (2014) might come from a cautious stance to the strong influence of FPI in public arena. Jahroni (2004) and Seto (2019), on the other hand, despite being separated by several years, might take a more balanced approach since their research were conducted at times when the state heavily scrutinized Islamic opposition movements. These reasonings are partly my speculation, but it reflects how the study on conservative groups such as FPI is a delicate matter contingent to the social and political dynamics. Nonetheless, as argued by Tretjak (2013), it is important for anthropologists to keep taking up the challenge in studying conservative groups. She argues that it is anthropologists' task to understand the grievances and the mechanisms which enable the rise of such groups. Moreover, in Indonesian context, despite the restriction from the government, the conservative groups still present as an important social and political forces in public arena.

To take up this challenge, anthropologists need to reconcile the principle of cultural relativism with the study of uncomfortable subject like FPI. It is thus important to seek in what forms the cultural relativism can be applied to conservative groups while not necessarily justifying their ideology. In this regard, I would like to borrow the argument of Donnelly (1984) that considers the principle not as the problem per se; rather, its extreme interpretation that is problematic. He distinguishes the application of cultural relativism into the 'strong' and the 'weak' version. The 'strong' application holds that culture is the source of moral validity (Donnelly, 1984: 418). Such interpretation makes it impossible to hold cultural practices to be accountable by universal standards such as human rights. Conversely, the application of 'weak' relativism, thus the argument goes, is beneficial since it acknowledges cultural differences yet could still follow the course of more universal values.

While it is hard to apply such a clear separation in actual research, it is still a useful reference to resolve the first dilemma. In conducting research of conservative groups, anthropologists could try to apply the same principle. The researcher could still make an effort to understand the subject, learning the rationales behind their actions, while not justifying their ideology. It will not be an easy process, the method will continuously be evaluated, but it is still possible to do. After all, as Pasioka (2019) has argued, there is no requirement for anthropologists to like their subject in order to understand their point of view. On the contrary,

one of the key tasks of anthropology is to illuminate the ‘dislike’ towards certain groups that might come from ethnocentrism (Pasiaka, 2019: 3).

The following question is, how to apply these ideas in studying an actual case of conservative groups such as FPI? Is there a way to preset the nuances of these movement while not glorifying the ideology or unwittingly helping to spread the problematic narratives of the group? While there is no straightforward answer to this, I believe the key lies in the researchers’ efforts to link it with the larger socio-political contexts with the highlights of personal narratives. To elaborate this, the following section will discuss the case of FPI in South Sulawesi.

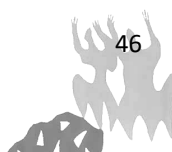
### **FPI and Contentious Islam in South Sulawesi**

The presence of FPI in South Sulawesi should be situated within the larger background of Islamic movements in the region. Like the province of Aceh and West Java, South Sulawesi is known for the strong presence of Islamic values in public. The entanglement between Islamic norms with local tradition could be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Pelras, 1994). Since the early process of Islamization, various Islamic organizations emerged and competed to become the dominant religious authority. The rich and long ties to Islamic symbols became an important backdrop when shortly after Indonesian Independence, DI/TII under Kahar Muzakkar recruited followers to establish an independent Islamic state. This movement was part of the larger resistance to Indonesian government alongside Aceh and West Java. While not exclusively motivated by religious reasons, this resistance movement was imbued with similar symbolism (Formichi, 2012).

During the times of New Order, in Makassar racial and religious persecutions was mobilized using Islamic norms (Mujiburrahman, 2006; Sidel, 2006). The aspirations to embrace Islamic norms in public arena was reinforced after the fall of the New Order. It was demonstrated with the initiation of the Preparatory Committee for the Implementation of Sharia (*Komite Persiapan Pelaksanaan Syariah* or KPPSI) that was established in 2000 (Mujiburrahman, 2013). Moreover, the region is later known as one of the few regions in Indonesia that implement sharia law (Buehler, 2016; Bush, 2008).

In South Sulawesi, even prior to the establishment of FPI, many Islamic organizations competed against each other while simultaneously shaping each other’s Islamic practices. FPI thus came in South Sulawesi when the region has long experienced contentious and vibrant ecosystem in relation to Islamic religious life. FPI in South Sulawesi was initiated back in 2005 by Habib Mahmud Alhamid who held a private meeting with Habib Rizieq Shihab and other FPI leaders from Jakarta (Ismail, 2016). In its early initiation, the organization focused mostly on small circles of da’wa, *dhikr* and study of Qur’an. It was only in 2010 that FPI in the region was officially established as a formal mass organization and a branch from Jakarta (Nurdiassa et al., 2019).

The FPI in South Sulawesi did not necessarily held a large number of members. After all, it functioned mostly like an informal organization. Formally, the organization had a few leaders, but it could manage to mobilize thousands of sympathizers during important occasions like rallies. Its presence never reached areas outside of the city of Makassar, similar to its counterparts in other regions that rarely had a strong influence outside of urban area.





Nonetheless, its activities were arguably notorious even at the national level. For instance, it did not hesitate to attack restaurants operating during the Ramadhan (Mna, 2011). FPI also actively persecuted events they perceive to be associated with minority religious groups such as the Shia community (Ismail, 2016). Moreover, the organization was allegedly associated with Poso terrorist networks (Tempo, 2016). In South Sulawesi, it thus developed a violent reputation shortly after its formal establishment.

The portrayal of the FPI in South Sulawesi and the discussions concerning it, however, rarely touch on the appeals of this organization to its followers. Analyses focusing on the threats and the problems it causes could overlook the legitimate grievances that motivate these followers to participate in FPI. Following some previous works (Jahroni, 2004; Seto, 2019), their affiliation with the organization is important to elaborate.

FPI was far from a monolithic organization. As discussed by Jahroni (2004), it consists of several groups with different backgrounds. The most important group was the network of *habaib*, an Arab-Indonesian community whose lineage claimed to be the direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad. As discussed earlier, FPI in South Sulawesi was initiated by the network of *habaib*. This is not to say that the entire *habaib* community fully supported its existence. Rather, the network was instrumental to the organization. The key leadership positions have always been dominated by *habaib* (Jahroni, 2004: 241).

Similarly, the regeneration of leadership in the South Sulawesi organization was exclusively given to the *habaib* community. One of my interlocutors, Ahmad,<sup>5</sup> mentioned that the privilege is even recorded in formal documents stipulating that the leadership of *habaib* is prioritized.<sup>6</sup> While some of them adhere to more traditionalist religious expressions, some *habaib* tend to fall into more puritan expressions that believe the implementation of sharia is essential to reclaim the glory of Islamic community in Indonesia (Jahroni, 2004). Particularly, as proposed by Habib Rizieq Shihab himself, FPI takes an active role in performing *nahi munkar* (forbidding vice) (Facal, 2020). The purpose of the organization thus shapes the actions of FPI members who do not hesitate to persecute or conduct violence to those considered to be threatening their faith. At the same time, Ahmad believed that FPI attracts pious individuals who already have a tendency to be radicalized. ‘If these people are not part of the right organization, they are susceptible to become suicide bomber,’<sup>7</sup> said Ahmad referring to terrorists who he believes have the same ideological inclinations with some FPI members.

The statement brought me to find FPI members. My colleague and I located the FPI headquarter through the address I had found on the Internet. The location did not match my expectation. It barely has any characteristics of a headquarter or even an office. It was located in a small street in Makassar. Aside from several banners with Habib Rizieq Shihab’s picture, the headquarter could not be easily identified. At the place pointed on the map, there was a semi-permanent security post made from bamboo. Apparently, the post was near to the house

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<sup>5</sup> Pseudonym, FPI sympathizer with *habaib* background whose family is one of FPI’s leader.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, 7 June 2018

<sup>7</sup> Interview, 7 June 2018



of Rahim,<sup>8</sup> one of the LPI (*Laskar Pembela Islam*)<sup>9</sup> leaders. The house, located in an even smaller alley, had many attributes showing his ties to FPI. There were banners of Habib Rizieq Shihab, and an even longer horizontal banner that says LPI.

Upon meeting us, Rahim was wary. He interrogated us on our origin and how we found him. After listening carefully about our background as LIPI researchers, he loosened up a bit and greeted us into his house. Rahim, a man in fifties, joined the organization in 2008. He described himself as someone who ‘grew up on the street.’ Rahim was familiar with all kinds of vice and developed a bit of reputation as a street thug who was feared by many.<sup>10</sup> At that time, he joined the *dhikr* community led by Habib Mahmud Alhamid. The community went on to be formally recognized as FPI.

Under Habib Mahmud Alhamid (2005-2010), the organization did not mobilize for street demonstration or anything. It was more of a religious study group, partly because the membership was dominated by women.<sup>11</sup> It was only in 2010 that the organization was formally recognized as FPI. It then entrusted larger role to Rahim in the organization. At that time, he was already a branch leader of FPI in South Sulawesi that while important was a minor position. Therefore, when he heard that Habib Rizieq Shihab himself trusted him as the commander of LPI, Rahim felt a great honor.

After his formal appointment, Rahim actively led around hundreds of members to mobilize or conduct raids against many groups or activities considered as a threat to Islamic community. Among their most regular activities was raiding alcohol-consuming youths. The raids, he claimed, were successful in lowering alcohol consumption around the streets of Makassar. Their actions were effective, according to Rahim, partially due to the fact that most street thugs were familiar with his background. Therefore, when Rahim and his members conducted the raids the youths were hesitant to retaliate or repeat their deeds.

It is hard to confirm these claims as justified or exaggerated; nonetheless, it is clear that the ‘street credentials’ were integral part of Rahim’s identity as the LPI leader. Rahim stated that FPI’s membership was dominated by people like him: those who experienced the harsh street life as a small thug and then gained *hidayah*.<sup>12</sup> Rahim added that these members, while not necessarily have sufficient Islamic knowledge, could perform some roles that would seem less appropriate to be conducted by *habaib*. Many people in Makassar, after all, in Rahim’s point of view, supported the implementation of sharia. He illustrated this spirit by discussing how even the youths who often drink alcohol on the street could be mobilized by Islamic organizations when they felt the need to defend their religion. It has occurred many times,

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonym

<sup>9</sup> The organization is the paramilitary group of FPI that perform the persecution

<sup>10</sup> Interview, 8 June 2018

<sup>11</sup> Interview, 8 June 2018

<sup>12</sup> The term comes from the Arabic of ‘guidance’, used to described religious guidance from God when the individuals felt the need to change their life and practices more obedience to Islamic norms.



including during the Makassar's race riot in 1997, and in mobilization against Ahok (former Jakarta Governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama) prior to 2017 Jakarta regional election.

Beyond the sense of purpose, Rahim's participation in FPI enabled him to access many respected figures. On numerous occasions, Rahim could have discussion with many other religious leaders from various organizations. On big issues, such as Shia community issues or the case of Ahok's blasphemous remarks, Rahim mobilized his group alongside members from other Islamic organizations. Moreover, in previous occasions Rahim often held *silaturahmi* (meeting) with leaders from regional police or military divisions, demonstrating informal ties between his organization and these state institutions. Rahim's actions resonate with FPI itself as an organization that even from its early initiation has close ties with the military and police officials (Facal, 2020: 8).

Rahim's experiences represent a large number of FPI members. Early observation on this organization has recognized that its members consist of impoverished urban youth communities (Jahroni, 2004). FPI provided them with a sense of meaning and self-worth that they could not get from state institutions, neighborhood, or even family. In the case of Rahim, not only did he get the sense of redemption, he was also able to play an active role to influence and shape the larger Makassar community. From his mobilization with FPI, Rahim believed that he contributes in improving local society. Moreover, he also felt a stronger sense of self-worth in his ability to connect with other religious leaders, public officials, and military figures that would not be possible without FPI. As of now, the existence of Rahim and many other FPI members were buried under the stereotypes that they are either intolerant or radical people. However, as proposed in this section, such portrayal will not reduce the appeal of FPI and its leaders for them. In contrast, it is important for either researchers or policy makers to understand the conservative rationality that legitimizes their actions. Such an understanding is necessary to create more sustainable solution in resolving issues regarding the presence of conservative organizations such as FPI.

Nonetheless, such understanding seems to be more or less irrelevant today as the government designated FPI as the enemy of the state. This is a situation to which many social scientists, including myself, partly contribute with the production of research on the conservative groups. This situation brings us to the conundrum first proposed in the introduction: how should we as social scientists, particularly anthropologists, situate our position amidst the tension between conservative groups and the state?

### **The Uncomfortable Researcher: Political and Ethical Dilemma**

The problem raised by this article is twofold. The first layer deals with the ethical dilemma in conducting research towards conservative groups while not justifying their ideology. The second layer focuses on my concern regarding political positioning as an anthropologist in a state institution in this current political climate. To elaborate on these issues, this section will be organized in two parts.

Previously, I have demonstrated the importance of personal narratives and larger social context in the discussion of FPI. The approach to some extent borrows the proposition from Tretjak (2013) who argues that to study the uncomfortable subjects we need to present two important aspects: the grievances of the subjects and the nuanced critique. I have discussed the

grievances in the previous section. Beyond local issues such as public drinking, the grievances were on a much larger scale when Rahim raised the issue of SARA.<sup>13</sup> The case of religious blasphemy like one happened in Jakarta, and the presence of religious deviants such as Shia and Ahmadiyya were, in his opinion, the larger problems that might threaten the existence of Islamic ummah.

In addition to Tretjak's framework, I argue that it is also important to examine the significance of the movements for its followers. As previously discussed, another strong narrative in Rahim's story is related to a sense of pride, redemption, and purpose that he found after joining the organization. Arguably, the grievances were most likely shaped and reinforced through his participation in FPI. The FPI in South Sulawesi initially existed not as a violent group but as a much simpler religious study group. The grievances thus seemed to be articulated in more concrete forms much later after Rahim's search of redemption.

Finally, Tretjak (2013) posits that anthropologists should apply nuanced critique to the community. The crux of the critique is crucial to balancing the need to sympathize while not legitimizing their actions.

Tretjak (2013) also argues that anthropologists should engage with conservative groups, implying that research should somewhat influence the community. This expectation, however, should be taken with a grain of salt. I believe such expectation is born out of the bias among scholars whose ecosystem is based on the premise to engage in open discussion. Rational and soundful debates for many intellectuals are considered to be the panacea of conflicts. However, when dealing with conservative groups whose ideology tied to their belief system like FPI, I highly doubt if nuanced critique could really influence the movement. The critique in this regard is better to be presented to those accessing the results of the research. Therefore, they could understand the logic and the structure that enables the rise of such movements while remain critical of their actions.

Another dilemma is raised from my position as an anthropologist working at a state institution. My research involvement with conservative groups started in 2017 at LIPI (Indonesian Institute of Sciences). At that time, together with my colleagues, I was assigned to create policy papers to address the issue of intolerance and radicalism. The report, among other things, proposed to revise regulations to grant the government the right to freeze the activities of mass organizations that repeatedly violate the law like FPI (Nadzir et al., 2018). While it sounded bold, the idea resonated with the general sentiment among academics and bureaucrats at the time. This was evident when our team presented the research to various stakeholders.

In the following year, with other colleagues from LIPI, I was assigned to develop a larger scale research project that could delve on both the quantitative and qualitative aspect of intolerance in Indonesia. This opportunity opened up my interaction with Islamic groups in Sulawesi, including FPI. The general outcome of the research was still wary about the growing conservatism in Indonesia. It was also justified from the findings of my colleagues in other regions. Nonetheless, the project has pushed me to reevaluate my position about conservative

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<sup>13</sup> Abbreviation of *Suku, Agama, Ras dan Antar Golongan* (Ethnicity, Religion, Race and Groups), introduced during the New Order to include topics that should be avoided in public discourses.

groups, particularly since I have much more grounded interactions to understand the rationalization behind the ideologies.

I must reiterate that our team's findings, which also informed my political position, were hardly unique among scholars studying conservative groups in Indonesia. Apart from LIPI, there were also other institutions who works on rather similar topics. PPIM, part of the Islamic State University (*Universitas Islam Negeri* or UIN) in Jakarta regularly published their surveys regarding the threat of radicalism and intolerance in Indonesia. The surveys, among other things, examined university and school students' perception of interactions with people of different ethnic or religious backgrounds. The Centre for Religion and Democracy Studies (*Pusat Studi Agama dan Demokrasi* or PUSAD) has published quality research on similar topic. Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (IPAC), previously led by Sidney Jones, has also conducted important studies in related topic. The rising influence of conservative groups thus has intrigued many researches that may contributed to the reinforcement of their status as a threat to Indonesian democracy.

The concern regarding conservative groups and rising intolerance was also shared among Indonesian anthropologists. As previously mentioned, anthropologists are commonly trained to embrace diversity under the concept of cultural relativism. Such training makes anthropologists somehow wary about any socio-political trend that might threaten the situation. This is obvious among anthropologists who live in liberal democratic countries advocating against political populism, discrimination and similar issues. Yet, it is also very relevant to Indonesia where democracy is deeply entangled with religious norms (Menchik, 2016). Around the same time when I was doing the study on intolerance, a number of Indonesian anthropologists met the president of Indonesia specifically to raise concerns regarding intolerance as a threat to diversity (Tempo, 2017). The meeting was conducted shortly after the religious mobilization of 'Aksi 212,' an event that pushed the government to incriminate Ahok, then governor of Jakarta with minority background, for religious blasphemy.

Considering the context, the wariness regarding conservative groups seemed very justifiable at the time. The situation has evolved differently when the government took stronger measures toward conservative groups. It was started by the banning of HTI (*Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia*) with a new in lieu regulations specifically created to tackle the issue (Burhani & Nadzir, 2021). The same regulation was later used to disband FPI. The FPI leaders were then facing some criminal charges with various allegations. Since his return from Saudi Arabia as a fugitive, Habib Rizieq Shihab has been dealing with other charges as well, one of which was related to the quarantine regulations during the Covid-19 pandemic. While Munarman, another important figure in FPI, was arrested alongside several others for terrorism accusation. Amidst the tension, several FPI members who were accused of using firearms against the police, were killed by them.

In my previous view, the situation seemed ideal since the government had successfully defused the threat of religious intolerance. However, abovementioned developments intrigued me to question my position, particularly as I realized that the political and social contexts have tremendously changed in recent years. Despite the problem posed by conservative groups, the ways in which the government can just eradicate certain groups pose another problem that is arguably more threatening to democracy. The so-called 'authoritarian turn' (Power, 2018) indicates the government's tendency to exercise power that contributes to the democratic



decline in Indonesia. In this situation, FPI and many other conservative groups were scapegoated as the source of problems in Indonesia. The conservative groups were designated to be the public enemy under the pretense that the government is trying to protect pluralism even by using undemocratic means (Fealy, 2020). This might obscure general public, including researchers, from other pressing issues such as creeping militarism, exploitation of nature, and the influence of oligarchs in Indonesian politics.

As I have proposed earlier, the works of scholars—including my own—to some extent contribute to the demonization of conservative groups such as FPI. Apart from academic curiosity, the knowledge produced from such research is very likely generated by the wariness about the increasing influence of conservative groups in Indonesia. The need to defend pluralism even made some human right activists and NGOs overlook the undemocratic policies that were applied by the government towards these conservative groups (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). I would argue that it was also the case for scholars, including anthropologists whose discipline has a strong tendency to advocate pluralism. Amidst the backdrop, I believe it is important to reevaluate my earlier positioning towards conservative groups. With the authoritarian turn of Indonesian government, these conservative groups are likely to be more marginalized due to their position as the ‘public enemy.’ So, how should we situate the political positioning of researchers in this situation?

Anthropology as a discipline is not immune from any entanglement with state power. Early ethnographies were known to be exploited by the colonials to govern the colonized regions (Pels, 2008). Even in more recent periods, the CIA also utilized the work of anthropologists amidst the tension of Cold War (Price, 2011). However, at the same time the discipline has undergone many changes, including through self-criticism. Many anthropologists now also play a role as the biggest critic of the ruling authorities. Among one of the most important critics is the work of Abu-Lughod (2002) whose notion on Muslim women serves as a reference. At the height of the war on terror campaign, Lughod questioned the moral superiority of Western countries that claim to save Muslim women. Without justifying terrorist acts, she challenged the dominant narratives of Western countries that pose the threat of imperialism.

I believe the same framework is applicable to my position regarding conservative groups in Indonesia. Amidst the demonization of conservative groups in public arena, it is important to reevaluate my position regarding their status and the state. My work, and probably many other researchers’ which are relevant in supporting Indonesian democracy, is currently utilized by the state to justify undemocratic policies. In this context, researchers including anthropologists should at least try to extend the application of nuanced critique to the state as well. Moreover, I believe it is also important for researchers to give a fair platform to voice the grievances of conservative groups. To do so would be very important, particularly since under the current circumstances, conservative groups are designated political pariah by the state. FPI and other conservative groups, which was once the problematic parties, are now arguably the political pariah. However, this change should not mean that researchers, including myself, must support their values. Rather, it is part of the commitment to present the voice of marginalized groups, even if the groups are considered uncomfortable to deal with. Anthropologists with the proper application of cultural relativism has the right tools to do so.

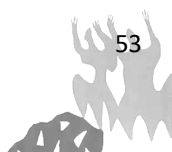


## Conclusion

The article is started with my questions regarding the position of a researcher, particularly an anthropologist, in studying conservative groups. As discussed, similar questions are raised by scholars who study comparable groups across the globe. My interest in evaluating this position corresponds with a broader trend that dominates the public politics in Indonesia: the increasing religious conservatism projected in various aspects, from fashion goods, religious inspired regulations, to vigilante movements. The article focuses on FPI that was notoriously known as vigilante movement.

My research in Makassar allowed me to evaluate my initial judgements regarding conservative groups in Indonesia. It is problematic to confine FPI and similar groups simply as a threat to democracy. Such groups emerge due to social, political, and economic grievances that are not necessarily solved by the state. Moreover, FPI provided its members with a sense of purpose that may leverages their standings in society. Unfortunately, such nuances have been neglected amidst contemporary political situations that demonize the group.

These contradictions bring me to the final issue related to my political and ethical position as an anthropologist working at a state institution. In this article, I have demonstrated why it is important for me to evaluate my previous stance regarding conservative groups in Indonesia. Nuanced critique should not only be applied to them, but also to the state. However, this should not be interpreted as a way to justify their ideologies, rather as a part of anthropology's commitment to voice the voiceless. The discipline should be able to provide more balanced and valuable presentation that will help not only academics but also general public to have a more nuanced comprehension on the uncomfortable subject.



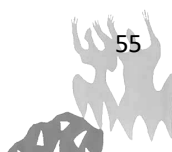
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