TRANSFORMATION OF EX-HTI PROPAGANDA BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Since it's dissolution in 2017, HTI ex-members transformed into multiple communities and utilizing internet to conduct propaganda, recruitment, and coordination. Covid-19 pandemic created new opportunity for spread of radicalism because of economic recession and increased poverty. HTI ex-members continue the struggle through underbouw organizations like GEMA Pembebasan, BacktoMuslimIdentity Community (BMI), and MuslimahNewsId. Rise in internet usage during pandemic helps expose people to HTI khilafah propaganda. Uploaded contents are provocative and targeting mainly millennials and women. This increased the potential of sectarian conflict and proliferation of radical Islamist movement in the coming years. Government could tackle this by providing Islamic education in college, conducting contra-narration in social media, accelerating economic recovery, and strengthening the implementation of Pancasila.

Keywords : Propaganda, HTI, Covid-19 Pandemic, Contra-Narration

INTRODUCTION

Disbandment of HTI in 2017 caused much of its members transformed into many communities. Those communities often composed from different social classes like student, private sector workers, academician, and government workers alike. Those communities are continuing HTI struggle to promote and build caliphate in Indonesia. Some also involved in politic by giving support to certain political faction, organizing and conducting political rally, and criticizing incumbent government policy.

This phenomenon occurred during 2019 election in which HTI ex-members affiliating themselves with certain political parties and fundamentalist moslem group polarizing and raising tension between two presidential candidates. After the election, HTI ex-members chose subtle movement concentrated mostly in Colleges and Preaching Community. The Spread of HTI Ideas also became more prevalence in social media.

Covid-19 pandemic which erupted in many nations on the early 2020 disrupted

global trade and economic. Authority in many nations issued travel restriction to prevent the spread of coronavirus. This policy caused global economic recession which increase unemployment and poverty.

The Covid-19 Pandemic also increasing internet demand and usage. This is because the shift from face to face interaction into working and schooling from home. According to Indonesian Ministry of Communication and Information, there are 40% increase in internet traffic during the early stage of pandemic. E-conference and social media became very popular and prevalence in Indonesian society. (Kementrian Komunikasi dan Informatika Republik Indonesia, 2020)

This momentum was overridden by HTI ex-members to amplify the caliphate propaganda using social media. Radicalism spread trough different online platform such as Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp, Zoom Meeting, etc. This trend could potentially radicalize the society and become threat to national security in the upcoming years.

Propaganda In Social Media

Propaganda come from latin term *propagre* which mean to spread or to reproduce. The term was firstly used by Pope Gregory XV in 1622 by the creation of *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* in charge of spreading the Christian faith and regulating church affairs. Propaganda is a systematic, well planned, and repeated effort to intentionally spread message with intention to influence group of people to adopt certain idea. (Nurdiana, 2006)

Propaganda is a branch of communication with presence of communicator, message, media, and receiver. Propaganda is a one-way and planned communication to influence people rather than naturally occurring usual interaction. Harold D. Lasswell stated that propaganda refer to opinion control, with important symbol, in form of story, rumor, news, picture, or another form of social communication. He also defined propaganda as a technique to influence human behaviour by manipulating representation in form of verbal, written, visual, or audio form of communication. (Malik, 2016)

Technological advancement grant access to internet-based propaganda which eliminate the limit of space and time. Social media also give open access to information and more interactive mass communication. More interactive pattern is clearly seen in social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Path, etc, where users could easily participate in information sharing and publication.

Social Media Communication is a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Connected gadgets not only in distribute and circulate message, but also became a medium like social aspects and environment in face to face communication. But, communication in CMC depends on text, symbol, icon, picture, and another signs that represents the meaning of the message. Because of its interactive nature, social media has a power to shape public opinion and behaviour.

The absence of gatekeeper which present in mainstream mass media caused interaction between social media user unrestricted. Netizens could freely share any message in forms of text, picture, video, or paste the information from certain websites, spread it regardless of credibility. The other netizens could also freely respond the shared information. The absence of gatekeeper made social media inilah belakangan media sosial could be ideally utilized for agitation and propaganda for certain interest. (Palupi, 2019)

Radikalisme Global On Covid-19

Restrictive policy is decreasing economic activity in Indonesia. Indonesia has plunged into recession because of negative economic growth of -5,32% and -3,49% in the second and third quarter of 2020. This recession raised the number of open unemployment into 9,77 million people. The rate of open unemployment in Indonesia reached peak level of 9,1% in 2020. This in turn increase the number of impoverished people into 26,42 million people. (Yovanda, 2020)

Covid-19 recession could threaten global stability by promoting proliferation of radicalism. Poverty is one of the factors that promote the spread of radicalism and terrorism. According to Gottlieb (2009) in Theory of Liberal Economy, every individual intent to pursue welfare so people that socio-economically experience sufferings (hardships and poverty) will tend to think and act radically.

Based on study by Fatkhuri (2015) "Supporting Factor in the Spread of Radicalism and Terrorism in Indonesia", growth of radicalism has two main factor, economic disparity and political injustice. This study explain that high level of poverty and unemployment increase the spread of radicalism because of social unrest and economic disparity caused by discriminative government policy.

Besides, there is a tendency that poverty caused by Covid-19 pandemic could increase social dissatisfaction to government. This tendency could promote radicalism. Radicalism proliferation could

be used by certain interest group. This could threaten the national security and develop into terrorism. (Anshori, Napang, & Nurhasanah, 2020)

DEVELOPMENT OF HIZB TAHRIR INDONESIA

Hizb Tahrir (HT) is a transnational islamic political party founded in Jerusalem in 1953 by Sheikh Taqiudin Nabhani. HT's goal is to restore islamic caliphate and unite the moslem world. HT's strategy was divided into three stages. First was cultivation of value (*tatsqif*) to develop loyal members that believe in the party ideology and form the core of organization. Second stage was interaction (*tafa'ul*) with moslem community, HT want to promote the ideas of HT to be implemented in the society. Last stage was power struggle (*istilamul hukmi*). HT would struggle to gain authority, implement comprehensive islamic law, and spread its idea globally. Nabhani stated to accelerate the third, HT leader could seek *nusrah* (assistance to gain power) from military, politician, and judge. Nabhani method tends to be more radical compared to gradual approach by another islamist movement such as Moslem Brotherhood.

HT chapter in Indonesia was founded by Abdurrahman al Baghdadi and Abdullah ibn Nuh. Baghdadi was Lebanese HT activist that immigrated to Australia.

He started to preach HT ideas in the Al Ghazali Boarding School owned by Ibn Nuh. HT preaching also spread among moslem student in IPB and ITB university. HT ideas also spread through Lembaga Dakwah Kampus (LDK) Network in many colleges in Indonesia. Recruitment and training of HT member was carried out through informal closed *halaqoh* (gathering). Since 1994, Hizb Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) began to publicly preach their ideas. Although, HTI activity during new order regime was limited to ideas dissemination and recruitment without mobilizing its members.

After the fall of Suharto's regime, HTI shown up itself publicly by organize International Caliphate Convention in the Indoor Tennis Venue, Senayan Stadium, Jakarta. This was first public activity of HTI. Through this forum, HTI openly introduce its ideas, programs, and leaders to public. The main issue was importance of caliphate as a solution to moslem community problems. HTI development was prominent in terms of membership, media, and operation. HTI found its momentum to mobilize its mass and move into second stage of its strategy. (Qohar & Hakiki, 2017)

HTI obtain its legal basis in 2006. This legal basis allows HTI to freely build its influence in government bureaucracy.

HTI preaching start to reach wider public spaces, such as seminar that was held in hotels and government agencies. This increase HTI confidence to seek assistance from powerful figures for power struggle and move into its last stage to establish caliphate. HTI activities ranging from preaching its idea to mobilizing mass for demonstration. HTI actively responded to global issue such as Israeli aggression, promoting moslem solidarity for Rohingya in Myanmar, and crowdfunding for humanitarian aid. Besides, HTI also campaigned for implementation of sharia law and caliphate system. But, HTI rarely using and promoting violence in its action. HTI approach focused on peaceful change in Indonesian political. This non-violence stance helps attract support and sympathy in the recruitment of young moslem intellectuals. HTI found its expression trough seminar and publication to promote its idea among intellectual segment from Indonesian society. (Osman, 2010)

HTI also issued magazine, books, pamphlets, bulletins, and websites to target wider audience. Among its publications was weekly pamphlet called "Bulletin Al-Islam", firstly issued in 1994. Published books was translation of HTI idea, especially Taqiudin Nabhani, conducted by HTI Press in Jakarta. HTI also seek support from public figures, intellectuals, and politicians, both in regional and national levels. HTI infiltration has reached almost every community such as mosques, college students, intellectuals, *majlis*, and government buereaucrat. (Zulfadli, 2013)

HTI recruitment targets multiple community, mainly students and women. HTI form underbouw organization GEMA Pembebasan to promote its idea among college students. GEMA actively held public discussions, seminars, and demonstrations that criticizes liberal-capitalist economic system and government policy. GEMA also pursued to promote HT ideas into another organization. GEMA helped in the formation of Forum Mahasiswa Islam.

HTI also actively recruited women through its underbouw, Perempuan Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia. HTI put concern about gender inequality, women's violence issue, and women's right. HTI stated that those issue was caused by absence of united moslem caliphate. Men and women have same responsibilities in restoring the caliphate system. (Osman, 2010)

Indonesian government recently assessed that HTI ideology and movement could enandger the existence and integrity of the united republic. HTI caliphate idea deemed to threaten the ethnic plurality and lead into horizontal sectarian conflict. As a

securitization attempt, Indonesian Government issued Government Regulation in Lieu of Acts (Perppu) Number 2 in 2017 2017 about Mass Organizations stating that mass organization was forbidden to spread ideology and teachings contrary to Pancasila. This served as a legal basis for Ministry of Law and Human Rights to revoke the legal status of HTI leading to its disbandment. Indonesian government also declared HTI as a forbidden organization.

TRANSFORMATION OF EX-HTI MOVEMENT

Altough HTI ceased to exist as an organizational body, it still retained cadres and resources to continue its political struggle in restoring islamic caliphate. As a religious based organization, HTI has many cadres, followers, members, symphatisants, and underbouw organizations. This made HTI ex members and movements more difficult to track and monitor.

GEMA Pembebasan is a college student based underbouw organization of HTI. GEMA Pembebasan was founded in 28th February 2004 at Japan Study Center Auditorium, Universitas Indonesia. This movement wanted to establish Campus Preaching Network, promote islamic thinking as a solution to *ummah* problem, and produce cadres that will involved in preaching HTI ideas to society. GEMA

organizational structure formed in hierarchical order from national, regional, until commissariat level. GEMA's funding mainly came from internal donations to preserve its independency. GEMA cadres also actively promoting HTI ideas trough BKLDK and moslem student community in colleges. Caderization was conducted trough *halaqahs,* open Focused Group Discussion, DIALOGIKA, and Training Pembebasan. (Lufaefi, 2018)

Ex-HTI members also founded Royyatul Islam Community (KARIM) that targets high school student trough mentoring program. Ex-HTI *murabbis* usually preached trough high school moslem student organization (Rohis). Ex-HTI members also founded Legal Consultation Agency (LBH) called LBH Pelita Ummat that mainly advocate islamic and *ummah* legal cases. One of the latest advocated cases was shooting of Habib Rizieq Syihab six bodyguards. Besides, other members founded preaching communities in many regions under the name of Back to Muslim Identity Community (BMI) and Muslimahnewsid.

Most activity of ex-HTI cadres conducted clandestinely and did'nt use Hizb Tahrir identity. Usage of HTI symbols also ceased in most underbouw organization (Rohman and Nurhasanah, 2019). Currently, media associated with

HTI are *Kaffah* bulletin and *Media Ummat* tabloid. *Kaffah* bulletin is a renamed version of previous *Al Islam* bulletin. Although more limited in circullation, it has the same pattern, which is published every Friday prayer targeting college mosques and public schools. It also has similar theme, content, and diction that criticize presumed unislamic government system, ideology, and resource management, offer alternatives in caliphate system. *Media Ummat* tabloid contains article about idea of Taqiudin Nabhani and Islamic caliphate system. It also criticizes actual socio-economic issues from islamic perspective. Pemimpin redaksi Media Umat adalah Farid Wajdji yang merupakan politisi dan anggota Komisi Yudisial RI periode 2015-2020.

Ex-HTI members also involved in political contestation by aligning themselves with certain political faction. The members tried to build relation with islam based political parties. The members also infiltrate another relatively militant islamic political groups such as Broterhood of 212. This because ex-HTI members lacked resources to compete directly with bigger relatively moderate islamic organization like Nahdlatool Ulema and Muhammadiyah. Besides, those political contracts and self association was conducted to secure legal basis and support

in its effort to revive itself as mass organization. For example, #2019GantiPresiden campaign was overridden by ex-HTI members. Ex-HTI spokesperson, Ismail Yusanto was involved in the campaign and HTI black banner was used in many occasions. This campaign caused political polarization and unhealthy political contestation climate.
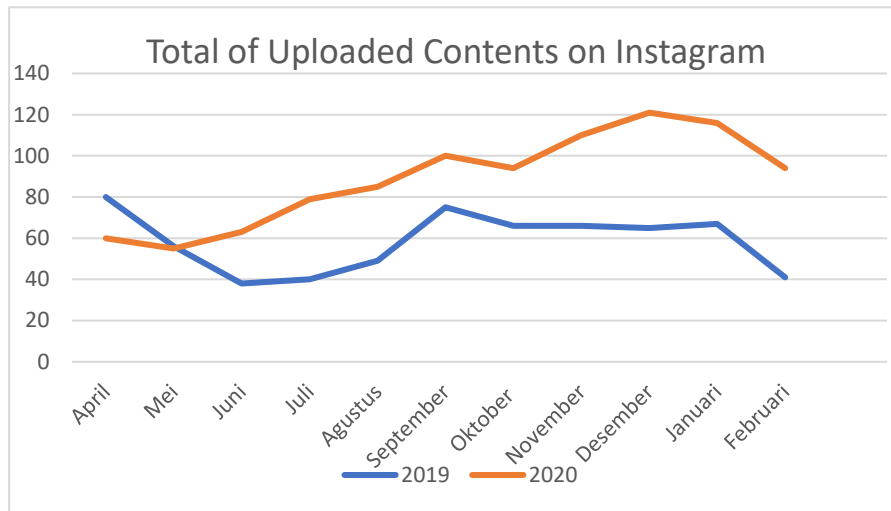
HTI ACTIVITIES IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Before its disbandment, HTI actively utilized internet to introduce its idea to Indonesian society. Social media was also used by its underbouw organization for publication and preaching. Some accounts and online communites was affiliated with HTI such as BMI, Muslimahnewsid, and YukNgaji which is present since 2016. GEMA chapter in many universities also have official account in social media.

During Covid-19 pandemic, publication of those accounts skyrocketted. GEMA build anti-government narration and spread it trough Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc. The narration was about social and economic inequality in Indonesian society. Social media is a strategi platform for spreading radicalism because of its anonimity, wide scope, and low cost. Communities could easily engage many segments such as student, professional, private sector worker, civil

service, and entrepreneur alike to maximize recruitment potential. They are able to develop members through social media groups. (Huda, 2019)

Total of Uploaded Contents on Instagram

Back to Muslim Identity (BMI) and MuslimahNewsId are accounts affiliated with HTI. BMI has 34k followers on Instagram, 13k on Facebook, and 3400 on Twitter. MuslimahNewsId has 52k followers on Instagram and 48k followers on Facebook. The number of uploaded contents increased by 60% in 2020 compared to pre-pandemic level. Uploaded contents promoted shift from face to face discussion into e-preaching and conference. The contents are also spesifically designed with attractive colour, provocative tagline, and interesting design to targets millennials. The similiarity of the contents shown

coordinated publication between communities.

Muslimahnewsid specifically designed to target women. The strategy is to upload more contents relevant to women's daily life and actual issues. The propaganda was directed spesifically to internalize caliphate idea, increase political participation, and implement HTI version of islamic interpretation. Uploaded contents also explicitly criticize omnibus bill on job creation, pandemic recovery management, feminism, etc. Published narration was about the failure of democration system and Indonesian government to tackle social and economic issues. Then, the premis was followed by the promotion of returning the glory and prosperity of the *Ummah* by establishment of islamic caliphate. Caliphate government was promoted as a single best answer and solution to every problem.

BMI and GEMA actively rallying mass for joint anti Omnibus Bill demonstrations in some region. The political orientation of these communities was Islamic revivalism. This prompted them to align with Islamic political parties and fundamentalist Islamic groups. These communities also cooperate with labour groups and government oppositions during some joint rally. These communities adopted political pragmatism based on mutual interest.

GEMA and BMI also objected the disbandment of Islamic Defender Front (FPI), a similar organization, in December 2020. BMI also support the 212 reunions movement as a moment to strengthen the *ukhuwah* of Islamic society before the establishment of caliphate. BMI also mentioned about the creation of new state under caliphate government that would include muslim and non muslim alike. This shown that ex-HTI communities started to associate themselves with far-right Islamic political groups.

Contribuors from GEMA, Muslimahnewsid, and BMI contents was mostly activist and pracher affiliated with HTI. The majority of contents were made from BMI chapter in the Java and big cities outside Java Island. Almost all provoke sectarian conflict and explicitly reject Pancasila democratic system. This shown

the existence of ex-HTI communities as latent political and ideological threat to Indonesian.

CONCLUSION

Disbandment of HTI did not effectively stop the sread of radicalism and caliphate ideology. There will be more difficulties and obstacles in mapping the distribution and activity of ex-HTI community. Propaganda and recruitement conducted massively through social media targeting mainly millenial and women. Female role and participation in ex-HTI and islamic revivalism forecasted to rise.

Covid-19 pandemic causing surge in social media propaganda. Social crisis and increasing economic inequality also promote higher radicalization potential. Ex-HTI groups also became more pragmatic by affiliating themselves with another fundamentalist groups. This movement will likely become involved in upcoming political contestation on regional and national level. After consolidated, this groups will mobilize its resources and mass to oppose government policy, provoke sectarian conflict through identity politic and propaganda in social media.

Government could conduct preventive act through providing and strengthening moderate religious preaching and movements targetting millenial,

especially women. This movements shall be attractive so it could compete directly with ex-HTI movements. Cooperation with moderate and traditionalist moslem organization such as NU and Muhammadiyah could help intensify the policy. Radical propaganda on the social media shall be countered using contranarration. Narration about importance on stable government and islamic legitimacy on Pancasila could be used as a contrapropaganda in form of infographics and videos. Government also need to map and track the ex-HTI movement to prevent further consolidation and escalation. Preventive action could also be conducted in colleges by strengthening Pancasila internalization among students. Relatively moderate and progressive islamic movements could also be supported to contain ex-HTI movement.

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