



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Amplified waves: the politics of religious sound in Indonesia and beyond

Henley, D.E.F.; Lorea, C.E.; Hackett, R.I.J.

Citation

Henley, D. E. F. (2024). Amplified waves: the politics of religious sound in Indonesia and beyond. In C. E. Lorea & R. I. J. Hackett (Eds.), *Religious sounds beyond the Global North* (pp. 263-281). Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
doi:10.1515/9789048554751-017

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4196924>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

13 Amplified Waves

The Politics of Religious Sound in Indonesia and Beyond

David Henley

Abstract

This chapter explores the nexus of religious sound and social conflict in multiethnic Indonesia. It analyzes recent controversy over mosque loudspeakers, including the case of a non-Muslim woman who was imprisoned in 2018 for “religious defamation” after complaining about noise from her local mosque. This event was bound up with a broader contest between groups favoring a greater role for Islam in the public domain, and groups upholding the principle of religious neutrality on which Indonesia’s quasi-secular state is based. The essay articulates a close parallel between popular hostility to *critics* of Islamic noise in Indonesia, and popular hostility to *makers* of Islamic noise in Western countries, both of which can be understood as expressions of nativistic, majoritarian identity politics.

Keywords: mosque, *adhan*, social conflict, Islam, noise, identity politics

Sound is a very public thing. It carries over long distances and around corners, and is perceived via organs which, unlike eyes, cannot be closed or averted to avoid it. Sonic space is hard to privatize: generally speaking, either everybody hears a given sound within a given radius of its origin, or nobody does. Partly because it is so public, sound has a special role in religious practice. The idea that religious truth must be *heard*, and that religious faith is the response of believers to a *call*, is important in both Islam and Christianity. But for those who do not wish to hear it, sound is noise, an intrusion from which there is no easy escape. Not everybody is Muslim or Christian, and nobody is both, and even among Muslims and Christians, opinions vary as to what the texts or principles of their respective

traditions have to say about the appropriate volume, duration, and type of religious sound. The boundary between religious sound and religious noise is therefore an intrinsically sensitive issue, prone to cause controversy and conflict. And because religion is often a key element of ethnicity and other forms of collective identity, conflicts over religious noise can be both symptoms and causes of broader conflicts within society.

This chapter explores the nexus of religious sound and social conflict in the multiethnic nation of Indonesia. It analyzes recent controversy over the use of loudspeakers by Indonesian mosques, including the events which led in 2018 to the imprisonment for “religious defamation” of a non-Muslim ethnic Chinese woman who had complained about noise from her local mosque. These events were bound up with a broad contest at national level between groups that would see Islam play a more central role in the public and political domain, and groups upholding the principle of religious inclusivity and neutrality on which Indonesia’s quasi-secular state is based. In their bid for hegemony, the Islamizing forces have whipped up righteous indignation at critics of mosque noise, whom they portray as enemies of Islam. To understand the paradoxical combination of aggression and defensiveness that underlies this impulse, it is important to appreciate both the extreme tolerance of loud sounds that most Indonesians display daily, and the fact that since 2012, mosque noise has been the target of a campaign of criticism in government circles which itself has unmistakably political overtones. The essay concludes by suggesting that there is a close parallel between popular hostility to *critics* of Islamic noise in Indonesia, and popular hostility to *makers* of Islamic noise in Western countries. Both are forms of “acoustic nativism” inspired by majoritarian identity politics.

Noisy piety and quiet resentment: Amplifying religion, 1960–2012

Amplified religious sound has quite a long history in Southeast Asia. As early as 1930, one mosque in Surakarta (Solo) was already equipped with an internal microphone and speakers for use by the *khatib* during Friday services (Pijper 1977, 28–29). In 1936, what was apparently the world’s first experiment with electrical amplification of the call to prayer (*azan*) took place on Indonesia’s doorstep in Singapore, where the custodians of the Sultan Mosque, having concluded that “the noises of a modern city demand an accompanying increase in the power of the muezzin’s voice,” installed a General Electric Company sound system featuring external as

well as internal loudspeakers. Mounted 27 meters above the ground on two of the mosque's minarets, the external speakers could be heard 400 meters away across the city streets (*Straits Times* 1936). Within Indonesia, however, amplification of the *azan* does not seem to have begun until much later, partly because the technology involved remained costly. In Jakarta it grew common only in the 1960s when more affordable equipment became available, principally from the Japanese manufacturer TOA (Hendaru Tri Hanggoro 2018). Thanks to burgeoning demand from mosques, Indonesia quickly became a key market for the TOA Corporation, which established its first overseas production facility in Jakarta in 1975 (TOA n.d.). Today, the name of this brand is still widely used by Indonesians as a generic term for loudspeakers.

In addition to the cost factor, conservative attitudes on the part of mosque officials and congregations also played a role in the slow initial spread of electronic amplification. In Singapore, the original 1936 experiment with loudspeakers reportedly met with opposition from some worshippers who found it "incongruous with the romantic conception of the holy cities of the East, where the sonorous tones of the muezzin ... are as old as recorded history" (*Straits Times* 1936). In the 1950s, the introduction of loudspeakers to announce the *azan* to pilgrims in Saudi Arabia sparked serious debate across the Muslim world as to whether this innovation violated the letter or spirit of the scriptures; many *ulama* were long critical of it (Khan 2011, 573–7). As late as 1977, one major Jakarta mosque still resisted using loudspeakers on the grounds that these "did not exist at the time of the prophet" (Hendaru Tri Hanggoro 2018).

Secular authorities, meanwhile, became concerned about the possible negative impact of amplified Islamic sound on members of the general public, and in particular on non-Muslims. Beginning in 1974, as part of a broader noise abatement campaign, sound systems in newly built Singaporean mosques were restricted to internal use, while existing mosques were required to reduce the volume of their external speakers (Lee 1999, 89–91). In 1978 the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs also issued a set of guidelines for the use of loudspeakers by mosques, the text of which included a general consideration of the potential disbenefits of the practice.

Negative consequences of the use of external loudspeakers by mosques and prayer houses include the disturbance that may be caused to people who are resting, or praying, in their own homes This is particularly apparent in large towns where members of the public no longer have

similar working hours The diversity of urban populations also means that those living in the vicinity of mosques often include adherents of other religions, and even citizens of other countries All this obliges the Islamic community to seek a wise balance between proclaiming the greatness of Islam, and keeping up good neighborly relations¹

The rules prescribed to safeguard such “good neighborly relations” in this ordinance were quite restrictive: external loudspeakers were only to be used for the call to prayer (*azan*) five times each day, and for Quran readings lasting at most fifteen minutes immediately preceding each dawn (*subuh*) call to prayer, and five minutes preceding the other *azan*.

The 1978 regulation, however, was never widely complied with and in subsequent years became mostly a dead letter, to the point that by the twenty-first century its existence was almost forgotten (Republika Online 2015). One reason for this was that as a directive of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, it carried no legal sanctions. A more important factor, however, was the great change that took place in the late twentieth century in the spirit of Indonesian Islam, and in its relations with other religions and with the state. In the 1970s, Islam, despite its commanding demographic position (then as now, close to 90 percent of the population called itself Muslim), was in general culturally unassertive, politically weak, and to some extent distrusted by government. In the 1980s, influenced by parallel developments elsewhere in the Muslim world, it underwent a resurgence, Islamic awareness and observance intensifying markedly across the country (Ricklefs 2012, 204–21). Beginning in 1990, this process received official sanction as the Suharto regime cautiously began to embrace the Islamic revival (Vatikiotis 1998, 131–7). If the visible signature of Islam’s new assertiveness was the increasing popularity among women of the *jilbab* or head covering, its audible signature, “the voice of aggressive orthodoxy,” was the unrestrained blare of religious sound (Beatty 2009, 293). In the 1970s, amplified Islamic sound had been a matter of public debate, on which critical letters were published in newspapers (Hendaru Tri Hanggoro 2018). But by the first decade of the twenty-first century it had become a taboo subject, with non-Muslims in particular reluctant to make any comment on it.

1 “Lampiran instruksi Direktur Jenderal Bimbingan Masyarakat Islam, nomor: Kep/D/101/1978, tanggal: 17 juli 1978, tentang tuntunan penggunaan pengeras suara di masjid, langgar dan mushalla,” 123–4, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/oB4lc74PFDHGHTUILOHVwTTdpCWm/edit> (accessed June 16, 2020).



Figure 13.1 The dome and loudspeakers of Al Furqon Mosque in Boyolali, Central Java. May 26, 2022. Photographed by Cahyady HP. Source: <https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/boyolali-central-java-indonesiamay-26-2022-2162738083>

Out in the open: A national debate, 2012–2016

Against this background of religious cacophony and critical silence, it came as a surprise to many when in April 2012, Indonesia's then vice president, Boediono, rose to the challenge implicit in the noise. In a speech to a national congress of the Council of Indonesian Mosques (Dewan Masjid Indonesia, DMI), Boediono, himself a Muslim, made a tactful but unambiguous request for the volume to be turned down.

The Council ... might also discuss ... regulating the use of loudspeakers by mosques. Now we all fully understand that the call to prayer is a sacred call upon the Islamic community to fulfill its duty to pray. Nevertheless, there are perhaps others besides myself who feel that the sound of the *azan* touches our hearts more deeply when it is heard softly in the distance than when it is too loud, too jolting, and too close to our ears.²

I have described elsewhere the intense and protracted public discussion which this comment by Boediono set loose (Henley 2019, 238–46). Proponents of moderation or regulation, suddenly more numerous than their previous

2 From the text of the full speech reproduced in *detikNews* (2012).

silence had suggested, cited passages from the Quran itself supporting quietness in religious observance. They also called for understanding and compassion toward others, and pointed out that intrusive Islamic noise is at odds with the peaceful image which Indonesian Muslims are usually concerned to project. Defenders of the unmoderated status quo, for their part, expressed a conviction that to admonish people to piety and prayerfulness is good for them whether they like the loudness of the message or not. Some also insisted that Quranic recitations in particular convey direct supernatural benefits, in the form of *pahala* or divine merit, on all those who hear them. Most of all, however, defenders of the status quo warned of the *danger* which any attempt to restrict Islamic noise would pose to the harmony and unity of Indonesian society. Whereas in the 1970s there had been a concern in official quarters that noise from mosques might annoy their non-Muslim neighbors, 40 years later there was much more fear of alienating the forces of Islamic resurgence than of offending minority sensibilities.

Not surprisingly, this fear of awakening dangerous passions in the orthodox Islamic community was particularly acute among non-Muslims. Christians, Hindus, and other religious minorities therefore continued to stay largely outside the public debate, much of which was conducted on the basis of Islamic sensibilities and doctrine. Non-Muslim criticism of Islamic noise was restricted to the private sphere. Elsewhere, the vast majority of non-Muslims maintained a very studied silence on the topic. The year 2016 was to bring a dramatic demonstration of why it was prudent for them to do so.

Things get ugly: Blame and blasphemy, 2016–2020

On July 22, 2016, in the small port town of Tanjung Balai in North Sumatra, a non-Muslim ethnic Chinese woman named Meliana (also written: Meiliana) asked her neighbor Kasini, a street trader whose father was a member of the managing committee of the mosque across the road from Meliana's home, to point out to her father that the volume of the mosque's loudspeakers was uncomfortably loud, and to request that it be turned down. On July 29, Kasini's father and other mosque officials made a visit to Meliana and her family during which Meliana allegedly talked in a disdainful way about the *azan*. Despite attempts at clarification and apology by Meliana and her husband later the same day, a rumor immediately spread through the town that "the Chinese" were attempting to "forbid the call to prayer" in Tanjung Balai. The result was a night of violent rioting (July 29–30, 2016) in which

14 Chinese temples and Buddhist religious buildings, as well as Meliana's home and many motor vehicles, were damaged or destroyed (Mulyartono et al. 2017; Suryadinata 2019).

This incident was not quite the first in which arguments over religious noise had resulted in open conflict. In 2010, an American homestay owner on the island of Lombok had been sentenced to five months in jail after disconnecting the loudspeaker of a nearby mosque during a prayer reading (Sigit Purnomo 2010). Angry villagers reported him to the police who charged him with the crime of "religious defamation," of which more below (Amnesty International 2014, 37). In December 2012, an elderly inhabitant of Banda Aceh, capital of the famously religious Sumatran province of Aceh, lodged a legal complaint against local mosque officials and municipal leaders for disturbing him before dawn with pre-recorded religious sermons and Quran readings (Sumaterakita 2014). Having recently suffered a heart attack, he was under medical advice to get plenty of sleep, and the basis of the lawsuit appears to have been personal injury (LamuriOnline 2013; Kusumasari 2012; Tri Jata Ayu Pramesti 2014). A wave of public anger and intimidation, including death threats, quickly forced him to withdraw his case, although subsequently the volume of the loudspeakers in question was apparently turned down (Winarno 2013). In July 2015, finally, the use of loudspeakers by Muslims celebrating the feast of Idul Fitri in the vicinity of an international Christian meeting was one factor involved in an outbreak of intercommunal violence, leaving one dead and many injured, in the district of Tolikara in Indonesian Papua (IPAC 2016, 9–10).

The Tanjung Balai riot of 2016, however, was to have a greater national impact than any of these previous incidents, thrusting the issue of religious noise into the heart of a national upsurge in identity politics. Accused by witnesses of "insulting, denigrating, and expressing hatred toward the practice of Islamic worship," Meliana was detained and in June 2017 her case was brought to a provincial court (Beranda Apa Berita 2018). Ultimately, on August 21, 2018, she was found guilty under Article 156 of the Indonesian criminal code of *penistaan agama* or religious defamation, often translated in English as "blasphemy," and sentenced to 18 months imprisonment, a verdict subsequently upheld on appeal by the national Supreme Court (BBC Indonesia 2019). This was a harsher punishment than those received by any of the rioters, just eight of whom had been given prison sentences of between one and three months (Billiocta 2017).

In the almost two years it took to reach its final outcome, the Meliana case attracted massive national publicity and was commented on at the highest levels, often in surprisingly critical vein. Although president Joko

Widodo (Jokowi) retained a careful neutrality, vice president Jusuf Kalla made clear his view that to request that the volume of a very loud *azan* be reduced is a normal and legitimate thing to do, and Minister of Religious Affairs Lukman Saifuddin even offered to act as an “expert witness” in Meliana’s defense (VOA 2018). A spokesman for Indonesia’s largest single Muslim (and religious) organization, Nahdatul Ulama (NU), agreed that such a request could not be regarded as blasphemous or insulting to Islam (Sigit Pinardi 2018). With the support of the Council of Indonesian Mosques (DMI), the Ministry of Religious Affairs used its network of provincial and district offices to draw the attention of mosque officials and other Muslim leaders to the existing mosque and prayer house noise restrictions from 1978 (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia 2018; Republika Online 2018). An online public petition to “Free Meliana!” immediately following her initial conviction attracted more than 50,000 signatures within a day of its launch (Mardiastuti 2018). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch identified Meliana as a prisoner of conscience, calling upon the Indonesian government to release her and revoke the law under which she had been convicted (Amnesty International 2018; Harsono 2018).

Within Indonesia, however, plenty of voices were also raised in support of the multiple decisions against Meliana, and not only out of a desire to respect due legal process. The national MUI (Council of Islamic Scholars), for instance, appealed for public understanding of the verdict, insisting that she had been found guilty not because she complained about the volume of the *azan*, but because she did so “using sarcastic sentences and words, and in a mocking tone” (Bimo Wiwoho 2018a). The parliamentary leader of the Islamist political party Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS, Prosperous Justice Party) went further by suggesting that Meliana had in fact insulted Islam simply by broaching the subject of the call to prayer in a critical way at all, given its importance in the Islamic tradition (Parastiti Kharisma Putri 2018). In digital fora, reactions were stronger still. One author opened his online polemic on the topic with the *hadith* (authoritative Islamic tradition) that records the Prophet Muhammad as saying: “When the *azan* is pronounced, Satan takes to his heels and farts during his flight in order not to hear it” (*Sahih al-Bukhari* 6o8).

By quoting this *hadith* I do not actually mean to say that Meliana ... is a devil No, that woman of Chinese descent and Buddhist religion is just a human being whose selfishness at that moment was such that she forgot herself, amid the social climate that has been building up in the last ten or twenty years. It is as if people born on the soil of Indonesia,

with its hundreds of millions of Muslim inhabitants, are struck with amnesia ... that they suddenly feel so disturbed by the cadences of the *azan*. (Imam Prasetyo 2018)

Meliana, Ahok, and Indonesia's new politics of intolerance

The explicit reference here to Chinese ethnicity as well as non-Muslim religion signals a break with public debates over religious sound in the period before 2016, which non-Muslims had by and large managed to stay out of. The early years of democratization following the fall of the Suharto regime (1998) had broadly speaking been a time of improvement in the historically fraught relations between indigenous (*pribumi*) Indonesians and the country's ethnic Chinese minority, most of which is both non-Muslim, and economically better off than the national average (Hoon 2008; Reid 2009). From 2016, however, Sino-*pribumi* relations tended to deteriorate once more in a process of politicization of which the Meliana affair became part.

Meilana's long-drawn out prosecution ran parallel to a controversial electoral and legal campaign, drawing openly on divisive ethnic and religious sentiments, which was fought in the same period against incumbent Jakarta governor Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama). An ethnic Chinese Christian, Ahok had been elected as deputy governor alongside Jokowi in 2012, becoming governor himself when Jokowi was chosen as president in 2014. Always unpopular with a part of the Jakarta electorate, Ahok was accused of blasphemy in October 2016 over a comment he had made about a passage in the Quran. In April 2017, at least partly because of that accusation, he failed in his bid to be re-elected as governor, and in the following month he was convicted of religious defamation by a state court and sentenced to two years in prison (Madinier 2018). There is strong evidence that Meliana's prosecution was inspired and influenced by the campaign against Ahok (Mulyartono et al. 2017, 15; Suryadinata 2019, 5–6). Both were victims of democratic Indonesia's resurgent identity politics, sentenced under a religious defamation law which, although dating from 1965, was seldom applied until after the fall of Suharto, when it began to be invoked more and more often in connection with election campaigns of various kinds (Garnesia 2018).

The extreme degree to which the issue of religious sound had become politicized was underlined in April 2018 when Sukmawati Sukarnoputri, a daughter of Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, was reported to the police for blasphemy simply for reading, at (of all things) a fashion event, a

nationalistic poem she had written, critical of Islamic cultural influences, in which the sound of Javanese *kidung* poetry was described as “sweeter than the tones of your *azan*” (CNN Indonesia 2018). Sukmawati’s sister Megawati leads the establishment political party PDI-P (Partai Demokrasi Indonesia-Perjuangan, Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) to which Jokowi and Ahok also belong, and her accusers were members of Islamist opposition groups (Peterson 2018).

Understanding acoustic aggression: Piety embattled

Alongside the obvious element of political opportunism and manipulation, there is no doubt that today, even more than before 2016, any criticism of amplified Islamic sound also generates genuine popular indignation and resentment in Indonesia. Despite the ascendancy which “orthodox” forms of Islam have enjoyed in the religious life of the country since the 1990s, reactions to such criticism in orthodox circles still recall sociologist W.F. Wertheim’s classic twentieth-century characterization of Indonesian Muslims as a “majority with minority mentality” (Wertheim 1980). A commentary on the Tanjung Balai riot, posted after the arrest of some of the rioters, but before the indictment of Meliana, illustrates this sentiment of collective victimization.

The latest news is that a Chinese, Meliana, objects to the *azan*. An attempt is made to mediate in a friendly way, but she persists. Unrest breaks out. She, ironically, remains free, treated only as a witness, while 19 suspects are arrested, all Muslims. ... The way the law is applied smells of double standards, reflecting the injustice with which Indonesian Muslims are treated. (Konfrontasi 2016)

In the same spirit, the renewed attempt made by the Ministry of Religious Affairs in 2018 to “socialize” the 1978 mosque noise regulation was met in some quarters with indignation at the fact that the guidelines applied only to Islamic institutions, and not to all religious sound, including that of churches and temples (Tempo 2018). It also gave rise to inflammatory rumors that the true intention was to ban the call to prayer altogether (Bimo Wiwoho 2018b).

As in the past, some of the reasons for the sensitivity of the issue are directly rooted in doctrine and faith. “May God forgive me, sir,” wrote one indignant commentator in response to a social media posting by a Muslim

politician questioning whether it was right to disturb sleeping babies and sick people with pre-dawn broadcasts during Ramadan, “but the sounds coming from those mosque loudspeakers are admonitions from GOD—glory be to Him—to do the right thing in the fasting month by taking breakfast before beginning the fast!!!”³ In this mindset the supremacy of religious noise in the human world mirrors the inescapable power of God himself, which is not something to be questioned or complained about. But there are other factors here which have to do specifically with the contemporary Indonesian social and political context, and which are worth enumerating in order to better understand the emotions which the issue of Islamic noise arouses in many Muslim Indonesians.

A first important thing to note is that in Indonesia, a loud sonic environment is a normal and accepted fact of most people’s lives. Indonesian towns and cities are already extremely noisy even without amplified religious sound, and their inhabitants display what often strikes outsiders as an amazing indifference to the permanent din of traffic noise, pop music, street vendors, and construction work. While not all such sounds are actually enjoyed, there is a culturally engrained tendency to tolerate and even appreciate an acoustic backdrop which contributes to an atmosphere that is *ramai*, “lively.” Anthropologist Freek Colombijn, in a pioneering 2007 survey of the soundscape of Indonesian cities, went so far as to conclude that noise “is not merely tolerated as an inevitable fact of life, it really is not perceived as an issue at all” (2007, 268).

Of course, this tolerance is not just a cultural given; it varies from individual to individual and on average has probably grown, in step with urban noise itself, since the 1970s. And by citing Colombijn’s observation here, I do not mean to deny that individuals like Meliana experience ear-splitting mosque loudspeaker broadcasts as a real problem. Nevertheless, the ubiquity and normalization of noise in urban Indonesia, and in the lives of urban Indonesians from cradle to grave, do mean that complaints about it, whether private or public, are rare. This in turn has the inevitable consequence that objectors to specifically *religious* noise are readily suspected of ulterior motives. And indeed, as far as recent public statements critical of excessive Islamic noise are concerned, there is strong circumstantial evidence that some ulterior motives really are involved.

Amplified religious sound, as we saw in the introductory part of this essay, is by no means a new phenomenon in Indonesia, and neither is private resentment of it. But for decades a powerful taboo rested in the public sphere

3 Tweet by “Farhanbehann,” May 24, 2018, reproduced in BBC Indonesia (2018).

on the issue of Islamic noise, and critics kept their feelings to themselves. To my knowledge there were no public discussions about mosque noise, and indeed no high-profile noise complaints by individual Indonesians, until Boediono broached the subject in April 2012. It is significant that when it came, the debate was initiated not from the grassroots by NGOs, journalists, or bloggers, but from the top down by a government supportive of cultural pluralism and “moderate” establishment Islam.

The sudden prominence of the Islamic noise issue after 2012 must be understood in the context of a long struggle between those political forces which would have Islam play a more encompassing role in government as well as society, and those which would prefer to halt that trend. In the democratic era since 1998, the elected governments—including those of double-term presidents Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014) and Joko Widodo (since 2014)—have clearly stood on the pluralist or “nationalist” side (a reference to the pluralistic founding principles of the Indonesian republic) of this great ideological divide. Jokowi in particular has been wary of Islamist opposition, and it is no coincidence that 2015 saw the launch, with presidential support, of the controversial concept of *Islam Nusantara*—loosely translated, “Islam with Indonesian characteristics”—as a formal alternative to the so-called *Islam Arab* or “Arab Islam” which many pluralists see as driving the orthodox advance (Affan 2015).

The current balance of the struggle is that despite the defeat and criminalization of Ahok in Jakarta, broadly speaking the pluralists are winning. Jokowi’s strategy has been to ally himself ever more closely with the moderate Islamic establishment represented by Nahdlatul Ulama, taming some of its more doctrinaire tendencies in the process, while increasingly treating oppositional Islamic organizations, including nonviolent ones, as enemies of the state (Aspinall and Mietzner 2019; IPAC 2019). Small wonder, then, that his government’s impulse to restrict religious noise is understood by some not as a defense of individual and minority rights, but as a form of intolerance and an abuse of political power. Certainly it does not form part of any broader official campaign to tackle the general problem of noise pollution, awareness of which, as we have seen, is very limited in Indonesia (Wan Ulfa Nur Zuhra 2017).

Strange parallels: Acoustic nativism in the Netherlands

Aspects of the ongoing controversy over Islamic noise in Indonesia can be illuminated by a brief comparison with the equivalent controversy in the

Netherlands. The specifically religious aspect of the Indonesian debate, in terms of a struggle between puritan and liberal interpretations of the same religious tradition, has no real parallel in any contemporary Western country. But two other underlying forces in that debate, majoritarianism and nativism, are all too familiar from a European perspective. Although only a minority of Indonesian Muslims are zealous defenders of Islamic noise, they are convinced that they speak for that group as a whole, and for the large national majority which it represents, in opposition to minorities which are partly of foreign (Chinese) origin, and which are supported by treacherous multiculturalists among indigenous Muslims. In the Netherlands, conversely, it is those opposing Islamic noise who appeal to majoritarian and nativistic sentiments, sentiments which color the thinking of established elites as well as radical populists.

Fewer than one in ten Dutch mosques amplify the call to prayer, and never in the early morning or late evening (Tamimi Arab 2017, 9). This is not because they are not allowed to; their right to do so is constitutionally protected. But they are aware of the hostile reaction it evokes among non-Muslim Dutch people, and so most of them practice self-censorship in order to avoid trouble. In the words of a scholar at the Islamic University of Rotterdam, speaking in 2012:

We must not force people to recognize us. That will cause pain and resistance. ... We could base ourselves on the law and demand our legal rights, but there is at the same time a social reality, the fact that people are not used to the *azan*. One must take this into account and behave pragmatically. (Quoted in Tamimi Arab 2017, 39)

The first Amsterdam mosque to amplify the call to prayer—just once a week for three minutes—did so only in November 2019; and not before the mayor of the city had criticized the initiative as “unnecessary and outdated,” the majority of city councilors agreed with her, and the first attempt to broadcast the *azan* had been sabotaged by vandals who cut the loudspeaker cable (Van Poppe 2019; Bontjes 2019).

I have lamented the lack of discussion of civic rights in the Indonesian debate. It would be gratifying to think that public opposition to Islamic “noise” in the Netherlands, although clearly not respectful of legally guaranteed freedoms, is at least inspired by some other kind of civic virtue: for instance, by a conviction that makers of religious noise are unjustly imposing their own beliefs on others, or infringing a universal right to peace and quiet. This explanation is called into question, however, by the

fact that certain other types of religious noise are not only tolerated, but celebrated, by secular public opinion.

When in 2019 an expatriate living in Amsterdam complained to the municipality that the bells of the Westertoren, a historic church tower, were keeping him awake at night, there was indignation not only among other Amsterdam residents who were fond of the quarter-hourly bell sounds, but also in media and intellectual circles. “How dare he? Those bells have rung out since the Golden Age,” bristled historian René Cuperus. “This new Amsterdammer needs to move somewhere else fast, and his residence status should be reconsidered in the light of his lack of respect for his host country” (quoted in Van de Crommert 2019). Journalist Patrick Meershoek, writing in the Amsterdam newspaper *Het Parool*, was equally indignant, suggesting sarcastically that newcomers should be required to take a “crash course on Amsterdam for beginners: in this city ... we listen to the clock that has told us for centuries what time it is” (Meershoek 2019).

People who complain about the bells of the Westertoren are not sent to prison; there is a difference between an integration course and a blasphemy charge. Nevertheless, the anger that such complaints evoke has the same roots as the anger of some Indonesian Muslims against people who complain about the volume of the *azan*. The real basis for the sentiments heard in Europe in relation to Islamic sounds is not civic but ethnocultural, or nativistic. If we understand the Indonesian conflict over mosque noise as the expression of an ethnocultural tension too, then the difference in causality between the Dutch hostility to Islamic noise and the Indonesian hostility to *opponents* of Islamic noise disappears. In Indonesia, where noise is the norm, it is the critics of Islamic noise who are perceived as offending the values of the indigenous majority. In the Netherlands, where a selective quietness is the norm, it is the *makers* of Islamic noise who are perceived as offending the native majority and threatening its supremacy in the public sphere.

References

- Affan, Heyder. 2015. “Polemik di balik istilah ‘Islam Nusantara.’” *BBC Indonesia*, July 15, 2015. http://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2015/06/150614_indonesia_islam_nusantara (Accessed July 29, 2020).
- Amnesty International. 2014. *Prosecuting Beliefs: Indonesia’s Blasphemy Laws*. London: Amnesty International.
- Amnesty International. 2018. “Indonesia: further information: prison sentence upheld for mosque noise complaint: Meliana.” November 13, 2018. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/ASA21/9359/2018/en/> (Accessed July 26, 2020).

- Aspinall, Edward, and Marcus Mietzner. 2019. "Southeast Asia's troubling elections: nondemocratic pluralism in Indonesia." *Journal of Democracy* 30(4): 104–18.
- BBC Indonesia. 2018. "Ajakan menggunakan pengeras suara masjid 'dengan bijak' menjadi viral." *BBC News Indonesia*, May 24, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/trensosial-44236625> (Accessed July 28, 2020).
- BBC Indonesia. 2019. "Banding Meiliana, yang divonis penjara 1,5 tahun karena keluhkan suara azan, ditolak Mahkamah Agung." *BBC News Indonesia*, April 8, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/indonesia-47859654> (Accessed 26 July 2020).
- Beatty, Andrew. 2009. *A Shadow Falls in the Heart of Java*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Beranda Apa Berita. 2018. <https://berandaapaberita.blogspot.com/2018/08/tiga-versi-kronologi-kasus-meliana-yang.html>, August 25, 2018 (Accessed July 25, 2020).
- Billiocta, Ya'cob. 2017. "Para terdakwa kasus perusakan vihara Tanjung Balai divonis ringan." *Merdeka.com*, January 24, 2017. <https://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/para-terdakwa-kasus-perusakan-vihara-tanjung-balai-divonis-ringan.html> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Bimo Wiwoho. 2018a. "MUI minta publik pahami kasus Meiliana sebelum komentar." *CNN Indonesia*, August 24, 2018. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20180824170850-20-324735/mui-minta-publik-pahami-kasus-meiliana-sebelum-komentar> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Bimo Wiwoho. 2018b. "MUI sebut Kemenag diskriminatif soal pengeras suara masjid." *CNN Indonesia*, August 27, 2018. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20180827084204-20-325105/mui-sebut-kemenag-diskriminatif-soal-pengeras-suara-masjid> (Accessed July 28, 2020).
- Bontjes, Annelies. 2019. "Omstreden gebedsoproep Blauwe Moskee moedwilling belemmerd." *NRC Handelsblad*, November 8, 2019. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/11/08/omstreden-gebedsoproep-blauwe-moskee-mislukt-door-geluidsprobleem-a3979653> (Accessed July 19, 2020).
- CNN Indonesia. 2018. "Sebut azan dan kidung, puisi putri Bung Karno dipermasalahkan." *CNN Indonesia*, April 3, 2018. <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20180403071553-12-287770/sebut-azan-dan-kidung-puisi-putri-bung-karno-dipermasalahkan> (Accessed July 28, 2020).
- Colombijn, Freek. 2007. "Tooot! Vrooom! The urban soundscape in Indonesia." *Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 22(2): 255–73.
- detikNews. 2012. "Ini pidato lengkap Wapres Boediono soal pengeras suara masjid." *detikNews*, April 29, 2012. <http://news.detik.com/berita/1904162/ini-pidato-lengkap-wapres-boediono-soal-pengeras-suara-masjid/1> (Accessed 16 June 2020).
- Garnesia, Irma. 2018. "Maraknya sangkaan penistaan agama di tahun politik." *Tirto.id*, April 17, 2018. <https://tirto.id/maraknya-sangkaan-penistaan-agama-di-tahun-politik-CHSL> (Accessed July 27, 2020).

- Harsono, Andreas. 2018. "The human cost of Indonesia's blasphemy law." *Human Rights Watch News*, October 25, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/25/human-cost-indonesias-blasphemy-law> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Hendaru Tri Hanggoro. 2018. "Awal mula pengeras suara di mesjid." *Historia*, April 11, 2018. <https://historia.id/agama/articles/awal-mula-pengeras-suara-di-masjid-Drg1> (Accessed June 14, 2020).
- Henley, David. 2019. "Sound wars: piety, civility, and the battle for Indonesian ears." In *Hearing Southeast Asia: Sounds of Hierarchy and Power in Context*, edited by Nathan Porath, 228–53. Copenhagen: NIAS Press.
- Hoon, Chang-Yau. 2008. *Chinese Identity in Post-Suharto Indonesia: Culture, Politics and Media*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press.
- Imam Prasetyo. 2018. "Setan terbirit-birit mendengar azan." *Kompasiana*, August 25, 2018. <https://www.kompasiana.com/imamprasetyo21/5b80cac6677ffb19960ab362/setan-terbirit-birit-mendengar-adzan?page=all> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- IPAC (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict). 2016. *Rebuilding After Communal Violence: Lessons from Tolikara, Papua*. Jakarta: IPAC (IPAC Report 29, June 13, 2016).
- IPAC (Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict). 2019. *Anti-Ahok to Anti-Jokowi: Islamist Influence on Indonesia's 2019 Election Campaign*. Jakarta: IPAC (IPAC Report 55, March 15, 2019).
- Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, Direktorat Jenderal Bimbingan Masyarakat Islam, Surat Edaran Nomor B.3940/DJ.III/HK.00.07/08/2018, August 24, 2018. <https://kemenag.go.id/myadmin/public/data/files/users/3/Surat%20Edaran%20ttg%20Pengeras%20Suara.pdf> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Khan, Naveeda. 2011. "The Acoustics of Muslim Striving: Loudspeaker Use in Ritual Practice in Pakistan." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53(3): 571–94.
- Konfrontasi. 2016. "Larangan azan dan standar ganda untuk umat Islam Indonesia." August 7, 2016. <https://www.konfrontasi.com/content/politik/larangan-azan-dan-standar-ganda-untuk-umat-islam-indonesia> (Accessed July 28, 2020).
- Kusumasari, Diana. 2012. "Merasa dirugikan tetangga yang menyetel musik keras-keras." *Hukumonline.com Klinik*, February 6, 2012. <https://www.hukumonline.com/klinik/detail/ulasan/lt4f1b05617e94d/merasa-dirugikan-tetangga-yang-menyetel-musik-keras-keras> (Accessed July 25, 2020).
- LamuriOnline. 2013. "Alasan Haji Sayed menggugat Mesjid Al-Muchsinin." *LamuriOnline*, January 8, 2013. <https://www.lamurionline.com/2013/01/alasan-haji-sayed-menggugat-mesjid-al.html> (Accessed July 25, 2020).
- Lee, Tong Soon. 1999. "Technology and the Production of Islamic Space: The Call to Prayer in Singapore." *Ethnomusicology* 43(1): 86–100.
- Madinier, Rémy. 2018. "Le gouverneur, la sourate et l'islamiste adulte: retour sur l'affaire Ahok." *Archipel* 95: 173–95.

- Mardiastuti, Aditya. 2018. "Petisi 'Bebaskan Meiliana!' Kini Sudah Diteken 50 Ribu Netizen." *detikNews*, August 23, 2018. <https://news.detik.com/berita/d-4179302/petisi-bebaskan-meiliana-kini-sudah-diteken-50-ribu-netizen> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Meershoek, Patrick. 2019. "Moet dat nou, dat gebimbambeier van de Westerkerk?" *Het Parool*, September 18, 2019. <https://www.parool.nl/columns-opinie/moet-dat-nou-dat-gebimbambeier-van-de-westerkerk~bd1bo1e0/?referer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F> (Accessed July 29, 2020).
- Mulyartono, Siswo, M. Irsyad Rafsadie, and Ali Nursahid. 2017. *Rekayasa kebencian dalam konflik agama: kasus Tanjung Balai, Sumatera Utara*. Jakarta: Pusat Studi Agama dan Demokrasi, Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina (Laporan Riset, Juni 2017).
- Parastiti Kharisma Putri. 2018. "Kasus Meiliana, PKS: termasuk penistaan agama ketika singgung azan." *detikNews*, August 23, 2018. <https://news.detik.com/berita/4178853/kasus-meiliana-pks-termasuk-penistaan-agama-ketika-singgung-azan> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Peterson, Daniel. 2018. "Sukmawati's saving grace." *New Mandala*, April 12, 2018. URL: <https://www.newmandala.org/45409-2/> (Accessed July 28, 2020).
- Pijper, G.F. 1977. *Studiën over de geschiedenis van de Islam in Indonesia 1900–1950*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Reid, Anthony. 2009. "Escaping the Burdens of Chineseness." *Asian Ethnicity* 10(3): 285–96.
- Republika Online. 2015. "Sekjen DMI: baru tahu ada aturan speaker masjid." *Republika*, July 23, 2015. <http://www.republika.co.id/berita/dunia-islam/islam-nusantara/15/07/23/nrxqv3313-sekjen-dmi-baru-tahu-ada-aturan-speaker-masjid> (Accessed June 16, 2020).
- Republika Online. 2018. "DMI minta Kemenag sosialisasikan lagi aturan speaker masjid." *Republika*, August 28, 2018. <https://republika.co.id/berita/pe5pxa384/dmi-minta-kemenag-sosialisasikan-lagi-aturanem-speaker-emmasjid> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Ricklefs, M.C. 2012. *Islamisation and its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to the Present*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Sigit Pinaridi. 2018. "PBNU: katakan adzan terlalu keras bukan penistaan agama." *Antaraneews.com*, August 21, 2018. <https://www.antaraneews.com/berita/739993/pbnu-katakan-adzan-terlalu-keras-bukan-penistaan-agama> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Sigit Purnomo. 2010. "WN Amerika dihukum lima bulan." *BBC Indonesia*, December 15, 2010. https://www.bbc.com/indonesia/berita_indonesia/2010/12/101215_us-prayah (Accessed July 24, 2020).
- Straits Times. 1936. "Loudspeakers in Singapore mosque. Radio muezzin." *The Straits Times*, December 29, 1936, 11. <https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/newspapers/Digitised/Article/straitstimes19361229-1.2.61> (Accessed June 14, 2020).

- Sumaterakita. 2014. "Ketika pengeras suara masjid berakibat mudharat." January 23, 2014. <http://sumaterakita.blogspot.nl/2014/01/ketika-pengeras-suara-masjid-berakibat.html> (Accessed July 25, 2020).
- Suryadinata, Leo. 2019. *Identity Politics in Indonesia: The Meliana Case*. Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute (ISEAS Perspective 2019/4, January 23, 2019).
- Tamimi Arab, Pooyan. 2017. *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape: Religious Pluralism and Secularism in the Netherlands*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Tempo. 2018. "Menteri Agama Lukman Hakim Saifuddin: Bagaimana mungkin kami melarang azan?" *Tempo*, September 8, 2018. <https://majalah.tempo.co/read/wawancara/156126/menteri-agama-lukman-hakim-saifuddin-bagaimana-mungkin-kami-melarang-azan?hidden=login> (Accessed July 27, 2020).
- TOA. n.d. "History In-Depth." TOA corporation website. https://www.toa.jp/profile/history/page_01.html (Accessed June 14, 2020).
- Tri Jata Ayu Pramesti. 2014. "Menghadapi pengeras suara masjid yang mengganggu." *Hukumonline.com Klinik*, August 4, 2014. <https://www.hukumonline.com/klinik/detail/ulasan/lt52fb1561b60c0/menghadapi-pengeras-suara-masjid-yang-mengganggu/> (Accessed July 25, 2020).
- Van de Crommert, Richard. 2019. "Expat wil Westertoren zwijgen opleggen." *De Telegraaf*, September 14, 2019. <https://www.telegraaf.nl/nieuws/201959306/expat-wil-westertoren-zwijgen-opleggen> (Accessed July 29, 2020).
- Van Poppe, Jan. 2019. "Wel of geen versterkte oproep tot gebed? 'Anno 2019 niet meer nodig.'" *NRC Handelsblad*, November 7, 2019. <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2019/11/07/wel-of-geen-versterkte-oproep-tot-gebed-anno-2019-niet-meer-nodig-a3979392> (Accessed July 19, 2020).
- Vatikiotis, Michael R.J. 1998. *Indonesian Politics under Suharto: The Rise and Fall of the New Order* (3rd edition). London: Routledge.
- VOA. 2018. "Kasus Meiliana: menteri agama hingga wapres beri dukungan di tengah pro-kontra netizen." *Voice of America* (Indonesia), August 24, 2018. <https://www.voaindonesia.com/a/meiliana-penistaan-agama-azan-dukungan-menag-wapres/4541550.html> (Accessed July 26, 2020).
- Wan Ulfa Nur Zuhra. 2017. "Jangan remehkan polusi suara." *Tirto.id*, March 28, 2017. <https://tirto.id/jangan-remehkan-polusi-suara-clGf> (Accessed July 29, 2020).
- Wertheim, W.F. 1980. *Moslems in Indonesia: Majority with Minority Mentality*. Townsville: James Cook University of North Queensland (South East Asian Studies Committee of the James Cook University, Occasional Paper 8).
- Winarno, Hery H. 2013. "Gugat pengeras suara masjid, Sayed Hasan nyaris diamuk massa." *Merdeka.com*, February 16, 2013. <http://www.merdeka.com/peristiwa/gugat-pengeras-suara-masjid-sayed-hasan-nyaris-diamuk-massa.html> (Accessed July 24, 2020).

About the author

David Henley is Professor of Contemporary Indonesia Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands. He is interested in diverse aspects of the politics, history, and geography of Indonesia and the wider Southeast Asian region. His books include *Asia-Africa Development Divergence: A Question of Intent* (2015).

