

Original Research Paper

Development of Islamic Society Based on *Majelis Ta'lim*: A Study of the Shifting Role of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java

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Abstract: As a religious institution that has focused on the propagation of Islam (*tabligh*), the *Majelis Ta'lim*, particularly the branches in West Java, faces no small challenge. First, the *Majelis Ta'lim* is charged with implementing breakthroughs to preserve organizational existence as well as undertaking self-development to achieve a better state. Second, the *Majelis Ta'lim* is faced with the challenge of contributing to the quality of various aspects of the life of the Islamic community. This research studies the phenomenon of the shifting role of the *Majelis Ta'lim*, which is no longer solely a religious institution that propagates Islam but is beginning to actively respond to issues categorized as “worldly” (*muamalah*). This shift in the role of the *Majelis Ta'lim* is interesting: Why and in what aspects has this shift (or, more accurately, enrichment) in its role occurred? This study uses an analytic descriptive approach to examine this phenomenon. The research results show that in the context of a developing Islamic society, the *Majelis Ta'lim* institution, which exists throughout the region of West Java, can become a development actor in the midst of its routine religious study activities. Although its scope to date has been in the religious area (*diniyah*), its representatives are becoming involved as actors and spokesmen for the development of Islamic society in social and economic fields.

Keywords: *Majelis Ta'lim*, Community Development, Religious Teachings, Shifting Role, Development Actor

Introduction

The *Majelis Ta'lim* is the oldest educational institution (other than schools) that exists in Muslim life. As a *Da'wah* (propaganda) and religious teaching facility, the *Majelis Ta'lim* has a traditional basis with strong historical roots. Socially and historically, the existence of the *Majelis Ta'lim* cannot be separated from Muslim believers themselves. It was born, lives and has developed in the midst of Muslims, from its beginning to the current time.

The existence of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java society has become a phenomenon and an interesting field of academic study. A number of studies on the *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java have been published in many types of media. Julian Millie, for example, a lecturer and researcher from Monash University in Australia who specializes in Islamic *Da'wah* in West Java, has undertaken extensive research on the dynamic existence of the *Majelis Ta'lim*. His research findings on the *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java include “Islamic preaching and women's spectatorship in West

Java” (Millie, 2011) and “The Languages of Preaching: Code Selection in Sundanese Islamic Oratory”, West Java (Millie, 2012).

Millie's research shows that the existence of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java has become worthy of serious attention. The *Majelis Ta'lim* is a community that is managed, developed and empowered for the best interests of the community itself. It has capitalized on its strengths to act as a development actor, particularly in village areas.

General observation shows that in the last two decades, the religious life of the West Java community has gained strength. This development of religious life is an application and consequence of the changes occurring in the social, cultural, political and economic life of the community. One form of development in religious life, specifically in the context of the development and guidance of believers, is the *Majelis Ta'lim* institution. The *Majelis Ta'lim* institution is an informal education medium that has a role in the guidance of believers as a place for spiritual recreation as well as a space for dialogue and

silaturrehmi (gathering) between *ulama* (religious clerics) and *umara* (government leaders) with *umat* (Muslim believers).

The *Majelis Ta'lim* is important because it is in the midst of the community and community is one of the three educational environments (in addition to the home (informal) and school (formal)). Thus, the *Majelis Ta'lim* represents an important stronghold facing the negative influences of globalization on the community. Furthermore, the *Majelis Ta'lim* can be a significant source of social strength to develop the community and the nation.

As a religious institution that has focused on the propagation of Islam (*tabligh*), the *Majelis Ta'lim*, particularly in West Java, faces with no small challenge. First, the *Majelis Ta'lim* is charged with implementing breakthroughs to preserve its organizational existence as well as undertaking self-development to achieve a better state. Second, the *Majelis Ta'lim* is faced with the challenge of contributing to the quality of various aspects of the life of the Islamic community. In the last decade, an interesting phenomenon has occurred as the *Majelis Ta'lim* no longer considers only its main role as a religious institution undertaking Islamic propagation activities but shifts toward an active response to problems categorized as "worldly." This shifting role of the *Majelis Ta'lim* is an interesting topic for further study.

Method

This research describes facts related to the shifting role of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in the context of the development of the Islamic community in West Java. This research attempts to describe the aspects of and reasons for the occurrence of the shifting role of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java.

Interviews were held with informants with direct experience as leaders of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java. Research informants were identified through snowball sampling. This entails identifying original informants and then moving on to the next informants based on information from the first ones about which people have additional information on the topic in question.

Data are acquired using in-depth interviews, participative observation and documentary analysis (historical method). Based on the data categorized according to the research problem, the data are then analyzed through an inductive and qualitative approach. Inductive analysis is undertaken continuously from beginning to end.

Literature Review

Development has essentially the same meaning as *da'wah*. At the level of understanding and aims and therefore at a normative level, *da'wah* and development

are identical. Both have the same target: To achieve a community that is materially prosperous and spiritually strong. This is the basis of the term community development.

Substantially, *da'wah* involves engineering and progress to change all forms of worship other than to Allah to *tauhid* belief and to direct all faltering lives to depend on Islamic values. *Da'wah* is an activity that creates personal and social change based on the reformers' behavior. Because of this, according to Mul Khan (1995: 26), the concept and strategy of *da'wah* must be directed toward solving various problems faced by the community in the field.

Using academic terminology in a macro sense, *da'wah* can be understood as equivalent to social reconstruction in economic, cultural, educational and societal aspects. This multidimensional social reconstruction process, according to Rais (1991), is the same as *da'wah*.

Generally, *da'wah* activities are undertaken with only a call from the rostrum, whereas life and social reality require real solutions for life problems, which are increasingly pressing because equality has not yet been created in all aspects of community life. Community life in the city has not left behind that in the village; both face the influence of modernity, which often has a negative effect if there is an imbalance between spiritual and physical needs.

Critical awareness in understanding issues and finding alternative answers is the main task of *da'wah*. In this context, the *da'i* required is participative *da'i*, namely, *da'i* that is capable of creating dialogues that provide an opportunity for (Muslim) followers to state their opinions, plan and evaluate desired social change and share enjoyment of the results of this *da'wah* process.

Why are many Muslims left behind in various aspects of life? Viewed from the *da'wah* perspective, it is because Muslims are only *ta'lim*, continually encouraged but never taught how to manage (*tadbir*). Muslim followers could be taught how to manage their eating, expertise, education, work and business capability; they could be told how to obtain work, where to find capital, how to manage capital and how they can become economically empowered beings.

However, the situation is the main problem of *da'wah* because until now, Muslim followers have been equipped with *ta'lim* rather than *tadbir* (management). They are insufficiently equipped with engineering capability, management capability, entrepreneurial capability, economic capability and social planning capability. This is a new direction that can be taken by *da'wah* organizations, such as the *Majelis Ta'lim*.

The contemporary *Majelis Ta'lim* does not only operate and discuss issues of religious ritual; it also plays an active role in handling social issues, such as how

followers can change to become small economic actors in the midst of their routine recitation activities or how they can become the first counselors if they encounter trafficking cases in their area.

Theoretically, according to Bidlle and Thomas (Wirawan, 2002), there are five aspects related to this role: Expectations, norms, performance, evaluation and sanctions. In relation to role theory as an analytical tool, there has been a shift in the role of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in Islamic community development in West Java. This process has been influenced by a variety of causative factors, including factors internal to the *Majelis Ta'lim* itself and external factors such as environmental conditions, associations, technological development, mass media and education.

How can community development be undertaken through the *da'wah bil hal* initiative? To answer this question, there are at least three reasons that must be considered to systematically attempt to overcome basic community problems. First, in situations of economic growth, widening inequality tends to occur. Second, as a result, a more directed effort is required to overcome the causes of these unequal tendencies beyond considering the resulting problems. Third, the involvement of a more studied (intellectual) approach with a better social position is needed in this attempt.

This involvement is based on a faithful spirit for the weak. This spirit must be reflected to better understand the life, suffering, hopes and aspirations of the *poor people*. Without this faithful spirit, existing relationships and aid will not bring real change and will tend to be charity, with only temporary benefits. This means that the key to success is increasing the degree of self-reliance of community members who currently desire help in solving their own problems.

In this relationship, it should be noted that there must be a re-formulation and development of an appropriately shaped role of *da'wah* institutions, such as the *Majelis Ta'lim*, to address problems of poverty and social backwardness. There is a strong impression that *da'wah* activities, generally speaking, are not yet able to change these unfortunate conditions. In this context, Tuti Alawiyah, a main activist of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in Indonesia, suggests the need for innovation and strategy enrichment, which must be undertaken by the *Majelis Ta'lim* to face the increasingly difficult development era (Alawiyah, 1997).

In other words, many activities are still marginal and rhetorical. These activities only temporarily remind and reassure the community. In some cases, this is seen as necessary. However, what the community needs is not just a splash of spirituality through oral *da'wah* but real activities that can improve the quality and prestige of life. These activities can be developed through *da'wah bil hal*, or community development *da'wah* activities.

Findings and Discussion

The number of *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java has grown rapidly in the last few years. The institution is an asset for (Muslim) followers and has the potential to be developed. Its large numbers can become a community strength if it can be directed and empowered appropriately.

General observation shows that for at least the last two decades, religious life in the community has seemed splendid. This development of religious life is seen as an application and consequence of changes occurring in the social, economic, political and cultural life of the community. One form of development of religious life, particularly in the context of guidance for (Muslim) followers, is the *Majelis Ta'lim* institution. The *Majelis Ta'lim* is an informal education medium that has a function and role in guiding (Muslim) followers as a spiritual recreation space, dialogue event and *silatullahmi* among *ulama* (religious leaders) and *umara* (government leaders) and *umat* (Muslim followers).

The increasing numbers of *Majelis Ta'lim* will be an important asset for community development. Based on data from the *Biro Yansos Pemerintah Provinsi Jawa Barat* (West Java Provincial Government Social Services Bureau; 2014: 78), the number of *Majelis Ta'lim* in Indonesia has increased significantly from year to year. In 2006, the number of *Majelis Ta'lim* was 153,357 units, with a total *jama'ah* (congregation) of 9,867,873 people and a teaching force of 375,095 people (272,454 men and 102,641 women). Two years later, in 2008, the number of *Majelis Ta'lim* in Indonesia had increased to 161,879 units.

The congregation joining *Majelis Ta'lim* activities reached 9,670,272 and was supported by 366,200 teachers in 2008. Of the participants in *Majelis Ta'lim*, 5,667,838 (58.6%) were women, or mothers, whereas the remaining 4,002,434 (41.4%) were men, or fathers. This finding strengthens the assumption that the *Majelis Ta'lim* tends to be an event for gathering, interaction and study for women or mothers, even though this *da'wah* institution does not target a particular gender. The *Majelis Ta'lim* is even described as a public arena for women's empowerment (Anitasari *et al.*, 2010).

The number of *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java is increasing rapidly. The data from the West Java Ministry of Religion (*Kementerian Agama Jawa Barat*) state that there are 52,020 *Majelis Ta'lim* in this province, with a population of 45,826,000. Thus, there is a ratio of 1 *Majelis Ta'lim* per 880 people (Agustin, 2014).

In almost every West Javanese Islamic community, it is easy to find a *Majelis Ta'lim* group. As an example, in the Great Mosque of Bandung, West Java, there are currently no less than 40 *Majelis Ta'lim* groups that routinely hold activities. As a public mosque located in the city centre, the Great Mosque of Bandung in West Java Province is always busy with religious activities

initiated by various discussion groups, *dzikir* (short recitation) groups and *Majelis Ta'lim* groups. Activities organized at the Great Mosque include public lectures, the study of *Al Qur'an* and *hadits*, the study of Islam, the study of *Al Hikam*, medicinal *dzikir*, *dzikir taushiyah*, *istighosah*, *tilawah* (recitation) and even the study of medicine *ala* Prophet. The following is a list of affluent religious groups that use the Great Mosque of Bandung, West Java Province: Radio Dahlia led by Haji Taufik Rahman, Jamiatunnur led by Haji Yedi M Saleh, Marhama led by K.H.R. Muhyidin Abazasa, Cahaya Ilahi led by Sargiyono, Ash Shahibah led by Hj. Evi Solafiyah, Qalbun Salim and Alhajar led by K.H. Buya Salimudin, Ad Dahlaaniyah led by K.H. Salimul Afif, MT Al Farras led by Hj. R. Farida Fauzy, Raudhatul Qurra led by Ustadz Mustafa Kamil, Albahjah led by Buya Yahya, Hakkama led by H. Abdul Majid Sofie (*almarhum/deceased*), Zentour MRB led by H. Zainal Abidin and Jamiatul Hujjaj led by H. Yahya Hudaya (Safei, 2015: 103-105).

The existence of *Majelis Ta'lim* is important particularly for preventing the negative impacts of the globalization era. However, to protect its own existence, the *Majelis Ta'lim* must utilize the positive impacts of globalization. Therefore, the *Majelis Ta'lim* is also charged with staying aware of developments of the era. The *da'wah* movement, particularly as undertaken by the *Majelis Ta'lim*, is also beginning to address concrete problems. For example, some *Majelis Ta'lim* activists are involved in counseling for drug problems or handling cases of child trafficking, which have been occurring frequently.

The Province of West Java has P2TP2A institutions (*Pusat Pelayanan Terpadu Pemberdayaan Perempuan dan Anak/Integrated Service Centre for the Empowerment of Women and Children*) headed by the wife of the Governor of West Java, Netty Prasetyani. P2TP2A is making continuous efforts to prevent trafficking. One breakthrough is empowering the *Majelis Ta'lim* to provide understanding of the dangers and ways to prevent trafficking in the community. According to the head of P2TP2A, the *Majelis Ta'lim* must undertake reform and train effective trafficking counselors. When trafficking cases occur, before being reported to P2TP2A, they can be addressed by a counselor. In addition to empowering the *Majelis Ta'lim*, P2TP2A works in partnership with the *Badan Pemberdayaan Ibu dan Anak Jawa Barat* (Mother and Child Empowerment Board of West Java) to build productive health centers. A number of volunteers will be educated by various organizations, including *Majelis Ta'lim*.

Prior to 2008, West Java did not have a specific institution to handle human trafficking. Until now, mothers have not taught their daughters about reproduction and sexuality. This lack of knowledge facilitates the incidence

of rape but could be addressed by *Majelis Ta'lim* activists, the majority of whom are mothers.

The *Majelis Ta'lim* is not currently dedicated solely to religious study activities but can participate in holding or joining activities of the *Ikatan Wanita Pengusaha Indonesia* (Indonesian Women Entrepreneur's Association) or various business institutions to develop economic knowledge. Related to this, a *Majelis Ta'lim* leader in the Bandung area said:

"In the *Majelis Ta'lim* which I lead, we have pioneered social economic activities beginning several years ago. We don't just hold religious study activities, but we also attempt to organize business skills provision for our congregation. We invite successful business people to share their skills and experience with the *Majelis Ta'lim* congregation I lead." (Interview, July 12, 2015)

This economic field should be mastered by women to allow these mothers to exchange knowledge and become more creative. In this way, the *Majelis Ta'lim* can become a *da'wah* institution that equips its congregation not only with religious insights but also with entrepreneurial skills and knowledge. Consequently, it is important to include entrepreneurial material in the *Majelis Ta'lim* curriculum.

A *Majelis Ta'lim* leader in Bandung Municipality stated that the institution he/she led went even further and handicrafts produced by the *Majelis Ta'lim* congregation were being marketed abroad. Further, he/she said:

"As a *Majelis Ta'lim* leader, I'm very happy because we not only congregate to undertake religious study but also to work on something economically beneficial to support the family needs of the congregation. We have even produced something that we can export abroad." (Interview, July 12, 2015)

Da'wah remains the main priority, but it is impossible to ignore social and economic issues. In the economic field, a number of *Majelis Ta'lim* have developed financial institutions, cooperatives and *baitul mal*. A *Majelis Ta'lim* leader in the region of Sukabumi emphasized:

"On the sidelines of our routine religious study activities, we are starting to be involved in handling the problem of rubbish. We now even have a rubbish bank, managed by *Majelis Ta'lim* activists. Furthermore, we are developing BMT (*Baitul Mal Watamwil*) as a financial institution that can be used by our congregation to develop their economic

activities. This type of business is not easy, but we are trying as hard as we can.” (Interview, July 28, 2015)

Awareness of the *syari'ah* economy is more aggressively undertaken, including the formation of partnerships with the *Kementerian Pemberdayaan Perempuan* (Ministry for Women's Empowerment). *Majelis Ta'lim* activists can provide detailed information and counseling about children under five, teenagers, reproductive health and maternal and child health.

If the economy is running smoothly, *Majelis Ta'lim* organizations also run well. As a result, several *Majelis Ta'lim* have opened up partnerships with economically oriented ministries. For example, several *Majelis Ta'lim* in the Bogor area have partnered with the *Kementerian Negara Koperasi* (Ministry of National Cooperatives) and UKM. This ministry has been supporting *Majelis Ta'lim* members with entrepreneurial skills.

Related to the motivation for undertaking activities that are not limited religious study, a member of a *Majelis Ta'lim* congregation in Depok stated:

“Our main activity is indeed religious study. But we also don't want to undertake something that is only related to ourselves. As members of the community, we also feel the need to be involved in responding to and handling the problems developing in the community. We do this as a step towards meeting our responsibilities as required by the Islamic teaching we believe.” (Interview, July 28, 2015)

Theoretically, in the context of Islamic community development in West Java, there has been a shift in the role of the *Majelis Ta'lim*. This shift is influenced by various factors, including those internal to the *Majelis Ta'lim* itself, such as awareness and support of religious teachings. External factors include environmental conditions, technological developments and education, which require the *Majelis Ta'lim* to be further involved in responding to the daily problems surrounding it.

It seems that there is indeed a shift (or, more accurately, an enrichment) of the role of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in West Java. Until now, the *Majelis Ta'lim* has been known as a religious institution that focuses on religious activities. As time passes, many *Majelis Ta'lim* are beginning to spread their wings and taking an active role in handling social community problems, including improving the economic conditions of the congregation.

The existence of the *Majelis Ta'lim* in the dynamic movement of the Muslim social community will develop in line with the Islamic *da'wah*. To increase the role of enriching the congregation, the *Majelis Ta'lim* must continuously increase its quality by further enriching its

role and function, addressing issues that affect the daily life of the community.

Conclusion

In addition to being an informal Islamic institution, the *Majelis Ta'lim* is a *da'wah* institution with a strategic role in developing the religious life of the community, particularly in West Java. The *Majelis Ta'lim*, as community-based Islamic education, is well situated in the effort to approach a society with a learning tradition not limited by age, gender or educational level and can be a place of study as well as a place to deliver religious messages and develop *silaturrahmi* and other religious activities for all levels of society.

With the development era, the institution has experienced an enrichment of its traditional role and function focused on religious activities. As a part of the National Education System, the *Majelis Ta'lim* implements its functions at an informal level, which is more flexible, open and formative with regard to the social solutions that provide opportunities for the community to build on its knowledge. This shift has occurred because of the internal awareness of the *Majelis Ta'lim* and the external challenge of the demands of the era.

That enrichment of this role has occurred in several areas of life, such as the economic development of (Muslim) followers by opening micro businesses run by the *Majelis Ta'lim*, the provision of life expertise to *Majelis Ta'lim* congregations, actively handling the issues of rubbish, drug counseling and human trafficking counseling and various other fields.

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Ethics

I have correctly followed the expected research ethics in writing this paper.

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