

The Formation of A Muslim Intellectual Community In Indonesia: The Case of Insists

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Abstract

This paper discusses the formation process of the Indonesian Muslim intellectual community, INSISTS (*Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilizations*). The emergence of INSISTS cannot be separated from the broader socio-political and intellectual context in post-Reformation Indonesia, a period marked by the opening of democratic space, the rise of various Islamic movements, and intense debates over the direction of Islamic thought. The 9/11 tragedy and its global repercussions further intensified concerns about the future of Islam, as liberal narratives—promoted domestically by the Liberal Islamic Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*, JIL), gained prominence in Indonesia's public sphere. Against this backdrop, INSISTS was formed as a response to liberal thinking, seeking to offer an alternative intellectual framework rooted in Islamic tradition. Unlike previous studies on INSISTS that focused primarily on Islamic thought, this study examines INSISTS through the lens of anthropological studies of friendship in the making of Muslim intellectual communities. It highlights that the formation of the INSISTS community is inseparable from the common interests of its actors, particularly the struggle for the Islamization of science. This struggle is carried out by INSISTS actors through continuous intellectual and social activities that reinforce solidarity, networks of friendship, and a shared vision of resisting liberal Islamic influences.

Keywords:

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Introduction

The study of the formation of Muslim intellectual communities is particularly interesting in the Indonesian context. Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority country, spread across thousands of islands, united in more than 600 ethnic groups, and interacting with over 1,000 languages. This remarkable diversity makes "Indonesian Islam" both unique and important to study, especially as it has historically been shaped by negotiation between tradition, modernity, and global influences. Since the 1998 (*Reformasi*), Indonesia has experienced a dramatic opening of democratic space that allowed a proliferation of new religious and intellectual movements. This era of transformation coincided with global events such as the 9/11 tragedy, which reshaped global discourses on Islam and heightened anxieties about the trajectory of Islamic thought. In Indonesia, the Liberal Islamic Network (*Jaringan Islam Liberal*, JIL) gained momentum by promoting liberal interpretations of Islam, sparking concern among Muslim intellectuals who sought to preserve Islamic authenticity while engaging modern challenges (Bachtar, 2016 & 2017).

One of the intellectual communities that emerged in this era was the Institute for the Study of Islamic Thought and Civilizations (INSISTS). Founded by young Indonesian intellectuals, many of whom were students and lecturers at the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, INSISTS has been active for more than two decades (Bachtar, 2016; 2017). Initially developed in Malaysia before expanding to Indonesia, the organization is engaged in public education, scientific research, publications, and academic consultancy. What makes INSISTS particularly significant is its ability to bring together actors from different Islamic organizational backgrounds—such as NU, Muhammadiyah, and PERSIS—into a long-standing intellectual community united by a common interest: the struggle for the Islamization of science and the resistance to liberal Islamic discourse (Husaini, 2020).

This paper situates the study of INSISTS within the anthropology of friendship. In anthropological terms, friendship often emerges in response to "feelings of insecurity in less-than-ideal situations" (Meinert, 2015; Diphorn & van Roekel, 2019). Such insecurity can arise from what Claire Dungey describes as tricky trust, a condition where trust is complicated and difficult to fully achieve due to ambiguous circumstances (Diphorn & van Roekel, 2019). In the case of INSISTS, the perceived threat of liberal Islam and Western epistemology created a sense of shared vulnerability among its founders, which in turn facilitated the building of solidarities and intellectual friendships.

Moreover, friendship studies also emphasize that actors negotiate a continuum of trust and distrust, leading to what Mortensen terms careful involvement, a cautious yet necessary engagement with others in the absence of full certainty (Diphorn & van Roekel, 2019). Within INSISTS, this dynamic was crucial, as its members came from diverse organizational affiliations (NU, Muhammadiyah, and PERSIS) but found common ground in the struggle for Islamization of knowledge. The shared historical trajectory of studying at ISTAC and engaging with Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Islamic worldview provided a foundation for durable friendships built on both emotional and instrumental interests.

Another studies about friendship note that shared beliefs and collective rituals are central to sustaining long-term bonds (Roseneil & Budgen, 2004; Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014; Tillman, 2015). Rawlins (1992) emphasizes the importance of emotional and instrumental companionship; friends as confidants, dependents, and co-participants in meaningful activities. In Durkheim's (1912) terms, such collective activities generate collective effervescence, a shared emotional energy that strengthens community solidarity. Within INSISTS, ritualized intellectual practices such as joint seminars, study circles, and collaborative writing served not only as academic endeavors but also as emotionally fulfilling acts of collective resistance against liberal Islamic discourse.

This study thus builds on the anthropology of friendship by showing how the formation of INSISTS was not merely an intellectual response to liberal Islam, but also an affective and relational project. The friendships that bound INSISTS actors together were shaped by shared insecurities, common interests, and collective histories, which over time enhanced their individual

capacities as intellectuals and strengthened INSISTS as an enduring Muslim intellectual community in Indonesia.

Methods

The important question asked in this paper is how friendship plays a role in the formation of the INSISTS intellectual community. The question will be answered using ethnographic research data with data derived from in-depth interviews, document analysis, and participant-observation (Cresswell, 2009). The data will be interpreted using an anthropological perspective of friendship based on the findings of the growing body of knowledge in the field (for instance Diphooorn & van Roekel, 2019, etc.). So far, it can be said that the study of the anthropology of friendship has not touched the locus of the study of intellectual communities, let alone Islam. Thus, the study of Islamic anthropology has not yet been analyzed using the anthropology of friendship. In addition, important to note here that this research is part of a broader doctoral dissertation project in anthropology at the University of Indonesia (2017–2025), which aims to explore Muslim intellectual communities in contemporary Indonesia through the lens of the anthropology of friendship.

Results and Discussion

INSISTS as a movement of thought

INSISTS is an institution for the study of Islamic thought and civilization in Indonesia with a membership of young Muslim intellectuals who were mostly students of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas at ISTAC, namely Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, Adian Husaini, Ugi Suharto, Anis Malik Thoha, Syamsuddin Arif, and Adnin Armas in 2003. In addition to these names, according to Bachtiar (2016 & 2017), other figures who contributed to the birth of INSISTS were Muhammad Arifin Ismail, Nirwan Syafrin, and Henri Shalahuddin. Apart from being active in INSISTS, these actors are also affiliated with various larger Islamic organizations in Indonesia such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and PERSIS (see Bachtiar 2016 & 2017).

The vision and mission of INSISTS is to clarify and reformulate important concepts and methodologies in the treasury of Islamic thought and civilization, which are relevant to the problems faced by the ummah such as science (philosophy, epistemology, ethics), education, history, civilization, politics, economics, social, and gender equality. INSISTS develops frameworks of Islamic thought that depart from the concept of the Islamic worldview. In addition, INSISTS presents Islamic responses to various “Islamic thoughts” derived from modern cultural currents, schools of thought, and ideologies (Bachtiar, 2017; Insists.id, 2024).

In general, INSISTS activities include intensive studies in the form of discussions, seminars, workshops, conferences, research, and publications in journals or books. The main aim is “to provide explanations and enlightenment on correct religious thought that is considered ambiguous and misleading the thinking of Muslims” (Bachtiar, 2017; Insists.id, 2024). INSISTS also aspires to establish a library with an extensive collection of Islamic and other civilizations’ intellectual heritage and to build an endowment fund to support an independent international center for the study of Islamic thought and civilization.

Based on the perspective of the anthropology of friendship, the emergence and sustainability of INSISTS cannot be separated from the bonds of friendship among its members. These bonds were formed in a situation of uncertainty and insecurity following Reformasi era, 9/11 ‘terrorist attack’ in the U.S. and around the world, as well as the rise of liberal Islamic discourse in Indonesia. As Meinert (2015) and Mortensen (in Diphooorn & van Roekel 2019) argue, friendship often arises from “insecurity in less-than-ideal situations,” where actors negotiate tricky trust—a form of fragile trust in contexts of ambiguity. For the INSISTS intellectuals, such ambiguity came from the ideological contestation with liberal Islam, which created a shared sense of threat and the need for solidarity.

Friendship within INSISTS is also reinforced by shared beliefs and common interests. As Rawlins (1992) and Tillman (2015) point out, friendships grow out of shared emotional and instrumental roles, such as intellectual companionship and collective struggle. Within INSISTS, this shared struggle is the Islamization of knowledge, which becomes both an intellectual and emotional bond. The collective effervescence described by Durkheim (1912) is evident in INSISTS' rituals of intellectual life—study circles, seminars, conferences—that generate joy, solidarity, and a shared sense of mission among members.

Moreover, these friendships are sustained not only by current activities but also by what Whyte (1993) and Young & Willmot (1961) call “shared histories.” The shared experience of studying under Syed Naquib al-Attas at ISTAC, engaging in intellectual debates with liberal Islamic networks, and building an institution in post-Reformasi Indonesia creates a collective memory that strengthens their long-term cohesion. Through these dynamics, the anthropology of friendship helps explain how INSISTS transformed individual intellectual trajectories into a collective movement of thought with enduring organizational capacity.

A response movement

Just as the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL) was formed as a ‘response movement’ (*gerakan respons*) to radicalism, INSISTS was also formed as a ‘response movement’ to liberalism. Both movements are response movements to Islamic socio-religious phenomena that are considered not ideal, even ‘dangerous’ (*berbahaya*) for Muslims, the nation and the state of Indonesia. Both JIL and INSISTS, formed after 9/11 tragedy, see these ‘non-ideal phenomena’, namely radicalism and liberalism as ‘non-ideal phenomena’ or problems of the ummah as well as the nation. This common intention is the impetus for the two different types of movements to form alliances, activities, and conduct public discourse battles.

As a response movement, JIL is a response movement that seeks the best form of Islamic thought in Indonesia. JIL actors see that Islamic values contain personal freedom on the one hand and the liberation of oppressive socio-political structures on the other. Liberalism is interpreted as freedom and liberation. As a descendant of *kiai*, JIL coordinator Ulil-Abshar Abdalla chooses to differ with the general view of Indonesian Muslims, by rejecting ‘religious interpretations that are not pluralist’ or that ‘contradict democracy.’ In 2001, with the growing fervor for the enforcement of Islamic law and concerns about the growth of radicalism, terrorism and intolerance, JIL was formed to provide a response to militant activism and extremism in Indonesia. JIL focused on studying and producing ‘an Islamic discourse that is tolerant, open and supportive of strengthening democratization in Indonesia.’ In my observation, JIL saw that the Indonesian situation at that time was in danger, the indicator was the weakening of democracy and therefore they made new alliances to fight groups that were considered militant and extreme, such as the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) in Jakarta and the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (*Majelis Mujahidin Indonesia*, MMI) in Yogyakarta.

Faced with such a non-ideal situation, JIL then produced various activities, articles, discussions, and resources relevant for the dissemination of liberal Islam, mainly from the Utan Kayu Theater, Jakarta, a complex owned by Goenawan Mohamad, a prominent journalist and author, and used for performing arts and non-governmental organizations. In the 2017-2025 period, in my observation, JIL's activities—especially as a group and ‘Islamic movement’—were no longer as massive as at the beginning of its formation and its leaders no longer synergized in ideas and movements, such as Ulil Abshar-Abdalla who had become a Democratic Party politician, studied in the United States, then returned to Indonesia and focused on the *Ngaji Ihya'* program, an online program studying the books of *Al-Hikam* and *Ihya Ulumuddin* by Imam Al-Ghazali (since 2017). In recent years, Ulil Abshar-Abdalla has developed the Ghazalia Institute (since 2021) and is active as a chairman in the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board as a cleric who is no longer as controversial as he used to be, or ‘no longer liberal.’

As a response movement, INSISTS responded to the turmoil of liberalism in Indonesia and became a new carriage of intellectual dynamics in Indonesia with “shared beliefs as a form of

friendship” personally and institutionally. This conclusion is derived from a study of several anthropological works on friendship, such as Roseneil & Budgen (2004), Owton & Allen-Collinson (2014) and Rawlins (1992). Meanwhile, Carrier (1999) and Desai & Killick (2010) found that friendships are formed due to the operation of sentiments that are inseparable from shared beliefs, or sentiments that are born because of the similarity of beliefs and thoughts that are anti-liberalism as taught at ISTAC. Before the formation of INSISTS, various intellectual communities existed in Indonesia. These communities were active in scientific and national dynamics. In the context of Islamic intellectuals, the debates that took place were not only related to religious teachings but also related to socio-cultural dynamics. These debates enrich the intellectual treasures of Indonesia.

Common interests of actors

In that context, Rawlins’ (1992) finding that actors’ emotional and instrumental commonalities as, “...collective interlocutors, dependents, and playmates” (p.271) are fundamental to the formation of friendships is also evident in the case of INSISTS. The periodic studies that the actors undertake are part of the effort to maintain collective-academic interlocutors, dependents and playmates. In this context, I found that there is a ‘common history’ in keeping friendships sustainable—not only in Malaysia but also after the actors return to Indonesia. Syamsuddin Arif, one of the founders of INSISTS, explained how INSISTS was established in the beginning as he did not really care about JIL but then became concerned when he met with his colleagues, formed INSISTS, and conducted academic resistance to JIL.

The formation of INSISTS was voluntary in the sense that it was not formed for money or based on a particular project. In this institution, friendly actors get a ‘luxury’ that cannot be obtained (either by individuals or groups) in many structural situations. INSISTS’ resistance was carried out by publishing a journal. Initially there were several names, namely *Al Munqidz* (proposed by Syamsuddin Arif) and *Islamia* (proposed by Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi), and *Islamia* was agreed upon. Adian Husaini suggested creating a newsletter and helping to connect INSISTS writings with the media. The formation of INSISTS was a response to religious discourse, especially from JIL, which promoted the liberalization of Islam massively. In fact, in Muhammadiyah and NU there are also intellectuals who are considered liberal who create internal and external discourse of the organization.

From the anthropological perspective of friendship, however, it is also crucial to note that friendships are not only shaped by shared emotional or instrumental commonalities, but also by “a sense of insecurity in less-than-ideal situations” (Meinert, 2015; Diphhoorn & van Roekel, 2019). This resonates with Claire Dungey’s study, which shows that insecurity is often rooted in “tricky trust”, the difficulty of trusting others in ambiguous and uncertain conditions (Diphhoorn & van Roekel, 2019). Meinert (2015) further explains that tricky trust emerges even when actors actively strive for trust, yet full trust remains elusive, especially under conditions of economic hardship. In the case of INSISTS, this “insecurity in non-ideal situations” is also a constitutive element of friendship that intersects with actors’ emotional and instrumental commonalities. Thus, the anthropology of friendship highlights that a sense of insecurity among actors can itself be a formative mechanism of friendship, reinforcing ties of solidarity, collaboration, and intellectual resistance.

Academic resistance

I have observed that INSISTS actors are actively involved in studying and campaigning against the dangers of liberal Islam academically. This means that INSISTS fights thought with thought. Although INSISTS was not actively involved in the formulation of MUI fatwa No. 7/MunasVII/MUI/11/2005 which forbids secularism, pluralism and liberalism, their criticism since the formation of INSISTS as a unified movement (2003), or even before, has strengthened concerns about the dangers of Islamic liberalism. Adian Husaini explained that he was not involved

in the formulation of the MUI fatwa regarding the haram of secularism, pluralism and liberalism. Adian writes that he was not involved in the drafting of the fatwa, and says that “MUI is great, having the courage to issue that fatwa” (2015: 226-227). Adian noted that in 2002 the NU Regional Conference in East Java had also issued a recommendation on the dangers of Liberal Islam, and in 2004 INSISTS had held a workshop with various Islamic boarding schools in East Java on the dangers of liberalism. Adian Husaini (2015) understands that the issuance of the fatwa was due to several factors, such as the anxiety of Islamic boarding schools about the liberalism spread by many pesantren alumni; then, the pressure of the regional MUI administrators who felt the bad impact of the spread of liberalism, as well as the recommendation of the East Java NU Regional Conference on the dangers of Liberal Islam (p. 226-227).

One of INSISTS’ intellectuals, Syamsuddin Arif, said that INSISTS does not want to follow the crowd, such as criticizing liberalism, which is also done by some Indonesian Muslim scholars, figures and writers. For this reason, Syamsuddin wrote about the ‘danger of LGBT’ which is associated with the people of the Prophet Luth who were LGBT as a form of da’wah to spread Islamic teachings, especially to stem Western thoughts that are not relevant to Islam. Referring to Al-Attas’ thinking, INSISTS does not reject Western thought outright, but rather, does what Wan Daud in *Budaya Ilmu* (2019) calls “respect-critical” (*hormat kritis*) towards it. Studies and criticism are part of that “respect and critique”. In program development and regeneration, INSISTS holds discussions, seminars and workshops as well as the opening of formal lecture classes.

Their interactions are not competitive or for personal gain such as popularity. It appears that the actors support each other to move forward with the same thoughts as a common interest. I agree with the notion that “in friendship, exchange is always at the core” (Beer, 2001) of interactor relations. It is the exchange that strengthens, even changes the capacity of actors. Of the many changes in actor capacity that will be described in the following chapters, I exemplify the changes in actor capacity seen for example in the changes in Syamsuddin Arif and Adnin Armas’ attention from attention to reading and research to attention to reading, researching and criticizing. The attention of Syamsuddin Arif and Adnin Armas changed when Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, an ISTAC doctoral student and son of Gontor Founder KH. Imam Zarkasyi who is more senior, conveyed the “turmoil of Islamic thought in Indonesia” in Ulil Abshar-Abdalla’s (2002) article entitled “Refreshing Islamic thought” (*Menyegarkan kembali pemikiran Islam*) in the national daily Kompas.

In the anthropology of friendship, friendships are often constructed in response to a sense of insecurity within non-ideal contexts. Meinert (2015) demonstrates how friendships emerge as strategies for navigating unstable social environments, while Dungey and Mortensen (in Diphooorn & van Roekel, 2019) highlight that such relations are shaped by tricky trust—the difficulty of trusting others under ambiguous conditions. This anthropological insight resonates with the dynamics of INSISTS actors, whose intellectual camaraderie and exchange are not merely based on shared interests but also function as a protective mechanism in facing the uncertainties posed by the rise of liberal Islam in Indonesia.

Conclusion

Based on the explanation above, it can be concluded that the formation of INSISTS is influenced by the values of friendship that have been established between its actors. This friendship allowed them to build alliances in one organization and collectively respond to the rise of liberal thinking represented by the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL). The friendships were not only forged during their time in Malaysia at ISTAC but were also sustained and expanded after their return to Indonesia. In this case, INSISTS managed to maintain networks of friendship across time and space, and even broadened these networks through collaborations with various Islamic organizations in Indonesia.

When placed in the broader socio-political and intellectual context of post-Reformation Indonesia, this finding becomes more significant. The emergence of INSISTS cannot be separated from the opening of democratic space after 1998, the proliferation of Islamic movements, and the intense debates over the future direction of Islamic thought in Indonesia. The 9/11 attack in the

U.S. and its global repercussions further sharpened the urgency of these debates, especially as liberal Islamic narratives gained prominence. Against this backdrop, INSISTS emerged not only as an intellectual response but also as a community sustained by friendships that bound its actors together.

This study demonstrates that the anthropology of friendship offers an alternative lens for understanding the formation of Muslim intellectual communities. The formation of INSISTS is inseparable from the shared interests of its actors—particularly the struggle for the Islamization of science—carried out through sustained intellectual and social activities. Through friendship, INSISTS actors have been able to reinforce solidarity, maintain long-lasting networks, and develop a shared vision in resisting liberal Islamic influences while promoting their own intellectual framework rooted in Islamic tradition.

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