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Muhammad Khoirul Muqtafa

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Redaksi menerima tulisan ilmiah tentang isu-isu kewarganegaraan,
administrasi kependudukan dan penghapusan diskriminasi ras dan etnis
serta tulisan-tulisan lain tentang hukum, demokrasi dan HAM

From Security to Citizenship? A Study of *Banser* in the Reform Era

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of *Banser* (militia group under Nahdlatul Ulama) in the Reform Era is quite interesting to observe. While previously, this militia's main duty was to ensure that all activities conducted by Nahdlatul Ulama ran smoothly, this organization has now expanded its activities from countering radicalism and terrorism activities to assisting disaster management programs. This signals a new transformation within this militia group and poses serious questions about the conception of security and citizenship practices. *Banser* actively protects religious minority groups so that they can practice their religious activities. Different from other religious militia groups such as the Islamic Defender Front (FPI) or Moslem Paramilitary Group (*Laskar Umat Islam*) who often commit violent actions, *Banser* has their own logic of security. This logic is mainly derived from religious values they hold: moderation, justice, tolerance, and balance. How they implement these values can be seen partly from their actions to protect and reject any violence against the religious vulnerable groups. This is because they believe that violence itself is against religion. Furthermore, their actions tend to advocate a certain form of citizenship based on religious values.

Keywords: Banser, security, paramilitary groups, religious minority groups, citizenship

ABSTRAK

Fenomena Banser (kelompok paramiliter di bawah Nahdlatul Ulama) di Era Reformasi menarik untuk dikaji. Meskipun, di awal pendiriannya, tugas utama Banser adalah untuk memastikan kegiatan-kegiatan yang dilakukan oleh organisasi Nahdlatul Ulama berjalan mulus, kini kinerja Banser mengalami perluasan, mulai dari mengonter radikalisme dan terorisme sampai membuat program manajemen kebencanaan. Ini menunjukkan transformasi baru dalam tubuh kelompok paramiliter ini dan menimbulkan pertanyaan tentang konsepsi kemananan dan praktek kewarganegaraan. Banser sangat aktif terlibat dalam melindungi kelompok minoritas sehingga mereka bisa melakukan kegiatan-kegiatan keagamaan mereka. Berbeda dengan kelompok milisia keagamaan yang lain seperti Front Pembela Islam (FPI) atau Laskar Umat Islam yang kerap melakukan tindak kekerasan, Banser mempunyai logika sendiri tentang keamanan. Logika ini bersumber dari nilai-nilai keagamaan yang mereka pegang: moderat, keadilan, toleransi dan

keseimbangan. Bagaimana mereka mengimplementasikan nilai-nilai ini bisa dilihat, setidaknya, dari tindakan mereka untuk melindungi dan melawan kekerasan kepada kelompok keagamaan yang rentan. Ini karena mereka meyakini bahwa kekerasan itu sendiri bertentangan dengan agama. Lebih dari itu, tindakan Banser ini cenderung menunjukkan praktek tertentu kewarganegaraan yang berbasis nilai-nilai keagamaan.

Kata Kunci: Banser, Keamanan, kelompok paramiliter, kelompok minoritas agama, kewarganegaraan

Introduction

Under Soeharto's leadership for more than 30 years, Indonesian people had lived "under surveillance". Press industries had been tightly controlled, people's voices had been tamed, and freedom of expression had been repressed. The fall of the "smiling general" Soeharto in 1998 has signaled new life for the Indonesian people. Within what so called as the Reform Era, press industries grow dramatically, voices of people are widely expressed and freedom of expression takes place everywhere. While this situation opens many possibilities as to where the architecture of Indonesian politics should go, the earlier period of the Reform Era also points out a serious challenge: the weakening of the state. This situation is characterized, at least, by the state's instability in providing the basic needs for their citizens; one of them is security (Masaaki and Rozaki 2006: ix).

This situation within this period is contradictory to that of the Orde Baru regime, where the state was so powerful that it overwhelmed Indonesian socio-cultural-political life. The space to criticize the government was closed. In the name of "social order", the repressive state apparatus coercively suppressed any

voices that were considered as against the regime. But, suddenly, after 1998, the state loosened its power. Violent conflict broke out in many places. Civilian casualties reached huge numbers, many properties had been destroyed, and "security" then became an expensive thing. The state seems powerless to manage the situation. Its inadequate performance led to another consequence: people felt uncertainty about where to go in this chaotic circumstance.

The weak performance of the state, by and large, has instigated the (re)emergence of violent based organizations (Masaaki and Rozaki 2006: 9), be in the name of primordial identity, such as FBR (*Forum Betawi Rempug, Betawi Rempug Forum*) in Jakarta, *Jawara* group in Banten to religious one such as FPI (*Front Pembela Islam, Islamic Defender Fronts*), *Laskar Jihad* (Warriors of Jihad), etc. These organizations appeared as suppressor groups that easily committed intolerant actions toward those of different interests and perceptions. Their demand varies from political and religious issues to economic ones. Their ability to adapt and take advantage of new situations makes them grow stronger. Some have successfully infiltrated political institutions, while others

run new “security businesses.” This business sounds promising in the age of the “retreat of the state” (Strange 1996, cited in Masaaki 2006: 2) and high demand for security.

This is not to say that all of the militia organizations that (re)emerged during the Reform Era are in the same boat; among them is *Banser*, *Barisan Ansor Serbaguna* (Ansor Multipurpose Front). This group got much attention, particularly during Abdurrahman Wahid’s presidency (1999-2001), due to its commitment to protect and defend President Wahid from being threatened with impeachment by his political opponents. While some argue that this organization does not differ from other paramilitary groups as a means of political violence (e.g., Ali-Fauzi 2008), I tend to argue differently. There might be a time when this group acted, to some extent, violently, particularly during the 1965-66 tragedy, but the role taken by *Banser* has shifted from time to time; thus, it needs a more careful examination. Furthermore, in the last two decades, we have seen how *Banser* is actively involved in protecting the minority groups while the state security that is supposed to be doing the job is often absent.

Founded in 1962 (Salim 2004: 37), the role of *Banser* has been significant in the Reform Era. From initially protecting the members of NU and securing activities conducted by this biggest mass organization in Indonesia, its role has now broadened. In April 2011, *Banser* created new divisions: Densus 99 to counter-attack

radicalism and terrorism movement, a new division to assist police in managing the traffic jams, and even to assist in disaster management (Republika 2011: np). While this effort can be seen as a help, it can also be read as posing a challenge to them due to their allegedly weak performance. From the violent cases over minority groups, it might not be an overstatement to say that *Banser* has substantially taken over the state apparatus’ function to protect those vulnerable groups. Their inadequate performance has led to a growing opinion among the public that the security arranged by *Banser* is much more trustworthy than that of the state security.

This paper will be divided into five sections to discuss this issue further. The first one will outline the theoretical sketch to analyze the (re)emergence of paramilitary groups in the Reform Era. The next section will discuss the history of *Banser* to get the context as to why *Banser* was born, its bodily practices and training to understand how they develop the skill that is important, particularly, in security provision. Following this is the discussion about religiosity and their commitment to the nation-state. Then, their reorientation of security will be dealt with to show how *Banser* and his role have changed and shifted due to the new situation they must cope with. The discussion will then end with reflections on the seemingly shifted orientation of *Banser* from mainly providing security to advocating a certain form of citizenship, one that is influenced by the religious values they hold and

their commitment toward the Republic of Indonesia.

Paramilitary Groups in the Contemporary Indonesia

The (re)emergence of paramilitary groups has been studied widely by some scholars. Most agreed that the New Order had been a significant period in these groups' (re)birth and proliferation, while their existence could be tracked down since the colonial era (Wilson 2005; Okamoto & Rozaki 2006). Their roles have varied from opposing and working for the colonial regime to maintaining local security (Nordholt 1991, Ongkhokham 2003 in Masaaki and Rozaki 2006: xi). In the revolution era, they were involved in the power struggle. After the independence, they maintained their role in the underworld by controlling certain territories such as stations, markets, and ports (Masaaki and Rozaki 2006: xii).

During the New Order regime, a "new" metamorphosis within paramilitary groups began when the regime formed *Pemuda Pancasila* and *Pemuda Pancamarga*. These groups acted as "assistants" of the regime to ensure that it would have achieved its goals and maintained its power over the citizens. Their physical and psychological method of investigation matched with the way the regime controlled their influence, giving the notion of state-sponsored violence "legitimate." Adding to this was the patronage relationship between the group of thugs and other paramilitary groups and the military, political and social

elites. The thugs acted as the "*beking*" (backing) of the elite, and they might have controlled a particular economic sector and shared some benefits with their patron. This brings the sense that "violence and criminality" were seen as part of the normal state practices (Wilson 2005: 1).

The fall of the New Order regime in 1998 did not make them dissolve. Instead, within this period, the number of paramilitary groups started to proliferate everywhere, be in the name of ethnic, religious and other ideological affiliations. Some of them maintain their connection with the elites, while others, to some extent, are independent. The losing power of the state and the absence of central authority, by and large, had conditioned the rivalry between the paramilitary groups. Consequently, violent conflict occurred, and the unsecured situation emerged due to this rivalry. The decentralization process has signaled the fragmented authority in controlling the territory. This has instigated conflict between the groups and trading the violence due to a relatively greater power to control the resources at the district level (Wilson 2005: 1). Adding to this is how the paramilitary groups have successfully infiltrated into the economic and political sector that makes the democratization process under critical circumstances (Masaaki and Rozaki 2006: xvi).

From this brief sketch, it is clear that the end of the New Order regime that is accompanied by the decentralization process has opened Pandora's box for the paramilitary groups to not only contest the

state authority in monopolizing the security but also pose a serious challenge to where the Indonesian political architecture goes in the future. The democratization process that has supposedly provided valuable opportunities to create a better Indonesia has been colored by the proliferation of violence. Thus, instead of consolidating the power of democratic institutions, this process has involved “a more fragmented intertwining with informal constellation of power” (Wilson 2005: 1).

The effort taken by the state to control these groups by proposing the revision of the regulation on the societal organization (*ormas, organisasi masyarakat*), Law No. 8/1985, in 2010 had been challenged by not only the militia groups but also the civil society organizations, though with different argumentation. Law No.8/1985 was a product of the New Order regime and had been used to control the societal organization. This kind of organization could be dissolved without legal process by the state once it is seen as a threat to the nation. However, it is quite ironic to see that this law had been a referent for the existence of *ormas* to be legalized once registered with the Ministry of Home Affairs (Wilson and Nugroho 2012: np). The new law on *ormas* was passed on July 2, 2013, Law No. 17/2013, but many observe that this law is unlikely to control the paramilitary groups in Indonesia effectively.

Indeed, the government issued the Government Regulation in Lieu of Law (*Peraturan Pemerintah Pengganti Undang-Undang* or *Perppu*) No. 2/2017 on July 10,

2017, to replace Law No. 17/2013. The government argued that the previous law was inadequate to regulate the societal organization whose number reached 344,034. To exemplify is the narrow definition formulated by Law No. 17/2013 on the term “teachings and actions against Pancasila” which is limited only to atheism, communism and leninism. The government argued that the ideologies that could be considered threatening to the country could come from others too, not only these three, as can be seen from Indonesian history (Marroli 2017).

This *Perppu* proposes that the government can ban or dissolve any societal organization that is seen as against Pancasila without a court process. This has sparked criticism since it will give the state a rather great power to control the organization. Furthermore, this regulation would potentially restrict the freedom of association, expression and thought, conscience and religion (Amnesty International 2017). One of the victims of this *Perppu* is *Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia* (HTI), which has been banned since the regulation was applied. Despite the criticism, the Indonesian parliament council legalized this *Perppu* as Law on October 24, 2017, with the majority support of its members (Wardani 2017). It is also based on this Law and other considerations that the Islamic paramilitary organization, FPI, was banned in 2020 (Farisa & Prabowo 2020).

Instead of being seen as solely a problem in the democratic transition process and thus in need to be tightly

controlled by the state, this paper argues that the proliferation of the paramilitary groups could be seen as agents that are actively involved in defining security and order after the fall of the authoritarian regime. It is widely known that during the New Order regime, the terms “security” and “order” were monopolized by the regime to eliminate their rivals or those considered a threat. Once the regime collapsed, the power to define security and order was polarized from the state apparatus to the civil militia groups. It is important to note that these militia groups vary, not only in their interests and primordial affiliation but also in the way they conceptualize security and order. Some of them may see this as part of “business”, but others, such as *Banser*, consider this as part of the reason for their existence itself. Drawing from Menkhaus’s analysis on the security arrangement by local actors in a fragile state, Somalia (2004: 149-165), *Banser* could be seen as a creative agent involved in building and reshaping Indonesia. Expressing in other words, their involvement in security arrangements could be seen as part of the effort in the state formation that is still in process and far from being complete.

The History of *Banser*

Banser was formally founded in 1962. *Banser* is a “paramilitary” group under Ansor coordination. Ansor itself is an autonomous body for the male youth group of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the biggest mass organization in Indonesia renowned

for its record of spreading moderate, pluralist and tolerant Islam. It was informed at that time that its task was to provide security in any activities conducted by NU and its supporters. Still, it was obviously known that its secret mission was to confront the Indonesian Communist Party (*Partai Komunis Indonesia*, PKI) and its associated organization in that critical period (Salim 2004: 37; Fealy 1998: 315). During 1962-1965, it was said that the PKI and their associated organizations (particularly *Barisan Tani Indonesia* and *Pemuda Rakyat*) acted on their own sake to grab the land and forcibly took any properties belonging to those considered as the seven village devils (figures such as ‘wicked landlords’ and ‘blood-sucking money-lenders,’ etc) (Anam 1990: 88; Bachriadi 2012: np).

These actions posed a serious challenge for NU since most of their leaders (ulama) at that time were, allegedly, landlords, one of seven village devils that needed to be fought (Cayrac-Blanchard 1991, cited in Feillard 1999: 65). Several times, *Banser* had physically confronted the PKI and its associated organizations until 1965, where the Indonesian army destroyed the PKI in cooperation with other religious and civil militia groups. Considering that *Banser* was prepared for a confrontation, this implies that *Banser* was not an ordinary division of Ansor. It might be argued here that, compared to others, *Banser* is a “more trained” division within the Ansor organization. To understand more about this, there is an

urgent need to track back the history of Ansor, its main creator.

It was Nahdlatul Syubban, an organization initiated by some elites of the young group of NU that pioneered the birth of Ansor (Anam 1990: 18). At that time, Nahdlatul Syubban was an independent organization and not under NU coordination. However, due to the need to train the new cadres within NU, the name of this youth organization was changed to *Persatuan Pemuda* NU in 1931, indicating that it had a close relationship with NU. However, in the next development, the word “persatuan” was removed, and its name was changed to “*Pemuda Nahdlatul Ulama*” (the Youth of Ulama Awakening organization) (Anam 1990: 18).

The existence of this organization was then consulted with the famous teacher among the young group of NU, K.H Wahab Hasbullah. During the consultation, Kiai Wahab recited some verses of al-Qur’an that tell the story about the Prophet’s companions in Madinah who helped the Prophet and Moslem from Mecca when they moved to Madinah (Yatsrib). Because of this assistance, the Prophet named the companions in Madinah *Ansor*, the helpers. Learning from this story, the name of this youth organization was finally changed to Ansor Nahdlatul Ulama (ANO) (1934). With this name, it was expected that the members of this organization would act as Moslem in Madinah, always helping and struggling in God’s path (Anam 1990: 19-20).

With the new name, ANO had its first congress in 1936 in Surabaya. This congress did not issue any important decisions except the need to create branches around Indonesia and form marching groups with uniforms. The latter idea was implemented in its second congress, 1937, where ANO had developed a scouting division, namely *Banoe* (*Barisan Ansor Nahdlatul Ulama*). Within this congress, *Banoe* performed their ability to march with new equipment: yellow uniform, green tie, black cap, and a double gold star on the shoulder. Furthermore, in the twelfth Mukhtamar of NU, *Banoe* attracted the audience by showing their ability to arrange security. Following this, in the third congress of ANO in Kudus, Central Java, April 19-23, *Banoe* performed their skill on *Pencak Silat* (Indonesia martial arts) (Anam 1990: 23-26).

The development of *Banoe* with their uniform and marching skills attracted attention from ulama within NU. Thus, it was not surprising that their improvisation by equipping their marching performance with trumpet and drum had instigated a debate among ulama. In the fifth congress, a committee of ulama was arranged to discuss this issue, and then after a long and thoughtful discussion, it was announced that using trumpet and drum in marching was allowed (Anam 1990: 35). It is quite interesting here to point out that the development of *Banoe*, particularly their physical performance, had attracted serious attention among ulama. The reason for this might lie in the

fact that ANO was prepared as a political instrument for NU to achieve its goals. Due to this, any performances related to ANO and *Banoe* should reflect the worldview of NU, including their religiosity.

In the period of 1940-es, there was a shift within Indonesian political life, particularly when Japan occupied Indonesia after defeating Holland. Under Japanese colonial rule, mass organizations had been shut down, including ANO. Prior to 1945, the Japanese leader asked the Indonesian people to form military troops. In response, NU negotiated with the Japanese government to allow *santri* and ANO members to participate in this program (Salim 2004: 43). Following this was the birth of Hizbullah. Under Hizbullah, the role taken, particularly by ANO, in the struggle for Indonesian independence was significant. Moreover, the renowned religious decree issued by the ulama of NU, *Resolusi Jihad fi Sabilillah*, was announced in the ANO office in Surabaya. This decree had significantly spirited ANO members to fight against the colonial troops (Anam 1990: 46).

After the “revolution” (1945-1949), some elites of ANO met and decided to revive ANO after being shut down under Japanese colonial rule. In 1949, the name of Ansor was changed to *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor* (GP Ansor, the Youth Movement of Ansor) (Anam 1990: 59-60). Since then, the role of Ansor has increased, particularly during the confrontation with the PKI. Within this event, so-called as the movement of September 30th, *Banser* was

created to protect ulama and fight against PKI and their associated organizations. Being showered with the spirit of *jihad fi sabilillah*, *Banser* actively participated in destroying the PKI and its associated organization during 1962-1965.

From this short history, it can be argued here that *Banoe* is the predecessor of *Banser*. To strengthen this, some arguments can be made: first, *Banoe* is the first division among ANO introduced with the uniform. This was a new development within ANO. Secondly, *Banoe* had been assigned to security provision, at least, as can be seen in the twelfth Muktamar of NU. Thirdly, *Banoe* possessed a skill necessary to provide security: *Pencak Silat*. These three characteristics, by and large, define *Banser's* characteristics today.

However, instead of being supported by ulama within NU, the development of *Banoe* was strongly criticized. The uniform with its accessories, particularly the green tie, was the first object of criticism because it made them look like a colonial officer. This was a serious issue because, at that time, there were some ulama within NU who believed that acting like a group of people could also mean being part of them (*man tasyabbaha bi qoumin fa huwa minhum*) (Anam 1990: 28). It was an urgent need for Indonesian people, particularly NU members, to differentiate themselves from colonial people because colonialism itself was (and still is) considered as against religion.

Following this, two weeks before the 13th *muktamar* of NU in Menes, a

forum to discuss *Banoe* and their bodily practices and training was initiated by some elites of ulama within NU, such as KH. Abdul Faqih, KH. Bisri Samsuri and KH. Mahfudz Shiddiq. From this forum, it was announced that *Banoe* and their uniform were recognized and allowed by NU (Anam 1990: 27-28). Moreover, this forum also highlighted the bodily practices allowed by sharia (Islamic jurisprudence). KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, the founding father of NU, stated that bodily practices and training (*riyadlatul badaniyah*) were allowed as long as they were in line with sharia, bringing some advantages and not harmful to the body. With this direction, it was then decided that the bodily training allowed were marching, jumping and running, lifting, camping, practicing first aid help, etc. (Anam 1990: 28). With this, the problem around *Banoe* and their bodily practices was settled down.

Besides these practices, *Banoe* also performed another one that is important in the later image of *Banoe* (and *Banser*) as an informal security provider, which is *Pencak Silat* (Indonesian martial arts). This can be seen from their performance in the third congress of ANO in 1938. The question is where did they learn *Pencak Silat*? To deal with this, we need to look closely at the world of ANO and *Banoe*.

It is stated earlier that ANO was a place where the youth group of NU could express and self-actualize their idea. Since ANO is part of NU, and NU is an organization founded by ulama from *pesantren*, it is arguable that the members of ANO mostly

come from *pesantren*. *Pesantren* is a place for *santri* (*pesantren* students) to learn religious subjects in depth. While this is the main concern of *santri*, this did not necessarily mean that *santri* did not learn anything else. Some literature mention that *Pencak Silat* is another training that *santri* needs to learn from *pesantren*. While it is also true that not all *pesantren* teach their *santri* *Pencak Silat* skill, this practice is not alien to them.

This can be seen from some memories drawn by some ulama when they learned in *pesantren*. KH. Saifuddin Zuhri (1974: 41), in his book "Guruku Orang-orang dari Pesantren", recounted his memory about one of his teachers, KH. Khalimi, who did not only teach religious subjects but also *Pencak Silat*. Kiai Khalimi was renowned as *Pendekar Cikalong*. Cikalong is a variant of *Pencak silat*, which is typical of West Java. Similar to this was informed by KH. Arman Arroisi who studied at *Pesantren Buntet*, Cirebon. He said that he had almost no leisure time because of the full-day learning schedule. At night, he learned *Pencak Silat* from his mentor, who was very skillful in *cimande* and *eS Ha* (other variants of *Pencak Silat* style) (Arroisi 1988).

From this description, while it is still unclear whether learning *Pencak Silat* is something obligatory, it can be argued here that it is not prohibited. Moreover, within *pesantren*, *santri* was also thought about *wirid* (a bit similar to a mantra, but it is derived from the authoritative religious text) to enhance their physical endurance

and strength (*kebal*). To maximally obtain a high level of this strength, sometimes *santri* needed to do fasting, as was informed by Kiai Arman Arroisi (1988). At the ultimate level of this practice, even a sharp blade could not injure them. This practice has been common knowledge for those who go to *pesantren*.¹

For *Banser*, this practice played an important role because this could increase their confidence and charisma. During the fight with the PKI and its associated organizations, the members of *Banser* visited ulama to get *wirid* and asked them to enhance their physical endurance and strength (Anam 1990: 88). Combining with *Pencak Silat* skill, members of *Banser* are no longer an ordinary youth group. Similar to this was when *Banser* decided to defend Gus Dur as president due to the impeachment initiated by his political enemies. In preparation for this, thousands of members of *Banser* went to East Java, visited ulama and asked *wirid* to improve their physical endurance and strength (Salim 2004: 103).

Furthermore, *Banoe* (and *Banser*) also got “military” training, at least at its basic level, from the army or those associated with it. The general instructor for *Banoe* in 1937 was Mayor Hamid Rusydi, from National Indonesian Troops (Anam 1990: 25). After 1949, while many former

members of Hizbullah became the national troops, by and large, many of them had been involved in the training for Ansor members. Particularly from 1981, when Ansor decided to support Soeharto’s candidacy for president, the relationship between *Banser* and Indonesian national troops got closer. Since then, many instructors for *Banser*’s training have come from military troops (Salim 2004: 75). Considering this, it is justifiable to say that *Banser* is a “more trained” Ansor member. They have combined their outer and inner strength. Also, they have been trained in “military” skills.

Religiosity and Nationalism

Religiosity and nationalism had been part of the history of *Banser*, as it can be seen from the short history outlined earlier. Since then, these two keywords have been the center of *Banser*’s conceptualization of security and order in a changing situation. Furthermore, the way they conceptualize security is very different from that of other security agencies such as FBR or former FPI. To better understand *Banser* in relation to this issue, *pesantren* (again) would be the best place to start. *Pesantren* has been seen as a subculture because of its unique position. Instead of being integrated into society, *pesantren* “separates” itself from it. Due to this “separation”, some differences emerge between them, at least in three

¹ A friend of mine who spent several years in one of famous *pesantren* in East Java informed me that after completing one level of schooling, *santri* will be given a *wirid*. Thus, those who have completed the school will get many *wirid* from their teachers

things: way of life, norms, and hierarchy of power (Wahid 2001: 7-14).

Within *pesantren*, ulama is the only authoritative person that possesses, considerably, “absolute power”. The *pesantren* community widely recognizes this power. Ulama plays an important role in guiding *santri* to stay on the right path. Moreover, ulama has always been considered to have a high quality of morals and a comprehensive understanding of religious issues. This image becomes more legitimized since *the pesantren* community believe that ulama is the inheritor of the prophet. With this picture, it is obvious that *santri* will pay high respect to their ulama. Since the members of *Banser* mostly come from *pesantren*, the way they see ulama is similar to *santri*. Even they pay more respect to them rather than to high government officials.

They use the word “to serve” to describe the way they treat ulama. This word is closely linked to the *pesantren* tradition. Within *pesantren*, there are *santri* who learn at their own expense. Others, mostly from low-income families, usually take another route, which is “serving” ulama and his family by, particularly, doing the household work. Their basic expenses normally are under the responsibility of the ulama. After finishing their work, they can join other *santri* learning religious subjects. Moreover, the motive to choose “serving” ulama is not only because

of a shortage of money but also to get blessings (*tabarrukan*). It is believed that to be successful, you need to be not only smart but also blessed.

With this spirit and motives, it is not surprising that *Banser* does their task, in terms of security arrangement, without having any intention to be paid or rewarded financially because it is, allegedly, not financial or other similar rewards they look for, but the reward in the *hereafter* life (*akhirat*). Having said this, it is not to say that *Banser* never or does not receive any financial reward. They may receive some amount of money, but their client decides it, and normally, it is so small.² This differs *Banser* from other security providers because the provider usually determines the payment. They have their own system of tariffs.

The performance of *Banser* is also qualitatively distinct from other religious militia groups such as the Islamic Defender Front (FPI). While the latter often commit violence in pursuing their goals, *Banser* seems to relatively maintain their actions in peaceful ways. This does not necessarily mean that they never commit any violent actions. Indeed, they were involved in bloody actions against the PKI members in 1962-1965. During that time, they needed to protect ulama and NU members from being attacked, and because of this, they were physically confronted by the PKI members.

² Based on interview conducted by Salim, the amount of money they got is around Rp 10.000-Rp 25.000/person. It depends on the negotiation. More detail about this, see Salim 2004: 182-183.

In general, it can be argued here that their option to maintain peace reflects their religious values. Religious values here refer to moderate (*tawassuth*), tolerant (*tasaamuh*), balance (*tawaazun*) and fair and justice (*al-i'tidal*). These values define the characteristics of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* tenets (Siradj 1999: 160). *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* is renowned as the moderate group within Islam. Its early development was to counter the Mu'tazilah group (Nasution 1986: 64). Ulama of NU then developed it with the formulation: in terms of Islamic jurisprudence, they follow one of four Islamic schools of thought (Maliki, Hanafi, Syafi'i, and Hanbali); in theology they follow al-Asy'ari and al-Maturidi; in spirituality (*tasawwuf*), they follow al-Junaidi.

KH. Ahmad Siddiq, the famous leader of ANO and NU, explains in detail how to implement these values in practice. In theology, for example, people should not easily judge others as heresy. Regarding Islamic law and jurisprudence, NU members are open to different opinions due to the multi-interpreted text. In ethics, they maintain the attitude to behave ethically and prevent over-judging while identifying problems. In terms of social relationships (*mu'amalah*), they should respect others and help those who are in need. Regarding state-related issues, NU stands in the position to defend the Indonesian republic and avoid any rebellious actions against the state (Siddiq 1979: 40-44).

Ansor and its *banser* have committed to practicing *Ahlussunnah wal*

Jama'ah principles. How they behave toward the Ahmadiyya group could be a good example of how these principles are implemented. While FPI and other hard-radical militia groups decided to attack, threaten and force Ahmadiyya to dissolve their organization, *Banser* chose to protect them because violence is against tolerant and moderate values. *Banser* did recognize that NU has issued a formal statement that Ahmadiyya is out of Islam. Still, *Banser* and also NU disagree that Ahmadiyya should be treated discriminately and be the object of attack.

Besides religious values, Ansor and its *Banser* have also committed to Indonesian-ness (Anam 1990: 133). This commitment has been proven by their involvement in fighting colonial powers and those considered threatening the nation. "*Resolusi Jihad fi Sabilillah*", which was issued by NU leaders, states the obligation of each person (*fardh 'ain*) to defend the independence of Indonesia. This has spirited the members of Ansor to battle against the nation's enemies. Moreover, Ansor and its *Banser* have been actively involved in strengthening Indonesian nationalism through their youth program, such as national camping in which people from different religious affiliations take part in this program.

From Communism to Radicalism

Observing the development of *Banser*, the period 1962-1965 could be seen as a significant event to point out its existence formally. It is stated that the movement

of the PKI had led to the birth of *Banser*. Without the PKI movement, there might be no *Banser* today. At that critical time, the security provided by *Banser* would always be associated with the PKI movement. The PKI and its associates had become a horror for Indonesian people. Particularly for *Banser*, they needed to directly confront the PKI members because of their alleged threat to the ulama. It could be said here that the longer the PKI existed, the longer they felt insecure.

After the collapse of the PKI movement, the social and political life of the Indonesian people changed. The new regime, the so-called Orde Baru, emerged. Instead of having privileges due to their significant assistance to the government, Ansor and *Banser* faced some difficulties; even some of their members had been sent to jail due to an accusation that Ansor was against the Orde Baru leadership. In response to this, the leader of Ansor, in its seventh congress, decided their commitment to support Orde Baru in annihilating communism, marxism, and leninism (Anam 1990: 118). This decision aligned with the policy issued by the Orde Baru regime in TAP MPRS 1966 No. XXV, which is to destroy PKI and prohibit any activities to spread communism, marxism, and leninism.

While this had temporarily resolved the difficulties faced by Ansor, this decision saved the existence of *Banser*, whose main reason for forming was to confront the PKI members. While, physically, PKI was destroyed, there is still a possibility

that the PKI will rise again. TAP MPRS 1966 No. XXV clearly reflects this worry. Thus, the decision taken by Ansor that supported the government to exterminate any activities related to communism was relevant to the government's imagination about the PKI.

When the Orde Baru regime collapsed in 1998, and Gus Dur was elected as the new president in 1999, new development within *Banser* occurred. The effort taken by Gus Dur to revoke TAP MPRS 1966 No. XXV has signaled new consciousness within NU, particularly their young groups, including *Banser*. At the national level, Gus Dur's effort may fail due to huge protests, but it has triggered people to reexamine the history of the 1965 tragedy. In 2000, *Banser* Yogyakarta made a serious attempt to make amends publicly to the victims of the 1965 tragedy (Bernas, Solo Pos and Radar Yogya /22/11/00, cited in Salim 2004: 62). These amends are very significant since they disrupted the collective imagination about the PKI among the *Banser* members.

If this is the case, how does *Banser* reorient their security provisions in the Reform Era? After the fall of Soeharto, Salim (2004: 165) notes the reemergence of the *jihad* discourse among the members of Ansor and its *Banser*. The trigger of this was the death of Riyanto, a member of *Banser* Mojokerto, while being involved in the security arrangement at Eben Heizer Church on December 12, 2000. The death of Riyanto was considered as *Syahid*. Moreover, since the nature of Islam is a

blessing for all human beings, not only for Muslims, accomplishing this mission was also part of worship (*ibadah*).

Jihad had also spirited *Banser* to defend Gus Dur during the impeachment process. This is because Gus Dur had been legitimately elected. Thus, any actions to topple Gus Dur could be considered a coup. Due to this, it is an obligation for Indonesian people to defend their leader. Moreover, Gus Dur was the former head of *Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama* (PBNU), the grandchild of the founding father of NU and an outstanding ulama within NU. Considering this, as the mission assigned to *Banser*, it is their task to “serve” and support his leadership.

Another challenge that emerged in the Reform Era was the growing violent actions committed by hard, radical religious groups toward those considered as “enemies” due to the different interpretations and religious affiliations. It is highly notable that in the Reform Era, the hard radical religious groups physically attacked and offensively acted toward religious minority groups. Their irresponsible actions had led to human casualties and broken properties in many places. As Setara Institute (2010) notes, in 2007, the number of intolerant actions reached 185 cases. A year later, in 2008, the cases of violence increased significantly, reaching 367 cases. In 2010, the Wahid Institute noted that there were 135 cases of violence related to religious issues in 13 observation areas, and in a follow-up report four years later, the number had increased to 185 cases

(The Wahid Institute 2014). The fast-growing radical group has led to religious disharmony. Those who have lived in Indonesia for a long time, even before Indonesia’s independence, such as the Ahmadiyya people, have been a target of attack. Similar to this is experienced by religious minority groups.

These violent actions committed by the hard radical groups have been seen, particularly by Ansor and its *Banser*, as a threat to citizenship and Indonesian-ness. At the same time, particularly during Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono’s leadership between 2004 and 2014, the state security that supposedly dealt with those actions seemed reluctant, not to say powerless, to take serious actions against these groups. Due to this, *Banser* made real efforts by offering protection to those vulnerable groups. *Banser* did recognize that these minority groups have different religious understandings, but this could not be used as a justification to commit violence against them. Based on the principle they hold, violent action itself is against religion.

From this short sketch, it can be argued that *Banser* has reoriented their conceptions of security depending on their situation and challenges. One thing that needs to be noted from this reorientation is their commitment to the religious principles they hold and their commitment to the nation-state and citizenship. Looking at the recent development of *Banser*, it seems that *Banser’s* conceptions of security have shifted from communism to countering religious extremist groups

and, at the same time, protecting religious minority groups and other vulnerable ones. At some point, *Banser* is trying to practice some kind of religious citizenship within which religious values they hold will navigate the way they see and treat other fellow citizens.

From Security to Citizenship?

It has been noted that the performance of the state security had been inadequate, particularly during the president SBY, to manage the violent actions committed by the hard radical groups. The Ahmadiyya case is a real example of how state security has allegedly failed to protect Indonesian citizens from being attacked and harassed by religious militia groups. Furthermore, to some extent, they even had been involved in sealing the Ahmadiyya mosque and banning them from preaching their religious beliefs. At this point, *Banser* decided to take action by protecting these groups and preventing them from having further experience of intolerant actions.

Similar cases occurred when state security was involved in preventing a public discussion organized by Salihara and *Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial* (LKiS) Yogyakarta with Irshad Manji as the speaker in 2012. Irshad Manji is a Muslim thinker with controversial ideas such as publicly supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT). Furthermore, they failed to protect the participants of the

discussion when the Muslim radical group who strongly protested this event started to attack them. Part of the LKiS Yogyakarta building was even partly destroyed.

Reacting to this tragedy, many people expressed their sympathy, protested the state security (police institution), and cursed the wrongdoers. What is interesting from this protest was the statement mentioning that the security provision provided by *Banser* was more effective than that of the state security.³ While this statement might sound overreacting, it found its justification when we look at the security arrangement provided by *Banser* for the Ahmadiyya group, for example, in Cirebon. The members of *Banser* have actively protected them from the threat posed by hard radical groups so that Ahmadiyya people could practice their daily worship. With the presence of *Banser*, Irshad Manji also successfully delivered her speech at ISAI (*Institut Studi Arus Informasi*) a few days after the Salihara incident.

This statement also implies the public trust in the state security within those cases was declining. Due to this, it is not surprising that people tend to turn to other security providers, i.e., *Banser*, if they need security arrangements. This might happen due to the continuous inadequate performance shown by the state security. Moreover, the state security, concerning police institutions, for example, has long been considered full of corrupt practices

³ Many expression about this have been posted in social media such as facebook and twitter, short after the Salihara incident on May, 4, 2012.

when dealing with cases. This does not necessarily mean no effort has been made to fix this issue. But, in practice, there are many cases where people need the police to help them; they must spend a lot of money. This also means that those short of money will find it difficult to get the security provision by the state.

More than providing protection, *Banser* strongly advocated their commitment toward NKRI (*Negara Kesatuan Republik Indonesia*, the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) and religious moderation principles. This can be seen from their confrontation with the now-banned HTI on several occasions, such as at *Khilafah* Forum in Semarang, Central Java and *tabligh akbar* and public oration in Makassar, South Sulawesi (Dwijayanto 2019). In both activities, it was unavoidable that HTI would discuss and promote the idea of *khilafah*. And this is not surprising since HTI had been actively campaigning the idea of *khilafah* and allegedly committed to replacing Pancasila with this doctrine. Due to this, *Banser* considered this organization to be against Pancasila, which may endanger the plurality of religious communities in Indonesia.

Furthermore, *Banser* also confronted the religious public figure actively preaching religious speech that may escalate the tension between religious communities. One of the examples is when *Banser* stopped the religious gathering (*pengajian*) in Sidoarjo, East Java, in 2017, with the main speaker Khalid Basalamah, a Salafi leader who is quite

popular in Indonesia (Detik.com, cited in Dwijayanto 2019). Their decision to do this is because, as *Banser* argues, Khalid tends to strongly criticize the practices of certain religious groups that are considered against his understanding. And this is not Khalid's first performance in expressing his religious attitude toward others. Khalid stopped his religious speech after 25 minutes of delivery.

The actions taken by *Banser* in the last two cases could be questioned as these might be considered against democratic values. In addition, *Banser* has no authority to stop any events since it is not part of the state apparatus. Furthermore, what *Banser* did could be accused of being similar to that of hardliner groups when they take action against religious minority groups. While this is an important issue to discuss further, this is separate from this paper's focus. Rather, this paper is interested in understanding why *Banser* performed this kind of action and what it means for their alleged commitment to NKRI and moderate religious values.

It is mentioned earlier that there was a shift in the way *Banser* conceptualizes their orientation toward security, from communism to radicalism. Later on, *Banser* is actively involved in protecting religious minority groups and preventing the spread of intolerant religious values. *Banser* holds religious values such as moderate (*tawassuth*), tolerant (*tasaamuh*), balance (*tawaazun*) and fair and justice (*al-i'tidal*), such

values that define the characteristic of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah*, renowned as the moderate group within Islam. Furthermore, *Banser* is also committed to defending the spirit of Indonesianness. These two commitments, by and large, have navigated the actions taken by *Banser* in dealing with many issues. These include the cases aforementioned earlier. The case with HTI could arguably be interpreted as conflicting with the commitment of *Banser* to defend NKRI as HTI ideas, as they argue, against Pancasila. Meanwhile, the case of Khalid Basalamah is more related to the religious values they uphold, as Khalid is being seen as spreading more conservative-fundamentalist views that may endanger religious moderation in Indonesia.

Again, this paper does not intend to judge whether *Banser's* actions were right or wrong. But, looking at the discourse of citizenship, I argue that *Banser* is trying to exercise what is so-called religious citizenship (Hudson 2003), a kind of citizenship practice where religion or religious values serve as a foundation in navigating the actions taken by the people. This term might sound contradictory since it is often assumed that religion and citizenship would not go hand in hand since religion is religious in nature while citizenship is more secular. However, Turner (2002) rejects this assumption, arguing that religion may provide a strong foundation for citizenship since it offers a social bond that goes beyond kinship and primordial ethnic ties.

Bendix (1964, cited in Turner 2006, p. 227) argues that citizenship practices are aimed to weaken class divisions, identity politics and differences. With this, *Banser's* actions to prevent the spreading religious fundamentalist views and actions found their justification based on the religious values they believed in and the commitment toward preserving Pancasila and NKRI. However, this does not necessarily mean that their actions were right or acceptable within the democratic arena, a question worth further discussion. But, this at least informed us that there is a shift in *Banser's* orientation toward security that now is more leaning toward exercising religious citizenship.

Conclusion

The history of *Banser*, from its early formation until the Reform Era, has depicted some developments: from a political instrument for NU to an active defender of minority groups and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). Their conception of security has occasionally shifted, though their commitment toward NKRI and religious moderated values has remained unquestioned. Due to this, looking at *Banser* as only an agent of political violence simplifies the problem⁴ as if *Banser* is not different from other militia organizations such as FPI (Islamic Defender Front) and *Forum Betawi Rempug* (Betawi Brotherhood Forum).

Their role in the Reform Era has been expanded by creating new divisions, from combating radicalism and terrorism

to assisting disaster management and firefighting activities. This development poses a serious challenge to state security. The security performance of *Banser* could be seen as providing, borrowing Menkhaus's words, "the informal system of security" while at the same time shedding light on a more "predictability" of lives (Menkhaus 2004: 163). *Banser* has shown what security and order mean for Indonesian people, particularly for the religious minority groups.

Furthermore, the recent development of *Banser* has also informed us that they tend to advocate religious citizenship to preserve the unity in diversity of Indonesia and bring a nuance of harmony

toward the life or religious communities regardless of their different interpretation and understanding. While this paper could not entirely capture the phenomenon of *Banser* in the Reform Era, let alone contemporary Indonesia, one thing that could be highlighted is their commitment toward Indonesian unity and religious moderation, which are worth noting since the problems related to these issues have become more challenging from time to time in this biggest country by Muslim population in the world. These challenges need to be seriously dealt with; otherwise, these will always haunt the future of Indonesia and its plural society in the coming years.*

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⁴ This can be seen, for example, in Ali-Fauzi's article, which argues that Banser tends to act violently to serve the political interest of their leaders. More details about this can be read at Ali-Fauzi, Ihsan. 2008. Religion, Politics, and Violence in Indonesia: Learning From Banser's Experience. *Studia Islamika*, 15: 3

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