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Between Buffet-Style Islam and the Complete-Package Islam: The Indonesian Ulama Council Balancing Moderation and Orthodoxy

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Abstract

Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, Indonesia has witnessed an intensified public role for religious authority alongside the consolidation of democratic institutions. Within this transformed political landscape, the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) is tremendously influential, serving as a government advisory body. This article approaches the MUI through the continuum between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam. “Buffet-style” refers to approaches where believers selectively interpret and practice Islam according to their individual choices. In contrast, complete-package Islam emphasises a holistic understanding of Islam where religious doctrine functions as an integrated system under recognised religious authority. Rather than treating these tendencies as segregated extreme poles, the article argues that they exist along a continuum continuously negotiated within Indonesian Islam. Viewed within this framework, the MUI’s trajectory reveals a striking paradox. Fatwas against pluralism and Ahmadiyya reflected strong commitments to doctrinal orthodoxy and boundary-making authority. Simultaneously, the rise in religious moderation has increasingly positioned the MUI within state-sponsored discourses of tolerance and harmony. By situating the MUI within this continuum, the article examines how it negotiates the tensions between doctrinal authority and religious moderation and the extent to which this negotiation shapes the governance of pluralism in democratic Indonesia.

Keywords: MUI; Majelis Ulama Indonesia; Indonesian Ulama Council; SiPiLis; Ahmadiyya; religious moderation; buffet-style Islam; complete-package Islam



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1. Introduction

The Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) was founded in 1975 and comprised several Indonesian Muslim groups, except Shi’ite Muslims and Ahmadiyya, who were regarded as deviant. Since then, the MUI has acted as an interface between the Indonesian government and various Islamic communities.

Since the fall of Suharto in 1998, Indonesia has witnessed an intensified public role for religious authority alongside the consolidation of democratic institutions. Within this transformed political and religious landscape, the MUI has emerged as one of the most influential Islamic bodies shaping debates about orthodoxy, public morality, and the place of Islam in a plural society. The growing influence of the MUI reflects a broader transformation

within Indonesian Islam itself, particularly the continuing tension between individualised religious interpretation and the institutional consolidation of Islamic orthodoxy.

In 2005, the council issued a fatwa declaring secularism, pluralism, and liberalism (SiPiLis) to be religiously forbidden and portraying these ideological orientations as threats to the Islamic faith and the moral foundations of the nation (MUI 2005a). In the same year, it reaffirmed its earlier ruling that the Ahmadiyya movement was heretical (*sesat*) and outside Islam, reinforcing calls to limit the group's religious activities (MUI 2005b).

However, this position became increasingly complex in the subsequent decade, as religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*) emerged as a central state policy discourse. The MUI was gradually drawn into initiatives promoting tolerance, harmony, and the management of religious diversity. This represented an apparent shift from exclusionary doctrinal policing toward participation in a state-sponsored moderation agenda. On the one hand, the MUI continues to promote a comprehensive and orthodox vision of Islam grounded in institutional religious authority. On the other hand, its involvement in religious moderation requires accommodation to democratic pluralism, social coexistence, and the realities of a diverse society.

This paradox is not merely an inconsistency in institutional behaviour, but it also reflects a deeper tension in the governance of religion in democratic Indonesia. The MUI operates at the intersection of religious authority and state legitimacy, where defining theological boundaries also has significant social and political consequences. Its exclusionary rulings helped shape public perceptions of acceptable belief and contributed to a climate in which minority interpretations of Islam, such as Ahmadiyya, became vulnerable to restriction and social hostility. At the same time, the state's growing emphasis on religious moderation has required recognised religious authorities to support a national vision of tolerance and plural coexistence. Therefore, the MUI's authority depends on its ability to preserve doctrinal orthodoxy but also on its capacity to adapt to the socio-political realities of democratic pluralism.

This study argues that the sustainability of the MUI's authority is maintained precisely through its movement along the continuum between these two conflicting ideals. Rather than occupying a permanently fixed ideological position, the MUI continuously negotiates between promoting comprehensive Islamic orthodoxy and accommodating selective forms of moderation that the democratic state requires. Situating the MUI within this continuum allows the analysis to explore the research question of this article: "How does the MUI negotiate the tensions between doctrinal purity and religious moderation, and to what extent does this negotiation shape the governance of pluralism in contemporary Indonesia?"

2. "Buffet-Style" Versus "Complete-Package"

This article will apply an established Indonesian metaphor as a lens in its analysis of the topic "How can the MUI accept tolerance and religious moderation without entirely compromising its ideal of complete obedience to Islam?"

The metaphor appears to have emerged within broader conservative *dakwah* networks before becoming normalised through repeated circulation among MUI-affiliated ulama, preachers, and Islamic revivalist actors. In this way, the MUI created an institutional space through which the metaphor gained legitimacy and public resonance. It is widely used to guide and popularise the MUI's message to the Indonesian public.

The metaphor describes the span between those who obey and practice the religion in its entirety and those who pick and choose based on their selfish motives. It is a normative span between what are considered "appropriate" and "inappropriate" forms of Islam.

A Qur'anic verse commonly associated with entering into Islam completely expresses this ultimate goal: "O you who believe, enter into Islam completely (*kaffah*), and do not follow the footsteps of Satan" (Qur'an 2:208).

The ideal of entering Islam completely is closely connected to the Arabic term *kaffah*, which is used in this verse. Within the metaphor, the MUI applies the Indonesian term "*paket lengkap*" whose literal translation is "complete package".

The opposite attitude is described in this Qur'anic verse: "Then do you believe in part of the Scripture and disbelieve in another part? What is the recompense for those who do so among you except disgrace in worldly life, and on the Day of Resurrection they will be sent back to the severest punishment?" (Qur'an 2:85).

The metaphor uses the Indonesian term *Islam prasmanan* (buffet-style Islam) to describe this undesirable attitude. It refers to Muslims who embrace only those aspects of Islam that suit their individual preferences while neglecting other obligations that are considered equally binding. The issue is not that "buffet Muslims" completely abandon divine commandments, but rather that they practice Islam selectively and incompletely. In other words, the distinction lies between what is perceived as a comprehensive and wholehearted adherence to the shari'a and a partial or fragmented observance of it.

In order to elaborate on how the metaphor is used within the MUI, we have chosen an example from a sermon by Abdullah Zaen, a scholar titled *ustadz* in Indonesian:

A buffet is one way of serving guests. Various kinds of food are neatly arranged on a table and decorated attractively—ranging from side dishes, vegetables, fruits, to beverages. Guests are then free to take whatever they like. The dishes they find appealing are selected, while those they dislike are simply ignored and left untouched. This is what is meant by a buffet-style meal (...) Is such a buffet-style arrangement permissible in Islam? Certainly—it is allowed and religiously acceptable, as long as the food served is halal and lawful (...)

The real problem, however, is that some Muslims treat the teachings and shari'a of Islam as though they were a buffet meal. When they encounter teachings they find agreeable or pleasing, they accept and follow them. Yet when certain teachings appear unpleasant or incompatible with their personal tastes, they reject them. Some teachings are even avoided altogether. Such an attitude is not permissible in Islam. Islam is not a buffet religion (...)

Once a person professes Islam, they are expected to accept it in its entirety. One cannot selectively embrace only the teachings that feel convenient while ignoring those deemed difficult or undesirable. Islam is not a religion to be followed according to one's personal whims. (Zaen 2019)

The two are not presented as a choice between two exclusive entities, but rather as a scale or linear continuum where buffet-style Islam and the complete package constitute the opposite poles. Between these poles exist multiple gradations, variations, and negotiated forms of religiosity that cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy between "proper" and "improper" Islam. This continuum helps explain the long-standing socio-cultural diversity within Muslim societies, where patterns of religious commitment range from more syncretic, accommodative, and flexible forms of Islam to stricter, scripturally oriented, and more comprehensive modes of observance.

Seen from a hermeneutic perspective, the buffet part of the metaphor has a dimension that comprises the individual interpretations and choices of Muslims living their everyday lives.

Founding theorists like Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Hans Robert Jauss agree that in reading a text, individual interpretation is always unavoidable (Grondin 2016; Palmer 1969; Steinberg 1988; Thiselton 2012). The historical, cultural, and linguistic

context of the interpreter then influences this interpretation. This context forms the individual's horizon of interpretation. The term "horizon" is central in hermeneutics, serving as a metaphor for the individual's context and perspective where interpretation takes place.

According to Hans Robert Jauss, the interpretation is created within the reader's "horizon of expectations," which prior readings, cultural context, and the ongoing transformation of the reader's perspective shape. The horizon of expectations includes the anticipations, norms, experiences, and prejudices through which the text is read and interpreted. Jauss highlights how the prejudices of the individual lead to new interpretations and, thus, a historical transformation of the understanding of the text. This illustrates that interpretation is a dynamic, historical process where the text carries a meaning that evolves through reception (Besbes 2021; Thiselton 2012).

In the quote above, *ustadz* Zaen accepts buffet-style choices as long as they are halal and lawful. Since "buffet" is a metaphor, he uses this as a general argument, relevant to all aspects of life—not just food. But the assessment of what is lawful is heavily influenced by interpretation into horizons that are very different culturally. Views and practices regarding gender roles may serve as an illustrative example. The majority of Indonesian Muslims regard the husband as the head of the nuclear family. Some also think he has the right to discipline his wife. They base this stance on their interpretation of Islam's Holy Scriptures. By contrast, many Western Muslims consider this way of thinking to be incompatible with the ideals of the same Holy Scriptures. In this case, the different choices within the buffet are not based on the egoistic wishes of the individual that *ustadz* Zaen depicts. Rather, they are based on completely different understandings of the true Islamic values regarding gender roles (Eidhamar 2017).

The transforming power of interpretation applies to modern individuals reading contemporary texts written within the same culture. In these cases, the horizon of the author is similar to that of the reader. At the same time, the transformation of interpretation is far greater when modern individuals read ancient texts that were written in cultures that differed greatly from those in the present reality. This is the situation when today's Muslims read hadiths reflecting cultures and realities that existed more than a thousand years ago.

The MUI does not deny the need to interpret the Holy Scriptures to fit modern times. But—according to the council—this interpretation must be expressed formally through tafsir and fatwas issued by an ulama in order to be religiously legitimate. This may partly refer to the MUI. Implicitly, this view implies a critical stance regarding individual interpretations of what is halal and lawful by ordinary lay Muslims. Such interpretations could easily be labelled as expressions of a negative buffet-style Islam.

At the same time, ordinary Muslims living in the modern world consciously or unconsciously make a large number of choices in their daily lives. The preaching that the MUI inspires may naturally trigger the question of whether their individual interpretations and choices also mean they are living as buffet-style Muslims—in the negative sense of the term.

The debate reveals that the metaphor itself remains contested. The term "buffet" is a neutral concept associated with freedom of choice. Critics therefore question why the metaphor must automatically carry a negative moral meaning. Partaking in a buffet does not necessarily imply choosing forbidden or harmful things; one may also freely choose what is healthy, lawful, and religiously appropriate. From this perspective, the negative connotation attached to buffet-style Islam does not emerge from the literal meaning of the word but from the MUI's value judgement and ideological framing. The metaphor thus becomes symbolic language through which the MUI classifies certain forms of Muslim behaviour as being insufficiently Islamic, not representing the complete package of Islam.

The tension becomes particularly visible in everyday Muslim life. Many Muslims continue to pray, fast, and maintain Islamic identities while negotiating modern plural realities in ways that conservative religious authorities do not always endorse. Examples include Muslim women who do not wear the hijab despite observing other religious obligations, Muslims who engage in interfaith marriages, and those who exchange Christmas greetings with Christian friends. Within the MUI's interpretive framework, such practices may be categorised as examples of buffet-style Islam because the individuals in question are perceived as selectively following certain aspects of Islam while setting aside others that do not align with their personal convictions or social realities. Yet, from a sociological and hermeneutical perspective, these practices reflect the ordinary and unavoidable process through which individual believers interpret and contextualise religion within modern life.

Ultimately, the debate demonstrates that “buffet-style Islam” is not simply a descriptive term but is also a metaphorical and polemical discourse through which competing Muslim actors negotiate the boundaries of legitimate Islam. The opposition between “buffet-style” and “complete-package” therefore reflects a broader struggle between two visions of religiosity: one emphasising doctrinal wholeness, moral discipline, and obedience to established religious authority and the other recognising interpretive flexibility, contextual adaptation, and the agency of individual Muslims in their navigation through the complexities of contemporary society.

3. Religious Authority and the Heretical Imperative: Contesting Islam as a Buffet or Complete Package

In premodern societies, religion operated within what Berger (1967) conceptualised as a unified symbolic universe. Religious belief was socially reinforced, existentially taken for granted, and experienced not as a matter of individual choice but as an objective reality embedded within everyday life. Under such conditions, religion functioned as a comprehensive canopy of meaning that structured moral order, collective identity, and social legitimacy. Religious authority derived much of its power from this taken-for-granted environment because institutionalised traditions enjoyed a near-monopolistic capacity to define reality and regulate legitimate belief.

Modernity fundamentally disrupted this condition. In *The Heretical Imperative*, Berger (1979) argues that modern pluralisation transforms belief into an arena of choice. The term “heretical” derives from the Greek *haeresis*, meaning choice rather than doctrinal deviance. Modern individuals are no longer able to simply inherit belief passively; they are compelled to navigate through competing religious and secular truth claims. As a result, faith becomes reflexive, contingent, and potentially fragile because it exists within a social environment characterised by competing sources of authority, expanding educational opportunities, urbanisation, mass communication, migration, and democratic politics.

Luckmann (1967), who argues that modernisation does not necessarily eliminate religion but relocates it from monopolistic institutions into individualised spheres of consciousness, has elaborated this transformation. Similarly, Hervieu-L  ger (2000) observes that modernity weakens the “chains of memory” through which religious traditions historically reproduced themselves across generations. As inherited authority becomes less secure, believers increasingly assemble religious identities through active selection and personal appropriation. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) describe this broader process as “individualization,” whereby individuals are increasingly required to construct their own biographies rather than simply inherit fixed identities. Religion thus becomes less a matter of unquestioned inheritance and more a project of continuous self-construction.

These developments are particularly visible in contemporary Indonesia. Muslims increasingly inhabit overlapping normative worlds shaped simultaneously by local reli-

gious traditions, democratic institutions, consumer capitalism, digital media, transnational Islamic movements, and global intellectual currents. A Muslim raised within a traditionalist Indonesian milieu may later encounter Salafi teachings through YouTube, liberal Islamic thought in universities, Islamist activism through social media, and secular-nationalist frameworks through state institutions. Even when traditional commitments are reaffirmed, they are no longer simply inherited; they become conscious choices made among available alternatives.

The increasing individualisation of religious life was accompanied by a parallel transformation in the circulation of religious knowledge. As believers gained greater access to alternative sources of information and interpretation, the monopoly that established religious authorities historically exercised became progressively more difficult to sustain. Eickelman and Anderson (1999) have extensively analysed the fragmentation of religious authority accompanying this process. Expanding literacy, higher education, mass communication, and digital technologies have contributed to what they describe as the “objectification” of Islam, whereby religious doctrines have become available for public reflection, comparison, and debate. Muslims are exposed to competing interpretations and diverse religious authorities, enabling them to evaluate and selectively appropriate religious teachings instead of relying exclusively on traditional institutions.

The Indonesian experience illustrates this process particularly clearly. As Azra (2020) notes, democratisation and transnational Islamic connections have generated a diverse Islamic public sphere in which multiple actors compete to define legitimate religious knowledge. Likewise, Kersten (2015) argues that contemporary Indonesian Islam is characterised by ongoing contests among liberal, conservative, traditionalist, and Islamist currents. Rather than a singular structure of authority, Indonesian Muslims increasingly encounter a plurality of religious voices operating through universities, mass organisations, television, social media, and transnational networks.

It is within this sociological environment that the metaphor of buffet-style Islam emerges. It refers to individualised forms of religiosity in which believers selectively interpret and practice Islamic teachings according to personal experiences and particular ethical priorities. Such selectivity does not necessarily imply weak faith. Rather, it reflects the condition that Berger, Luckmann, Hervieu-Léger, and Beck identify in which religious commitment is continuously negotiated amid competing truth claims and diverse sources of authority.

Conservative Islamic authorities, however, often interpret this condition, not as an inevitable consequence of modern pluralism but as a threat to religious coherence and doctrinal certainty. In response, they promote what may be called the “complete package” of Islam. From this perspective, divine revelation cannot be selectively appropriated according to individual preference because it constitutes an integrated system whose legitimacy transcends personal choice.

The trajectory of the MUI must be understood within this contestation. It responds to the Bergerian crisis of pluralised belief by attempting to stabilise orthodoxy and restore doctrinal certainty. Its 2005 fatwa against SiPiLiS, together with its reaffirmation that Ahmadiyya is deviant (*sesat*), reflected efforts to preserve Islam as a coherent and authoritative moral system against the perceived dangers of relativism and selective religiosity.

Yet the proliferation of religious choices does not eliminate the need for boundaries. On the contrary, the expansion of interpretive options often intensifies efforts by religious actors to distinguish legitimate forms of belief from those considered deviant, incomplete, or insufficiently Islamic. The more dispersed religious authority becomes, the greater the incentive for institutions that claim doctrinal authority to reaffirm their role as guardians of orthodoxy.

At this point, the analyses of Ichwan (2005, 2013) become particularly important. Ichwan argues that post-Suharto democratisation transformed the MUI from a largely state-dependent advisory body into a more autonomous actor operating within an increasingly competitive Islamic public sphere. Under these conditions, fatwas function not only as theological pronouncements but also as mechanisms through which religious authority is asserted, negotiated, and institutionalised. The SiPiLiS fatwa and the reaffirmation of Ahmadiyya's deviance therefore represented more than doctrinal interventions. They were also efforts to reaffirm the MUI's position as a guardian of orthodoxy amid proliferating religious voices, competing interpretive communities, and expanding forms of public religious expression.

The Indonesian context further illustrates what Hefner (2000, 2005, 2011) describes as the paradoxical consequences of democratisation. Democratic reforms expanded opportunities for religious participation and public debate while simultaneously intensifying competition among Islamic actors seeking to shape the moral direction of society. Here, the insights of Casanova (1994) are equally important. Modernity does not necessarily privatise religion; rather, democratic public spheres often provide new opportunities for religious actors to participate in public life. The MUI exemplifies this dynamic. While defending orthodoxy, it participates actively in governance through fatwas, halal certification, policy consultation, campaigns against extremism, and support for religious moderation.

At the same time, as van Bruinessen (2013) observes, democratisation has not necessarily produced religious liberalisation. Instead, it has enabled conservative actors to mobilise more effectively within public arenas and to strengthen their efforts to define orthodoxy and police doctrinal boundaries. The MUI's authority must therefore be understood as a response to pluralism and as part of a broader conservative reconfiguration of religious authority in post-Reformasi Indonesia in which the definition of orthodoxy became increasingly intertwined with questions of public influence and institutional legitimacy.

This dynamic produces the apparent paradox of the MUI's contemporary position. While continuing to reject theological pluralism and resist the relativising tendencies associated with buffet-style Islam, the council increasingly promotes moderation (*tawasuth*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), balance (*i'tidal*), and harmony as guiding principles of religious life. These concepts are not indigenous to the MUI itself. They are rooted in the classical Sunni interpretation of the Qur'anic ideal of a middle/median community (*ummatan wasatan*) (Qur'an 2:143), and long associated with Nahdlatul Ulama, the largest Muslim organisation in Indonesia. It represents a tolerant and inclusive kind of traditionalist Islam that bridges orthodox doctrine with indigenous practices. Thus, it was subsequently incorporated into Indonesia's state-sponsored programme of religious moderation. Its adoption by the MUI therefore reflects less a theological transformation than the strategic appropriation of a widely accepted vocabulary through which the council can demonstrate compatibility with the state's moderation agenda without fundamentally revising the doctrinal boundaries established through the SiPiLiS fatwa. Through this discursive framework, the MUI presents itself simultaneously as a guardian of orthodoxy and a partner in promoting social harmony, democratic stability, and national cohesion within a religiously diverse society.

Menchik's (2016) concept of "tolerance without liberalism" helps explain this apparent contradiction. Menchik argues that coexistence in Indonesia often rests not upon liberal commitments to theological equality but upon shared commitments to social order, communal harmony, and civic coexistence. Religious actors may therefore support moderation and democratic participation while continuing to uphold exclusive truth claims and firm doctrinal boundaries. From this perspective, the MUI's endorsement of religious moderation does not represent acceptance of theological pluralism but rather a strategy for managing diversity while preserving orthodoxy.

Consequently, buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam should not be understood as mutually exclusive sociological categories. Rather, they represent competing poles within a broader field of religious negotiation. The MUI itself moves dynamically within this field, resisting the fragmentation of authority associated with individualised religiosity while adapting to the realities of a plural democratic public sphere.

Seen from this perspective, the discourse of moderate religion (*moderasi beragama*) reveals not the resolution of tensions within Indonesian Islam but their ongoing management. Following Asad's (1986, 2003) conception of Islam as a discursive tradition, struggles over orthodoxy are fundamentally struggles over authority. The central question is not simply which interpretation of Islam is correct but who possesses the legitimacy to define what counts as authentic Islam in the first place. The continuing contest between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam therefore reflects a broader struggle over religious authority, pluralism, citizenship, and the moral foundations of democratic life in Indonesia.

4. The Continuum of Muslim Religiosity in Metaphorical Discourse

Debates on religion and democracy have increasingly shifted from whether religion should participate in public life to how religious authority operates once it becomes an influential moral and political force within democratic society. Casanova (1994) argues that democratisation often enables religious actors to enter public debates and shape discussions concerning morality, citizenship, and national identity. Yet public religion may evolve in different directions. It can support pluralism and democratic coexistence, or it can seek to establish a singular moral vision as the normative foundation of public life. The central question therefore concerns not merely the visibility of religion in the public sphere but how religious authority negotiates diversity, disagreement, and competing claims to legitimacy.

This issue becomes particularly significant when religious institutions claim the authority to define orthodoxy and regulate the boundaries of acceptable belief. As Asad (2003) observes, secular liberalism is not a neutral framework but privileges particular assumptions about religion as being private, individualised, and non-coercive. Consequently, disputes over secularism, pluralism, and liberalism are never merely theological disagreements. They are also struggles over the moral foundations of public life and who possesses the authority to define authentic religion within democratic society.

Within the Indonesian context, these tensions are frequently expressed through a metaphorical continuum stretching between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam. At one end, buffet-style Islam refers to forms of religiosity in which believers selectively interpret and practice religious teachings according to personal conviction, social experience, and contemporary lifestyles. At the other end, complete-package Islam, or *Islam kaffah*, represents the ideal of Islam as a comprehensive and indivisible moral order encompassing theology, law, politics, economics, ethics, and social conduct. Although often presented as opposing categories, these positions are better understood as ideal types situated along a continuum of Muslim religiosity rather than as mutually exclusive social groups.

The emergence of buffet-style Islam is closely linked to the transformations Berger (1979) identifies in *The Heretical Imperative*. In pluralistic societies, religion no longer operates within a single taken-for-granted symbolic universe. Individuals encounter multiple religious interpretations, secular ideologies, and competing sources of authority, making belief increasingly reflexive and subject to personal negotiation. Muslims therefore become active interpreters navigating diverse religious options within what conservative Muslim intellectuals will later describe as the “supermarket of faith” (*pasar swalayan iman*). Yet the proliferation of religious choices does not eliminate the need for boundaries. On the contrary, the expansion of interpretive options often intensifies efforts by religious actors

to distinguish legitimate forms of belief from those considered deviant, incomplete, or insufficiently Islamic. The metaphor therefore performs a function that extends beyond describing religious change. As Barth (1969) argues, collective identities are maintained not primarily through shared cultural content but through the symbolic boundaries that distinguish insiders from outsiders. Viewed from this perspective, the distinction between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam functions as a mechanism of boundary-making. It separates forms of religiosity considered authentic from those regarded as incomplete, insufficiently committed, or vulnerable to external influence. The metaphor therefore helps construct moral distinctions within the Muslim community while defining the contours of acceptable religious identity.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of the religious field further illuminates the significance of this discourse. Religious authority is not merely the possession of theological knowledge but also the capacity to classify, legitimise, and regulate religious meanings. The power to define which interpretations are orthodox and which are deviant constitutes a form of symbolic capital that enables religious institutions to exercise influence over wider social and political debates. The contestation between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam can therefore be understood as a struggle over symbolic authority: a struggle to determine who possesses the legitimacy to define authentic Islam and regulate the boundaries of acceptable belief.

As Burhani (2018) demonstrates in his analysis of pluralism, liberalism, and Islamism within Muhammadiyah, contemporary Indonesian Islam is characterised not by simple opposition between religious and secular forces but by ongoing contestations among multiple Islamic orientations seeking to shape the future direction of Muslim society. Pluralism and liberalism thus become sites of struggle over religious authority, citizenship, and the place of Islam within a democratic order. Within this contested landscape, metaphors such as "buffet-style Islam" and "complete-package Islam" function as powerful discursive tools through which competing actors seek to classify legitimate and illegitimate forms of Muslim identity.

This framework provides an important lens for understanding the position of the MUI. The council derives legitimacy from its role as a guardian of orthodoxy while operating within a democratic environment that requires engagement with pluralism and religious diversity. As a result, its authority depends upon theological expertise and upon its ability to define the acceptable limits of religious interpretation and public belonging. The contestation between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam therefore reflects a broader struggle over religious authority, interpretive legitimacy, and the moral boundaries of Indonesian public life.

The 2005 SiPiLiS fatwa must be understood within this wider struggle over orthodoxy, pluralism, and religious authority. Far from being an isolated theological ruling, the fatwa represented a decisive intervention by the MUI to discipline selective forms of religiosity, reaffirm doctrinal authority, and defend a particular vision of Islam as a comprehensive moral order. The following section therefore examines how these concerns were translated into an institutional project aimed at stabilising orthodoxy and consolidating religious authority in post-Suharto Indonesia.

5. The MUI and the Struggle Against Buffet-Style Islam

The 2005 fatwa on SiPiLiS that the MUI issued marked one of the most significant theological interventions in post-Suharto Indonesia. Issued during the MUI's Seventh National Congress, the fatwa condemned secularism, liberalism, and pluralism as being incompatible with Islamic orthodoxy, thereby extending the council's authority beyond ritual and morality into the regulation of belief, interpretation, and religious ideology. More

than a doctrinal ruling, the fatwa represented a broader effort to defend the coherence of Islamic authority in a democratic and increasingly plural social environment characterised by competing religious interpretations and expanding forms of public religious expression.

Underlying this intervention was a growing anxiety among conservative Muslim intellectuals regarding what they metaphorically described as the “supermarket of faith” (*pasar swalayan iman*), a condition in which believers increasingly exercised personal choice in interpreting and practicing religion. Within this imagined religious marketplace, Muslims were no longer expected simply to inherit doctrine from established religious institutions but were increasingly encouraged to evaluate, select, and adapt religious teachings according to individual conviction and contemporary circumstances. It was within this context that the metaphor of “buffet-style Islam,” namely the tendency to embrace aspects of Islam perceived as attractive or compatible with modern life while neglecting teachings regarded as demanding, restrictive, or socially unpopular, emerged as a critique of selective religiosity.

Conservative Muslim actors contrasted this tendency with the ideal of *Islam kaf-fah*, understood as a complete and integrated moral order encompassing theology, law, ethics, politics, economics, and social conduct. Although neither “buffet-style Islam” nor “complete-package Islam” appeared explicitly in MUI fatwas, both reflected broader ideological concerns circulating within conservative Islamic networks during the Reformasi period. For many of these actors, liberal Islamic thought encouraged forms of religious reasoning that privileged individual interpretation over established religious authority, thereby threatening the coherence of orthodoxy and the unity of the Muslim community (Shihab 2019).

The significance of the SiPiLiS fatwa cannot be explained by viewing it solely as a reaction to theological pluralism. Rather, it emerged within a broader post-Reformasi struggle over religious authority and the public meaning of Islam. As Fealy (2008) and Kersten (2015) observe, democratisation not only expanded opportunities for Islamic participation in public life but also intensified competition among religious organisations, intellectuals, preachers, and social movements seeking to define the relationship between Islam, democracy, pluralism, and public morality. In this increasingly contested religious arena, the authority to determine orthodoxy became an important source of public legitimacy. The SiPiLiS fatwa can therefore be understood not merely as a theological verdict but as an intervention in a wider struggle to establish which interpretation of Islam would acquire normative authority within Indonesia’s democratising public sphere.

The MUI’s intervention must also be situated within what van Bruinessen (2013) describes as Indonesia’s “conservative turn.” This development unfolded alongside the expansion of what Hasan (2009) terms a new Islamic public sphere in which Islamic identities, symbols, and moral discourses became increasingly visible within public life. Rather than producing a straightforward liberalisation of religious authority, democratisation created new opportunities for conservative actors to articulate claims to orthodoxy and moral regulation. The SiPiLiS fatwa can therefore be understood as part of a broader effort to reassert doctrinal authority in an environment characterised by expanding religious choice, competing interpretations, and increasingly fragmented sources of authority.

Contrary to earlier expectations that democratisation would strengthen liberal and progressive interpretations of Islam, the post-Reformasi period witnessed the growing influence of conservative religious actors who sought to reaffirm doctrinal boundaries and strengthen public expressions of Islamic normativity. Within this context, the SiPiLiS fatwa represented an effort to reassert the authority of orthodox Islam against intellectual currents perceived as relativising religious truth and weakening established religious authority.

This concern became especially visible during debates surrounding the proposed Counter Legal Draft of the Compilation of Islamic Law (CLD-KHI) in 2004, when progressive Muslim intellectuals advocated revisions concerning inheritance, polygamy, gender relations, and interreligious marriage. For many conservative ulama, such proposals symbolised an attempt to reinterpret Islamic law according to liberal and secular principles rather than established jurisprudential traditions. Growing participation in interfaith dialogue, joint prayers, and cross-religious spiritual practices further intensified anxieties regarding what conservative circles described as *percampur-adukan agama* (the mixing of religions). From this perspective, pluralism threatened to dissolve Islam's exclusive truth claims into a fluid and negotiable religious identity shaped by individual preference rather than religious authority.

As Hasyim (2011) argues, controversies surrounding pluralism and liberalism in Indonesia often conceal a deeper contest over interpretive authority. The central issue is not simply whether diversity should be accommodated, but who possesses the legitimacy to determine the acceptable limits of that diversity. Opposition to pluralism therefore reflected not only concerns about religious truth but also concerns about preserving communal boundaries and maintaining a particular vision of social order. Seen from this perspective, the SiPiLiS fatwa was simultaneously an intervention in questions of religious orthodoxy, citizenship, and national belonging, seeking to define not only what constituted authentic Islam but also the legitimate place of religious difference within Indonesian public life. The broader historical significance of this development becomes clearer when viewed against the longer trajectory of Islamisation that Ricklefs (2012) describes. Ricklefs argues that, since the late 20th century, Indonesian Islam has undergone the gradual intensification of religious commitment and public piety. Within this context, demands for clearer doctrinal boundaries and more visible expressions of Islamic normativity acquired increasing social legitimacy. The SiPiLiS fatwa therefore reflected a reaction to specific liberal ideas and a wider historical movement in which questions of orthodoxy, religious authenticity, and Islamic identity became increasingly central to public life.

Viewed through these lenses, the SiPiLiS fatwa represented far more than a theological condemnation of secularism, liberalism, and pluralism. It constituted an attempt to restore and stabilise the authority of orthodox Islam in a social environment that democratic openness and expanding interpretive diversity were increasingly shaping. By rejecting pluralism and delegitimising selective forms of religious interpretation, the MUI sought to reaffirm the authority of the ulama over the interpretation of Islam within the public sphere.

The implications of this intervention extended beyond abstract theological debate. As Assyauckanie (2009) notes, reformist Muslim intellectuals associated with liberal Islamic networks sought to reconcile Islam with democracy, human rights, pluralism, and constitutional citizenship through contextual approaches to interpretation. The significance of the SiPiLiS fatwa therefore lay not only in its rejection of particular theological concepts but also in its attempt to constrain emerging forms of religious reasoning that located interpretive authority beyond established religious institutions. In this sense, the fatwa became part of a broader contest over who possessed the legitimacy to speak on behalf of Islam in contemporary Indonesia.

The anti-buffet discourse also created conditions for the expansion of religious authority beyond questions of belief into the regulation of everyday conduct. Once Islam was imagined as a comprehensive moral order rather than a selectively practiced identity, religious governance could no longer remain confined to theology. The growth of halal certification, sharia-compliant finance, halal tourism, Islamic fashion, and other forms of halalisation reflected the institutional extension of this logic into the domains of consumption, lifestyle, and economic practice. In this sense, the SiPiLiS fatwa and the

expansion of halal governance formed complementary dimensions of the same project: one sought to discipline religious interpretation, while the other sought to shape everyday Muslim conduct.

Yet the trajectory of the MUI after 2005 also reveals a striking paradox. Despite its strong anti-pluralist stance, the council gradually repositioned itself as a strategic partner of the state in promoting religious moderation. By the late 2010s, the MUI was actively collaborating with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) in campaigns promoting moderation, deradicalisation, and interfaith coexistence. This transformation, however, did not signify the abandonment of earlier exclusivist positions. The MUI never revoked the SiPiLiS fatwa, and the doctrinal boundaries established in the name of defending orthodoxy remained firmly intact.

Instead, the council recalibrated its discourse by adopting the language of the middle path (*tawasuth*), tolerance (*tasamuh*), and balance (*i'tidal*), concepts widely associated with Islamic moderation (Azra 2020; Kemenag Republik Indonesia 2019; Ropi 2019). In practice, moderation became less a theological transformation than a strategy for preserving institutional legitimacy within a democratic and plural society. The MUI successfully integrated its anti-buffet-style narrative into the state's moderation agenda by presenting itself as the guardian of a "middle path" positioned between violent extremism on the one hand and the relativising tendencies of the "supermarket of faith" on the other. Through this framework, the MUI could remain a legitimate partner of the democratic state while maintaining the doctrinal boundaries established through the SiPiLiS fatwa.

Placed alongside other major Islamic organisations in Indonesia, the MUI appears considerably more guarded in its approach toward pluralism. The world's largest Muslim organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, has launched the term "Islam of the Archipelago" (*Islam Nusantara*) as a positive entity. It denotes the form of Islam that was historically developed in Indonesia, blending Islamic teachings with local traditions and resulting in a moderate, pluralistic, and tolerant kind of religiosity. Muhammadiyah—another large Muslim organisation—represents the concept of Progressive Islam (*Islam Berkemajuan*). It promotes tolerance and integrates Islamic values with modern science, education, and human welfare. These two Muslim organisations, the largest in Indonesia, provide strong theological accommodation for diversity and plural coexistence. By contrast, the MUI manages diversity without fully affirming pluralism as a legitimate theological principle. Its moderation therefore remains bounded by hierarchies of orthodoxy inherited from the anti-SiPiLiS framework.

Ultimately, the contestation between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam reveals a broader contest over religious authority, interpretive legitimacy, and the future direction of Indonesian Islam in the post-Suharto era. Beneath discussions of pluralism and moderation lies a deeper issue concerning who possesses the authority to define authentic Islam, regulate the boundaries of acceptable belief, and shape the moral foundations of public life within contemporary Indonesian democracy. The MUI's evolving trajectory demonstrates that its authority is sustained not by choosing exclusively between orthodoxy and moderation but by strategically navigating the continuum between these two metaphorical poles—defending doctrinal certainty while adapting to the political realities of democratic pluralism.

6. The Institutionalisation of Complete-Package Islam: Marketing Halal Doctrine

The expansion of the MUI into sectors such as halal consumption, halal tourism, and the sharia economy should not be understood merely as a technocratic effort to regulate Muslim markets. Rather, it represents the material and institutional extension of a

broader ideological struggle against what conservative Muslim actors describe as buffet-style Islam—a fragmented, selective, and individualised approach to religion shaped by modern pluralism and consumer culture. If the 2005 SiPiLiS fatwa attempted to discipline theological pluralism and liberal interpretation at the ideological level, the expansion of halal certification and the sharia economy extends the same project into the practical organisation of everyday Muslim life. Through these mechanisms, the MUI seeks to prohibit practices that are considered religiously problematic and to construct an alternative Islamic ecosystem that can reduce Muslim exposure to the “supermarket of faith” associated with modern pluralistic society.

Underlying this project is the aspiration to preserve Islam as complete-package Islam—a comprehensive and integrated moral order governing all dimensions of life, including consumption, finance, leisure, mobility, and social conduct. Within this framework, Islam cannot be reduced to ritual observance alone while economic and lifestyle practices remain governed by secular norms. Religion must instead function as a total ethical system that structures the believer’s entire existence. Consequently, halal certification represents far more than concern over lawful consumption. By certifying halal food, halal cosmetics, halal tourism, Islamic banking (*bank syari’ah*), and lifestyle services, the MUI embeds Islamic orthodoxy into the infrastructures of everyday life and transforms religious authority into a continuous presence within the social and economic sphere.

This logic becomes especially visible in the promotion of halal tourism. Global tourism industries are generally shaped by secular and cosmopolitan environments associated with alcohol, nightlife, permissive social interaction, and non-halal consumption. From the perspective of conservative Islamic authority, such environments compel Muslims to engage in the selective religious negotiation that is characteristic of buffet-style Islam, constantly “picking and choosing” between practices that are compatible or incompatible with Islamic norms. Halal tourism therefore functions as an institutional response to the anxieties pluralistic modernity generates. Rather than leaving Muslims to navigate morally ambiguous spaces individually, the MUI promotes pre-regulated environments in which prayer facilities, halal-certified food, segregated recreational spaces, and Islamic ethical standards are already integrated into the tourist experience. Leisure itself is thus incorporated into the framework of complete-package Islam.

A similar logic underpins the development of the sharia economy. For the MUI, conventional finance represents not merely an economic system but a secular structure rooted in practices that Islamic law prohibits. The expansion of Islamic banking, insurance, and sharia investment therefore reflects an effort to construct self-contained halal economic infrastructure through which Muslims may avoid continuous moral compromise. The objective is not simply to offer alternative financial products but to establish a comprehensive Islamic economic order in which religious commitment and economic activity no longer need to be selectively negotiated. In this sense, the MUI attempts to “close the aisle” within the metaphorical supermarket of faith by replacing morally ambiguous financial options with a fully certified Islamic alternative.

Importantly, this transformation also reshapes the character of the MUI’s authority. The council no longer functions solely as a body issuing fatwas against liberalism, pluralism, or theological deviance. Increasingly, it positions itself as the provider of authorised Islamic alternatives across all dimensions of Muslim life. Rather than merely defining what Muslims should avoid, the MUI actively constructs parallel infrastructures of “safe” religious consumption and participation. The anti-buffet-style discourse is therefore transformed into a proactive lifestyle project in which Muslims are encouraged not simply to reject secular modernity but to inhabit a fully regulated Islamic environment where everyday practices remain aligned with orthodox standards.

At the same time, this strategy demonstrates the adaptive flexibility of Islamic authority in contemporary Indonesia. Rather than rejecting globalisation and modern capitalism outright, the MUI selectively appropriates branding, certification, tourism, finance, and market mechanisms in order to strengthen religious governance. This allows the MUI to reposition itself simultaneously as the guardian of orthodoxy, the regulator of public morality, and a strategic partner of the democratic state within the discourse of religious moderation. Yet beneath the inclusive language of moderation remains a continuing commitment to preserving doctrinal boundaries and defending Islam as a complete package rather than a negotiable or selectively interpreted identity.

A different interpretation emerges from Fischer's (2011) work on halal consumer culture. Whereas the striking paradox of complete-package Islam views halalisation as a means of integrating religious principles into all dimensions of everyday life, Fischer demonstrates that halal industries operate within the logic of modern consumer capitalism. The proliferation of halal products, halal tourism, halal finance, and halal lifestyle industries may therefore expand rather than reduce individual choice. Seen from this perspective, halalisation does not necessarily overcome the "supermarket of faith". Instead, it may create a distinctly Islamic marketplace in which Muslims continue to exercise choice, preference, and consumption, albeit within an increasingly Islamised commercial environment.

Ultimately, the expansion of halal industries, sharia finance, and halal tourism reveals that the contestation between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam extends far beyond abstract theological debate. The institutional implications of this struggle over interpretation have also been highlighted by Lindsey and Pausacker (2016), who note that contemporary Indonesia has witnessed the growing influence of Islamic institutions in shaping legal, social, and public norms. Debates over pluralism, liberalism, and religious authority are therefore not confined to theology alone. They carry significant consequences for the governance of religious diversity, the regulation of public morality, and the relationship between Islam and the democratic state. Viewed from this perspective, the SiPiLiS fatwa was simultaneously a theological statement and an intervention in broader struggles over the authority to define legitimate religion within contemporary Indonesia.

The struggle over religious authority in contemporary Indonesia is materially embedded within markets, tourism, finance, and everyday consumption. In this broader configuration, the MUI's project of halalisation represents an effort to institutionalise Islamic orthodoxy as an integrated system of governance that is capable of preserving doctrinal coherence, maintaining social cohesion, and regulating the acceptable boundaries of Muslim identity within a democratic and plural society.

7. Conclusions

The trajectory of the MUI demonstrates how religious authority in post-Suharto Indonesia has evolved from a state-sponsored advisory body into a powerful moral architect operating across theological, political, and economic domains. Since its establishment in 1975, the MUI has sought to preserve its legitimacy by positioning itself as the guardian of Sunni orthodoxy while adapting to changing state agendas and social transformations. This adaptive capacity explains how the MUI has been able to move strategically along the continuum between buffet-style Islam (*Islam prasmanan*) and complete-package Islam (*Islam paket lengkap*), between the discourse of religious moderation and anti-pluralist orthodoxy.

Rather than representing two completely segregated poles, buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam reflect competing yet interdependent orientations within contemporary Indonesian Islam. Buffet-style Islam emerges from the sociological realities of modern plural society, where believers increasingly exercise individual choice in selecting and negotiating religious interpretations according to personal conviction and modern

lifestyles. By contrast, complete-package Islam represents the aspiration to preserve Islam as a comprehensive and indivisible moral order governing belief, morality, economy, leisure, and public life. Within this continuum, the MUI consistently attempts to restrain the fragmenting tendencies associated with the “supermarket of faith” while institutionalising Islam as a complete ethical system.

This project became particularly visible through the 2005 SiPiLiS fatwa, which condemned secularism, pluralism, and liberalism as threats to Islamic orthodoxy. The fatwa was not merely a theological intervention but an attempt to defend centralised religious authority against increasingly individualised and selective forms of religiosity. At the same time, the MUI expanded this anti-buffet-style logic beyond doctrine into everyday life through halal certification, halal tourism, and the sharia economy. By constructing a certified Islamic ecosystem, the council sought to minimise the need for Muslims to “pick and choose” between religious commitment and modern economic participation. In this sense, the halalisation of markets became the material extension of complete-package Islam.

Fischer’s analysis of global halal markets suggests a more complex dynamic than the institutionalisation of a comprehensive Islamic moral order alone. He suggests that halal industries are shaped not only by religious aspirations but also by consumer culture, branding, middle-class identity formation, and market competition. From this perspective, the expansion of halal certification, halal tourism, and sharia-compliant consumption may not necessarily eliminate the selective tendencies associated with buffet-style Islam. Instead, it may relocate them in an increasingly Islamised marketplace where Muslims continue to exercise choice among competing products, services, and lifestyles. The attempt to institutionalise complete-package Islam may therefore coexist with new forms of individualised religious consumption that the very market mechanisms through which halalisation operates generate.

The MUI’s authority has also depended on its ability to accommodate democratic expectations of tolerance and coexistence. Its participation in religious moderation (*moderasi beragama*), adoption of the language of the moderate middle path (*tawasuth*) and tolerance (*tasamuh*), and collaboration with state institutions reveal a pragmatic recalibration rather than a full theological transformation. The MUI never revoked its anti-pluralist fatwas. Instead, it repositioned itself as both a guardian of orthodoxy and a partner of the democratic state. Consequently, moderation in the Indonesian context often functions as a form of bounded pluralism: Tolerance is promoted but only within doctrinal limits determined by dominant religious authority.

Ultimately, the Indonesian case suggests that religious moderation and doctrinal orthodoxy should not necessarily be understood as opposing projects. Rather than replacing exclusivist understandings of religious truth, moderation may function as a mode of governing religious diversity while preserving established boundaries of orthodoxy. The MUI’s evolving role demonstrates how religious authorities can adapt to democratic pluralism without abandoning their claims to define legitimate belief. From this perspective, the contest between buffet-style Islam and complete-package Islam is not simply a dispute over personal religiosity. It reflects a broader challenge confronting religious authorities in contemporary democratic societies: how to preserve doctrinal coherence in an age of expanding religious choice, pluralised authority, and individualised belief. The significance of the Indonesian experience therefore extends beyond debates on Islam and democracy, offering wider insights into the relationship between religious authority, citizenship, and the governance of diversity in modern plural societies.

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