

# Forming ‘Forbidden’ Identities Online: Atheism in Indonesia

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This article discusses the online activism of Indonesian atheists. While most of the little existent scholarship on atheism in Indonesia views the controversial cases in the light of the violation of Western-style rights to free speech and religious liberty, a closer look at the public discourses both online and offline reveals a more complex picture. The article embeds atheist activism and the well-known case of Alexander An in the changing landscape of religion and state in post-Suharto Indonesia. It points at the intricate relationship between atheism and blasphemy and shows how activists not only carve a space for themselves online, but also seek to counter the negative and anti-religious image that decades-long campaigning has created for atheists. Activists use Facebook, Twitter, messaging systems, and forums such as Quora, both to become visible and yet allow for anonymity. Their online communication and activism is often coupled with offline meetings. In this way, atheists allow for a thriving ‘community’, and also present atheism positively in public. However, to defend atheism this way also has its downsides, as it aligns Indonesian atheists with an international network of mainly Western-funded human rights activists and thus runs the risk of further alienating them from a nation that strongly defines itself along religious identity.

**Keywords:** Atheism; Indonesia; Islam; Non-Religious Minorities; Social Media



## INTRODUCTION

When self-described Indonesian atheists meet in public places, more commonly than not they have already met online. In a space that allows for the use of pseudonyms, hundreds of skeptics find like-minded doubters and non-believers in a society where religiosity is the norm. Across the archipelago, these atheists regularly organize offline meetings. Some just want to watch a movie or share a meal with fellow non-believers, while others want to discuss the difficulties of having to pretend to be religious for their families and colleagues, or to partake in religious rituals for fear of reprisals. All of them are aware of the stakes involved in framing their activities as ‘atheism’, especially since 2012, when Alexander An, a civil servant in the Dharmasraya regency of West Sumatra, was first attacked and then imprisoned by local authorities for his Facebook posts against Islam. Human rights organizations such as Amnesty International called for his unconditional release, while Muslim hardline organizations such as the Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam*, FPI) demanded his execution. Finally, the local judges at the Muaro Sijunjung district court found him guilty of disseminating hatred and sentenced him to two and a half years of prison (Hu-

man Rights Watch, 2013). For many human rights activists, this case is a proof that atheism is being officially prohibited in Indonesia. Yet, atheism is only one of several ‘-isms’ that have been discussed controversially in the post-Suharto era. After verbal and semi-legal attacks against “*sekularisme, pluralisme dan liberalisme*” (“secularism, pluralism, and liberalism”) in the mid-2000s (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 2005; Gillespie, 2007), and the rejection of an appeal to revoke the so-called blasphemy law in 2010, the so called Aan case (Aan being Alexander An’s nickname) sparked a heated debate on *ateisme*, and on the state’s regulation of religion and irreligion. Like *sekularisme, pluralisme, and liberalisme*, *ateisme* is a controversial term, and most Indonesians would frown at someone’s declaration of being an atheist.<sup>1</sup>

The term seems to carry a certain dose of hostility against religion, and thus people’s understandings for moral conduct. Human rights activists and foreign as well as local scholars interpret the case as a straightforward example of growing intolerance and the shrinking space for expressing non-religious views in Indonesia (Hasani, 2016). However, there is more to the case than the question of freedom of expression. In this paper, I examine the case of Alexander An from a discourse-oriented perspective. I argue that this case served as a discursive battleground for reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and religion. Nationalists, liberals, and promoters of varying nuances of the political involvement of religion have been rethinking the position of Islam vis-à-vis the state with new fervor since the fall of Suharto in 1998. In these discourses, a new voice is slowly beginning to rise and enter public discourses via online platforms: A number of Indonesian atheist activists today are striving to carve out a legitimate presence for atheist identities. Yet, after decades of demonization as ‘communists’ since 1965/1966, during which religiosity became an expression of being anti-communist (Bertrand, 2004, p. 74), this form of social activism is still highly controversial.

Adopting critical discourse analysis, this article focuses on the case of Alexander An because of its dialectical relationship with the social structures and institutions which frame it. In other words, “the discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them” (Wodak & Fairclough, 1997, p. 258). This article thus eschews any detailed discussion of the history or contemporary practices and intellectual discussions related to atheism, but rather seeks to situate the case of Alexander An in the public discourse on religious minorities and on the changing relationship between religion and the state. It analyzes how this case became so widely discussed, and how it changed the discourse on Islam and the state. The case of Alexander An is a critical point of entry for broader questions on non-belief and online activism in Indonesia that have been widely discussed by local and international media and human rights reports, but that have not yet been the focus of scholarly research. Critical questions with this regard are: What did Aan’s opponents and the state find so offensive about his comments, and how does this case relate to atheism and the online presence of non-belief in Indonesia more generally. To answer these questions, this article unpacks the circumstances under which Aan’s case became an offence to the state. The main method employed is media analysis, complemented by online and offline con-

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1 I observed this during my fieldwork on notions of orthodoxy and deviance in Indonesia. Between 2008 and 2014, I spent several periods of altogether 18 months in various cities and towns across Java.

versations and interviews during and after my fieldwork in Java between 2009 and 2013 when I was working on deviant sects, or *aliran sesat*. The Aan case opens a window to a small but well-connected group of activists who use the Internet to push the boundaries of the sayable and tolerable. Given the aggressive climate that works against the public propagation of atheism in Indonesia today, as indicated by the case itself, online forums and chat groups are the only promising space that allows for atheist expressions – a space where a concerned group of atheists strives to educate an Internet-savvy public about their lives and non-religious views. What they insist on is the possibility of non-belief without insulting religion, which I will illustrate in some examples below. The case of Alexander An and the online presence of other atheist activists form an ideal site to study the boundaries of what is publicly tolerable and to investigate under what conditions these boundaries become contested.

### THE AAN CASE AND ATHEISM IN INDONESIA

More generally speaking, scholarship on irreligion differentiates between atheists and people without any religious affiliation. Atheism usually refers to not believing in the existence of one or several gods, and non-religion refers to either those without beliefs or those whose beliefs are not recognized as religious. Some of the academic literature on this subject (e.g., Beaman & Tomlins, 2014; Lee, 2015) points at the broad palette of nuances, ranging from non-theist religious practice to irreligious beliefs, which often gets overshadowed by the crooked binary of atheism versus religion. In Indonesia, however, the state's foundational political principles of Pancasila prescribe to its people monotheism, since religion or *agama* is per se defined as the belief in one god only. In this context, even Hinduism is constructed as a monotheistic religion (McDaniel, 2013). Besides the six officially recognized religions, the Indonesian Constitution also recognizes *kepercayaan*, literally belief, to refer to local beliefs which are not referred to as atheism, and are not part of the discourse on atheism. Thus, while they may not necessarily be similar elsewhere, in the context of Indonesia, atheism and non-belief mean one and the same thing. In addition to the more general differentiation between atheism and non-belief, a growing scholarly work focuses on different kinds of atheism such as, for example, *negative* atheism, which is defined as the not-believing in the existence of a god, or *positive* atheism, or the believing that there is no god (Martin, 2007). These categorizations, however, are mainly based on Western experiences (which self-evidently is not to say that non-Western experiences of irreligiosity and non-belief do not exist; they just have not informed the currently globally salient category of atheism). In many societies where religion and state are more formally connected and constitute the social norm, atheists are too concerned about even voicing their skepticism to refine their disbelief. The atheists that this article focuses on demonstrate a newly forming identity in Indonesian society today. After decades of worrying about being associated with communism – still a deeply stigmatized category, even 60 years after the mass-killings in the transition period leading to the New Order – a loose network of activists is attempting to rehabilitate the term *ateis*. They claim not only the right to not believe in the existence of God, but also the right to express this skepticism or disbelief in public. Many of them remain anonymous online, but their nicknames and their frequent use of English suggest a

cosmopolitan upbringing or outlook: Some, yet not all of the activists, belong to the Indonesian diaspora. A more detailed look at the case reveals that Alexander An was not simply imprisoned for being an atheist, or even for creating an online platform for atheists – almost 1000 Facebook users supported ('liked') his Facebook fan page entitled Ateis Minang. Aan went much further than publicly announcing his disbelief and inviting others to discuss it with him. In January 2012, one of his posts read: "If God exists, why do bad things happen? . . . There should only be good things if God is merciful". He then declared heaven, hell, angels, and devils to be myths (*mitos*) and posted an article describing Muhammad as "attracted to his daughter-in-law" as well as comic strips depicting him and a servant during sexual intercourse (Bachyul, 2012; McKinnon, 2012). These posts go beyond mere statements of atheism. They combine an atheist stance with anti-Islamic commentary. Shortly after these posts, on his way to work, Aan was violently attacked. Rather than arresting the perpetrators, the police took Aan into protective custody. He was later charged with religious blasphemy, atheism propagation, and dissemination of religious hostility. Prosecutors sought a three-and-a-half-year jail term for him. In June 2012, the court eventually convicted him of the most serious charge and decided to drop the other two. The judge found Aan guilty of having violated Article 28 of the Information and Electronic Transaction Law, more precisely of "disseminating information aimed at inciting religious hatred or hostility" (Amnesty International, 2012). For this, the court sentenced Aan to two and a half years of imprisonment and a fine of IDR 100 million.

Public commentary on the case reflects the broadness of the spectrum of responses to avowals of atheism in Indonesia. On the respective Facebook page alone, comments ranged from calls for beheading Aan to vocal support of his cause. Several national as well as international human rights groups called for his release; Amnesty International, for example, filed him under its category "prisoner of conscience" (Abbott, 2014). At the other end of the spectrum, the Islamic Society Forum (*Forum Umat Islam*, FUI) insisted that a five-year jail term for Aan would not suffice: "He deserves the death penalty, even if he decides to repent. What he has done cannot be tolerated. It is important to prevent this group from spreading atheism in this country", said the organization's Secretary General Muhammad al-Khaththath ("Calls to Behead", 2012). It cannot fully be determined whether their hatred was sparked by Aan's declared disbelief, or by the insults he had posted. Human rights reports and a number of newspaper articles simply claimed that Aan was sentenced for his atheism. But atheism itself, albeit uncommon and shunned, is not illegal in Indonesia. It was not his non-belief that Aan was punished for, Aan was punished for making his atheism public in a particular way. It appears that it was the public display of non-belief and anti-religious views that crossed the border of what is acceptable. Among the 240 million Indonesians classified as Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, or Confucian, there are many who do not believe in any god. Among those, many joke about or question religious beliefs in small groups. But the difference between these atheists and atheist activists such as Aan, is that the latter claim their right to speak publicly about their views – they claim their share of public space. Aan strengthened this visibility by using his real name. Thus, he was targeted for spreading (*menyebarkan*) atheist beliefs. Many atheist activists would argue that they do not wish to convert believers to atheism, but that they simply want to be accepted in their non-religious

identity. But the line between acceptance and missionary intentions is blurred: Greater acceptance and visibility of a belief or conviction, circulating details concerning practices, and the possibility of discussion all have the potential to lure those out of the closet<sup>2</sup> who have hitherto been in hiding. In Indonesia, the accusation of proselytization weighs heavy. Ever since the first European encounters, and especially since the days of anti-colonial struggle, many Muslims have been worried about foreigners spreading Christianity, or Christianization (*kristenisasi*) (Boland, 1971, p. 230; Steenbrink, 1998, pp. 329-330). In the post-independence period, fear of conflict through proselytization was so widespread that it was legally prohibited (Steenbrink, 1998, p. 330). Until today, the Proselytizing Guidelines (Ministerial Decision No. 77/1978) and the Guidelines for Overseas Aid to Religious Institutions in Indonesia (Ministerial Decision No. 20/1978) regulate and restrict the dissemination of religious convictions. Viewed in this light, it is not surprising that many Indonesians keep a close and skeptical eye on the public visibility of atheists.

Two main factors seem to have contributed to the sentence against Alexander An. First, what many presented as a case of atheism came in combination with what was perceived as a deliberate insult of Islam. In fact, the case could be analytically reduced to blasphemy if one were to ignore the discursive event surrounding it, which presented the categories of atheism and insult as deeply enmeshed. Second, the outrage this case sparked among different circles positioned it on a public stage. Arjun Appadurai's (2006) work on inter-ethnic conflict helps to understand why even 'small numbers' are often, as in this case, perceived as a major threat to national majorities. Nationalism, he argues – and this applies to many interpretations of religion as well – is ultimately built on notions of exceptionalism, namely the belief that a national ethnic or a particular religious group is unique and ultimately different to, if not better than others. This uniqueness is based on narratives of certain shared characteristics, and minorities challenge such narratives of social cohesion and homogeneity. In Indonesia, the dominant narrative is that of religious *harmoni*. Aan's statements can thus be viewed as a visible impurity. The visibility of non-belief coupled with anti-Islamic sentiments thus challenges the narrative of both *ummat Indonesia* and a multi-religious but monotheistic and harmonious Indonesian society.

The major challenging factor of the Aan case is not so much atheism or even the blasphemous insult per se, but rather the spreading or, in the words of the court's sentencing, "the disseminating of information" (Mahkamah Agung Republik Indonesia, 2012). It is not so much the contents of Aan's message, but the quality and eventually the produce of their dissemination. During the sentencing, the presiding judge Eka Prasetya Budi Dharma described Aan's actions as having caused "anxiety to the community and tarnished Islam" ("*keresahan dalam masyarakat dan menodai Islam*") (Mahkamah Agung Republik Indonesia, 2012). This judgement was linked to the le-

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2 Activists speak of "being in the closet" and "coming out", either in English or in direct translation, as in *keluar dari kloset/kakus*. "Closeted" and "in the closet" is a central metaphor of the 20th century LGBTQ movement. It describes people who have not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity, and who hide a part of their personality because of social pressure (Sedgwick, 1990; Seidman, Meeks, & Traschen, 1999). Those who use this metaphor to refer to atheists argue that most atheists hide their critical stance toward religion in order to remain safe, or simply in order to avoid harassment, and that they suffer from having to hide part of their identity.

gal upholding of the so-called blasphemy law in 2010: After a group of activists had demanded its revocation, the judges explicitly declared that Indonesia is a country with belief in God, not an atheist country, and that campaigning for the freedom not to have a religion was neither provided for, nor possible in Indonesia (Crouch, 2012; Menchik, 2016; Schäfer, 2013). In both cases, the judges were careful to reach a compromise between extreme demands. The second aspect this case reveals is that there is a liberal public in Indonesia that demands not only the right to publicly express its non-belief, but also, inextricably, the right to blaspheme. While many atheist activists work hard to maintain a respectful and positive relationship with believers, others conclude that they can only fully exercise their right to free speech if there is no exception for religious sentiments. One might argue that their situation in Indonesia forces non-believers and those deemed deviant to demand the right to blaspheme, since any atheist statement is prone to be punished under Indonesia's blasphemy laws. Blasphemy and atheism are thus deeply enmeshed. Atheist activists cannot escape this matter, and they use it to push forward their demand to the right to speak their mind freely: No atheist activist can seriously campaign for his or her right to speak freely on the basis of their non-religious identity without also demanding a public space for blasphemy. Outspoken atheists are not only different from most Indonesians. For those who fear religious insult, they are the 'blasphemous other'. It is this particular connection between atheism and blasphemy together with its public delivery that caused the case of Alexander An to explode.<sup>3</sup>

#### INDONESIA'S BLASPHEMY LAWS AND ONLINE MEDIA

In 1961, President Sukarno accepted the selection of six religions as suggested by the Ministry of Religious Affairs. Based on the four criteria of having a holy scripture, a prophet, one lordship, and a system of rules for its followers, Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism became officially and legally recognized religions in the young Republic of Indonesia.<sup>4</sup> Arising from the effort to satisfy the faction that demanded an official place for Islam in the formation of the independent state without excluding the adherents of other religions, the fifth principle of the official state ideology Pancasila prescribed the belief in "One Lordship" or "*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*" (Darmaputera, 1988, pp. 84, 153).<sup>5</sup> But despite these regulations, the formal adherence to a religion is not prescribed constitutionally.<sup>6</sup>

Indonesian atheists today face difficulties on two legal levels: the level of registration of religious affiliation, and the level of banned blasphemy. The Indonesian national identity card requires filling in a religious affiliation. Although it is legally

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3 Elsewhere, I have concluded that the combination of visibility, foreignness (real or ascribed), and growing numbers of followers (real or reported) are highly likely to make a group a target (Schäfer, 2015).

4 After being banned at various times, Confucianism has again been officially recognized as a religion since 2006.

5 *Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa* has been translated in various ways, but the choice of words, which Eka Darmaputera convincingly argues can only be correctly translated as "One Lordship" (Darmaputera, 1988, pp. 84, 153), suggests that it was intended to prescribe monotheism.

6 For a more detailed discussion of the constitutional situation of atheists, see Hasani (2016, pp. 201-205).

possible to register as not adhering to any religion by filling in “not existent” (“*tidak ada*”) in the blank space provided for the category of religion, very few actually make use of this option. Many bureaucrats refuse to oblige, and the danger of being discriminated when registering at school, at university, or at work is considerable. Many atheists say they fear repercussions when they are known to be non-believers.<sup>7</sup> Even greater is the legal difficulty in the case of marriage. Indonesian law has no provision for non-religious civil marriages. According to the marriage law of 1974, every marriage needs to undergo a religious ceremony led by an officially recognized religious leader in order to be recognized as a legal marriage by the state. The other set of laws that atheists may face difficulties with are the anti-blasphemy laws. Religious blasphemy is prohibited in Indonesia under Law No. 1/PNPS/1965. Within the Penal Code, blasphemy is prohibited under Article 156a. Paragraph (a) of this article employs a vague language in its prohibition of any acts and expressions of views which are considered to be blasphemous, and carries a maximum punishment of five years imprisonment. A similar maximum punishment is also carried by paragraph (b) of the same article, which prohibits any acts and expressions of views calling for others to embrace atheism. Further, Article 28 of the 2008 Information and Electronic Transaction Law makes the dissemination of information aimed at inflicting hatred based on ethnicity and religion punishable. Both laws are often used against individuals who are considered deviants within their own religions, or who are accused of insulting a particular religion, for instance by mocking religious practices or prophets. Yet, only the latter is the one applied in the case of Alexander An. This move undoubtedly aimed at encouraging self-censorship and robbed Indonesians of the illusion that the Internet is an unregulated space.

In 2015, Freedom House ranked Indonesia as “Partly Free”, with a score of 42 (midway between 0 as best and 100 as worst) (Freedom House, 2015). In Indonesia, this type of freedom – the kind that is bound to the Western notion of freedom of speech – is more easily obtained on the Internet than in print media, on TV, or on the radio (Lim, 2012). This is at least partly due to the inconsistency of Indonesia’s Internet regulations, and because digital spheres allow for the use of pseudonyms. While pseudonyms and second accounts could technically be traced back, the offence at stake here is not the type that aggravates a tightly controlling state – such as in the case of Thailand, or China – but rather sits unevenly with members of the public. Those who oppose atheists or religious and political diversity do not have the sophisticated means that would be necessary to trace Internet users. Their technical limits mean more online freedom for those who wish to make their ideas visible, but not themselves. Alexander An decided to not make use of a pseudonym, but openly revealed his identity. This may have prompted the physical attack on him and, shortly after, his imprisonment. Yet, many Indonesians seem to have learned from his experience, as they make ample use of the anonymity that the Internet still offers today. Indonesia’s media landscape is vibrant and open, with few certainties and sometimes surprising restrictions. Before 1998, media was highly supervised both by the Ministry of Information and through mechanisms of self-censorship (Hill, 1994). Issues

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7 Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) have shown a high likelihood of being discriminated also for US-American non-believers despite increasing acceptance of religious diversity in the states.

that were not to be openly discussed included *suku* (ethnicity or tribal affiliation), *agama* (religion), *ras* (race), and *antar golongan* (groups with different affiliations and background), also known under the acronym SARA.

Journalists were expected to avoid these topics and to take positions stressing national unity. Since then, freedom of expression has increased considerably and the Indonesian media are now considered among the freest in Asia. However, restrictions and regulations remain. International observers from Reporters Without Borders ranked the country 132nd out of 180 countries in their 2014 World Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2014). Indonesia ranks that low, not so much because of media censorship or government control, but mainly because of the murders of several journalists which were never properly resolved or prosecuted. Issues such as corruption or Papua's struggle for greater autonomy are among those topics that are still particularly dangerous to discuss in public. Besides legal regulations and violence against journalists, ownership is an important factor that affects Indonesia's media landscape. Despite fairly diverse media ownership patterns, business networks rapidly gain influence vis-à-vis the state (Hill & Sen, 2012). Today, in Indonesia, more than 55 million people use the Internet regularly to access various websites – including the websites of local and national newspapers – with almost half of them surfing the web via mobile devices. Mobile phones are an important status symbol in Indonesia (Pousttchi & Wiedemann, 2009, p. 148). The country boasts the world's second largest number of Facebook users and the third largest number of Twitter users (Indonesia Investments, 2014). The majority of young Indonesians have grown up in a very mobile, fast-moving society in which mobile phones have been one of the easiest ways to stay in touch with family and friends back in the left-behind hometown. The digital divide disadvantages rural areas and ensures faster, more regular, and more reliable access to the Internet to urban Indonesians. Among these urbanites are those who have grown up with a cosmopolitan outlook on individuals and society. Many of them compare practices at home with those they find on TV and online, and situate themselves in a broader frame of reference than the village, the city, or even the nation state. Their global outlook becomes apparent in their consumption of both international as well as national English-language media; their frequent use of English in discussion boards; and either their applications for studies abroad, or their fondness of movies whose main characters often live torn between their loved ones back in Indonesia and their studies abroad. Among these cosmopolitan urbanites are those who actively seek to broaden the spectrum of acceptable identities in Indonesian public discourse.

#### ONLINE ATHEIST ACTIVISM AS A CLAIM TO PUBLIC SPACE

Online activism for atheism forms maybe the most important frontline in the broad campaign for the right to freely express skepticism toward religion. Atheist groups have systematically and regularly maintained online groups, discussion threads, and websites in order to make their views public to an Internet-savvy audience. The activist group Indonesian Atheists, founded in 2008, has its own blog decorated with its own logo; it also maintains the most popular Facebook group and is active on YouTube and Twitter. Its founder is Karl Karnadi, an Indonesian expat in Germany and



the US. Eight years after its founding, it reached 1700 members (who call themselves Indonesian Atheists).<sup>8</sup> Another group is the Indonesian Atheist Community, with about 500 likes on their Facebook fan page.<sup>9</sup> Many sign into the group with their real names, while others establish a second account with a pseudonym to protect their identity, either for safety reasons or for fear of alienating their families. Some share stories of being disowned by their parents, and so there is not a general encouragement of 'coming out' as an atheist. Another popular group on Facebook, Indonesian Atheist Parents, is dedicated to questions of atheist parenting. This is a closed group with about 400 members.<sup>10</sup> Atheists with children discuss questions of religious education and of raising children without faith in a society in which religiosity is the norm. These groups mainly function as forums for atheists and non-believers to exchange their experiences.

In addition to these online forums, atheist groups organize regular offline meetings. These often have less of an activist character, but are gatherings for dinner or movie-watching, offering an opportunity to "[have] fun with fellow nonbelievers, where they can be themselves for a while and not [have] to pretend (to be religious or someone they're not)" (Karl Karnadi, 7 February 2016). From these general offline meetings, smaller activist groups emerge and continue their communication online via instant messaging systems such as WhatsApp and LINE. The constant threat of physical violence is one of the reasons why atheist campaigning continues to thrive online. Another related reason is that atheists often become outspoken only after they have left Indonesia to live abroad. Members of the Indonesian diaspora support atheist activism in the motherland by publicly showing their face and name without the same fear of attacks that they would suffer in Indonesia.<sup>11</sup>

Besides serving as meeting platforms, online groups and websites also provide a space for atheism in a semi-public realm. Atheists gather online not only to exchange experiences and opinions but also to educate an Internet-savvy public about their own perspectives. This becomes clear in the online forum *Anda Bertanya Ateis Menjawab* (You Ask, Atheists Respond). The group is also active on Facebook and Twitter. Here, a group of activists "positively interact[s] with the public through [a] strongly moderated Q&A format" to "soften the devilish image of atheists" in the Indonesian public (Karl Karnadi, 7 February 2016). On their Facebook page, liked by more than 55,000 users<sup>12</sup>, they share information on atheism, but also regularly post greetings on major religious holidays such as Muslims' Eid, Christians' Christmas, or Chinese Happy Lunar New Year. After decades of demonization, this online outreach and the

8 While some members will only join the group to inform themselves over its activities, it is safe to conclude that the number of its members does correlate with the significance of the group. For more information, see Indonesian Atheists' Facebook fan page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/indonesianatheists/?fref=ts>.

9 In October 2016, the site had 496 likes.

10 In October 2016, the group had 400 members.

11 This is not to say that activism is restricted to diaspora Indonesians; it is just easier for them to use their real names. From the comments on the respective websites, it is clear that many participants in the online discussions are based in Indonesian cities. Users have hitherto organized offline meetings in at least nine cities, including Jakarta, Bandung, Jogjakarta, Semarang, Surabaya, and Malang in Java, Medan in Aceh, and various places in Bali. Indonesians abroad organize their own meetings.

12 This number refers to October 2016.

notion of community that these websites and forums create in tandem with regular offline meetings seem to help soften social schisms, and even indicate efforts to differentiate between different facets of non-belief.

This mixture of online and offline engagement is reminiscent of gay parades, where the mass character of the event together with practices of donning masks and costumes allowed homosexuals to gather and spend time together, and to simultaneously be present and visible in the public space without exposing themselves to the same vulnerability that they would risk in daily life. In other words, online forums, groups, and websites have a double function: Firstly, they offer atheists a space to seek advice and exchange opinions and strategies; secondly, and more importantly, they make visible their claim to the right to exist as non-believers. Atheist activists use the Internet as a semi-public space that allows them to be simultaneously visible and anonymous. Online activism gives atheists a share of the public realm and allows their cause to be visible and present.

### INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR LOCAL ACTIVISTS

The skepticism toward atheism stems from its supposedly direct link to communism reflected, for example, in the reactions to the 1949 novel *Ateis* by Achdiat Karta Mihardja, in which the lead character, a Muslim called Hasan, begins to question his faith after conversations with his Marxist-Leninist friends. Several comments uttered by politicians in the years to follow show how atheism was ideologically constructed as connected to communism (Hasani, 2016, p. 199). Today, much of the skepticism toward atheism is framed in and enhanced by its international dimension, particularly in connection to Western societies and governments. In addition to the attention which Western media cast upon the issue, and which some Indonesians are well aware of, recognition from abroad comes in two forms: Via the language of human rights and via the international support from other atheist organizations. Both entail not only moral, but also financial support, particularly in the legal realm. Locally, many look at these connections skeptically, and accuse local NGOs of being subverted agents of foreign interests. Notwithstanding, many atheists debate their existence in the vocabulary of human rights. Indeed, the language of human rights has become omnipresent in Indonesia since 1998. The *reformasi* period brought a mushrooming of civil society organizations, and many of them rely entirely on foreign support from USAID, AusAID, and so forth. Those organizations not only speak the language of human rights themselves, but also disseminate this language into Indonesian society through their public outreach in newspapers and other media, and through the jargon of applications. Salaries from international agencies are often not only competitive but generous, and many educated Indonesians regularly try to get their activism funded by an international agency. An important aspect of the human rights regime is the increased importance of the concept of minority since the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup> In their 2013 report on “Abuses Against Religious Minorities”, Human Rights Watch discusses the case of Alexander An at length, thereby suggesting that atheists are a reli-

13 Two minority agendas are reflected in the “Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities”, adopted by the UN in 1992, and the “Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”, adopted in 2007.

gious minority in need of protection (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Atheist organizations in Indonesia not only speak the language of human rights, but focus on the right to non-belief. For them, agnosticism, humanism, or atheism, are group identities that deserve state protection. They advocate for those they perceive as part of their group. In the case of Alexander An, the American Humanist Association – a US-American organization that provides legal assistance to defend the rights of non-religious and religious minorities and actively lobbies for the separation between church and the state in the United States and abroad – discussed his case and offered to assist him with legal support (Bulger, n.d.). This foreign recognition further strengthens atheism as an identity category. As a comment by Karl Karnadi on the online platform Quora illustrates:

When international organizations like Human Rights Watch mentioned atheists as one of Indonesian minority groups for the first time in . . . [sic] probably ever, it has brought confidence to many Indonesian atheists. I saw some atheists were starting to come out, even though most of them do it very carefully and in limited circles of friends and families. It's a good start. ("What Is It Like", n.d.)

When they reveal their views, many atheists become disowned by their families and find consolidation and support in online communities. Yet, members of online communities tell journalists that they are also ready to form an offline community. This happened when, in 2013, a large sum of money was donated to a non-believer by other atheists, so that he could pay the debts to his estranged father (Schonhardt, 2013).

For campaigners like Karl Karnadi, the online presence and the connected offline meetings of atheist groups are only the beginning of what they envision as an Indonesian society that holds a place for atheists, just as it holds a place for different religious groups. Such a society would, most of all, allow atheists to speak their mind openly and publicly, and it would allow them to publicly show their identity as atheists just as others show their identity as Muslims, or Christians. Yet the path they have chosen is rather problematic as it builds on the international terminology of identity and, hence, underlines their (ir)religious identity. In other words, they claim the right to be something rather than the right to do something. By this, they defend the freedom of religion rather than the freedom of speech, and thus end up using religion as their central frame of reference.

The political theorist Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (2015) has investigated the consequences of a religious rights and freedoms model that singles out groups for legal protection as religious groups. According to Hurd, this model molds religious groups into discrete faith communities with clean boundaries and governs difference through religious rights. Social differences of various kinds get reduced to the category of religion. With such a narrow focus, the exploration of reasons for social exclusion and violence gets blocked. The focus on religious affiliation reduces possibilities for both understanding of and campaigning against social exclusion. A major effect that this sectarianization (Hurd, 2015) has for religious groups is the strengthening of boundaries and of claims to orthodoxy and authority. As I have argued elsewhere,

the use of online media in tandem with a rhetoric of minority rights has reinforced the identities of Shia and Ahmadiyya Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia (Schäfer, 2015). However, many of the problems of center-staging religious identity do not only concern those who are categorized as belonging to a particular religious group, but also, comparable to a strong ethnic group identity, apply for atheists and other non-believers. Atheists and others who vocally distance themselves from religion do so by relating themselves to religion or to (ir)religious minorities. In other words, they style their own identity as a community within the same model and frame which religious identities build upon. Religion again becomes the main marker of identity, and thus also contributes to what Hurd (2015) calls the “sectarianization” of irreligious or atheist groups. Even more so than in the case of those deemed deviants from their own officially recognized religion, atheists are vulnerable to this accusation, simply because of the term itself. The term *ateis* is neither of Malay nor Arab origin, but derives from ancient Greek. Its foreign taste on the Indonesian tongue (wrongly) suggests that there has never been any local form of non-belief, or belief without gods. The perceived ‘foreignness’ of the category invites both religious as well as nationalist critics to speculations and conspiracy theories. This hostility is only strengthened by the moral and financial support offered by foreign agencies to atheist groups. This perceived foreignness of atheism might as well be the reason why those local beliefs (*kepercayaan*) that are not officially recognized as religions and that are not centered on a particular deity were rarely attacked of being blasphemous, as atheist expressions were and continue to be today.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS: FORMING FORBIDDEN IDENTITIES ONLINE

Formally, post-Suharto Indonesia is neither a religious, nor a non-religious state. When the judges upheld the old laws against blasphemy in 2010, they declared that Indonesia is a country with belief in one god, not an atheist country. Even though atheism is not technically illegal, religious affiliation is the norm. It is enshrined in the Pancasila, the state philosophy, and it is preserved in various laws, such as the marriage law, as well as in other administrative practices, such as the official ID card. Blasphemy is punishable by law, and with blurred boundaries, some atheist activism is deemed blasphemous by the state. The key aspect here is not the content of the message per se, but its visibility, which has been on the rise since the introduction of new media technologies in Indonesia.

In a media landscape where journalists often financially depend upon the people they report about, the Internet has become a very important platform for self-representation and the dissemination of dissent. For those who do not have the resources to pay journalists for favorable reporting, the Internet offers an array of possibilities. They can not only design their own long-term web presence, but also transmit their own perspectives via social media. In Indonesia, the persecuted Ahmadiyya community has experimented with its own YouTube channel (Schäfer, 2015), and has also successfully secured a place for Ahmadi perspectives in talk shows and reports. In a similar vein, atheist activists, many of whom live abroad, use the Internet to make their own voices heard. In a sectarianized society in which religion occupies central stage, some atheist activists fit their views and the discrimination against them by

turning atheism into a visible form of identity, standing side by side with the religious ones. When they avoid using their real names, the Internet allows activists to exchange views and to become visible without exposing themselves to the danger of violent attacks. In the same way, they use the Internet as a semi-public space to establish an identity that is formally discouraged in Indonesia. Not only did the Indonesian society discourage atheism within its long-lasting campaign against communism – also the Indonesian state, in principle, sanctions atheism and public atheist identities, as in the case of Alexander An, who coupled his atheist online presence with anti-Islamic insults and thus overstepped the line of what is tolerable in a religiously defined public sphere.

The Aan case, however, produced a heightened awareness and sensitivity about the state's regulation of belief. It also revitalized the public debate about what is and is not publicly tolerable and about the state's role in limiting the freedom of speech in matters of religious sensitivities. Those who opposed a relaxed attitude toward what should publicly be tolerable were able to demonstrate the limits they wanted to impose. Moreover, the state used the opportunity to reiterate its middle-ground stance on religious matters, as already demonstrated in the 2010 blasphemy law controversy. The international attention that the case garnered, together with the online network of various atheist websites that commented on the case, show how the Indonesian atheist community is further boosted, and also determined by international support. This is done not only through the increasing demand for religious freedom and the prevailing language of human rights, but also through moral and financial provisions of international atheist organizations flowing to their Indonesian counterparts. In this context, sectarian identity becomes ever more important: The campaigns of international organizations encourage much more sharply differentiated profiles of Indonesian atheists – and other minorities – than they might otherwise adopt. Thus, for Indonesian atheist activists, their newly gained visibility and confidence brings about the danger of reducing their identity to their stance toward religion at large. These markers of difference concentrate pressure at precisely the spot where the Indonesian society is most sensitive. In a nation that is already rapidly fragmenting into various religious and political camps, the growth of internationally well-connected communities may thus increase social tensions within society. Yet, for those whom online activism has enabled to 'come out of the closet' and finally connect with likeminded non-believers in Indonesia and abroad, this sacrifice might be worth the price.



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