

**Criticism of Social, Political, and Religious Problems in Indonesia: A Study on *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* by Misbah Bin Zainil Mustafa (1917-1994)**

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**Abstract**

*Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* by Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa is a Qur'anic exegesis that was born from the pesantren tradition and was written during the New Order era under the leadership of President Soeharto. Through his exegesis, Misbah criticized social, political, and religious issues in Indonesia. The issues he highlighted, including how he formed his criticism, and its political as well as scholarly ramifications, are the focus of this study. Using descriptive, historical and explanatory methods, this article presents interesting and important findings. First, Misbah was an Indonesian ulama who started to publicly criticize the New Order regime's policies and Muslims' behaviors who were deemed inconsistent with Islamic values. In the midst of a hegemonic and repressive political system, Misbah's attitude was a high risk and faced with political pressure from the New Order regime. Second, the use of Qur'anic exegesis as a medium for expressing criticism was an unusual move. During the New Order era, various criticisms of the government were raised through the mass media, art performances, literary works, or extra-parliamentary movements on the streets, but Misbah used Qur'anic exegesis as a medium for criticism; an out of the ordinary choice. Finally, from a political standpoint, because of his *Al-Iklīl*, Misbah was able to escape the political pressures of the hegemonic New Order government, and in term of academic contribution, he was able to establish a new tradition in the history of Qur'anic interpretation in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Qur'anic exegesis, pesantren, social criticism, New Order regime

**Introduction**

Apart from the internal components of the Qur'an, particularly its language and structure, the external aspects of the Qur'an are also important variables in its interpretation. The external aspects of the Qur'an are comprised of two parts. The first one is everything that is directly related to the text of the Qur'an, especially the background and context of the Qur'an's revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) as well as the social, political, and cultural circumstances of Arab society when the Qur'an was revealed.<sup>1</sup> The second one is issues that are unrelated to the text of the Qur'an, such as the social, political, and cultural context in which the interpretation was performed, as well as the interpreter's social, political, and intellectual background. In terms of approach, method and philosophy, this latter aspect is one of the most important variables impacting Qur'anic interpretation.<sup>2</sup>

The external aspect of the Qur'an and its significance in its interpretation is an intriguing and pivotal area for inquiry. Unfortunately, studies in this topic have not yet piqued the interest of Indonesian scholars. Two researchers who studied the history of Qur'an interpretation in Indonesia, Anthony H. Johns and Howard Federspiel, concluded that the Malay-Indonesian interpretations written by the local Muslim scholars (ulama) were transmissions and adaptations of Arabic interpretations written by ulama in the Arab world.<sup>3</sup> By this conclusion, they imply that the exegesis of the Qur'an produced by Indonesian ulamas are lacking in terms of novelty.

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<sup>1</sup> Nur Zainatul Nadra Zainol, Latifah Abdul Majid, and Mohd Faizulamri Md Saad (2018), "An Overview on Hermeneutics Method Application to the Qur'an by Muslim Thinkers," *International Journal of Engineering and Technology*, Vol. 7, No. 4.9 (Special Issue 9), pp. 167-170.

<sup>2</sup> Kasyfullah Abd Kadir and Idris Mansor (2022), "Ideology Manifestation in the Translation of Ambiguous Items from the Qur'an by Abdullah Basmeih," *Al-Bayan*, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 238-266.

<sup>3</sup> Howard M. Federspiel (1991), "An Introduction to Qur'anic Commentaries in Contemporary Southeast Asia," *The Muslim World*, Vol. LXXXI, No. 2, pp. 149-161; Anthony H. Johns (1984), "Islam in the Malay World: An Explanatory Survey with Some Reference to Qur'anic Exegesis," in Raphael Israeli and Anthony H. Johns (eds.), *Islam in Asia: Volume II Southeast Asia and East Asia*, Boulder: Westview Press, pp. 115-161; Anthony H. Johns (1988), "Qur'anic Exegesis in the Malay World: In Search of a Profile," in Andrew Rippin (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 257-287; Anthony H. Johns (1998), "The Qur'an in the Malay World: Reflection on 'Abd Al-Ra'uf of Singkel (1615-1693)," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 120-145; Anthony

Riddell concluded from his research that the Arabic interpretation of the Qur'an had a significant impact on the formation of the Malay-Indonesian exegesis of the Qur'an.<sup>4</sup> This notion, according to Riddell, also applies to other disciplines such as fiqh, theology and tasawuf.<sup>5</sup> Riddell's conclusion is understandable since the practice of studying Islamic sciences in Southeast Asia has always been involving Arabic literature written by Middle Eastern ulamas. This finding also serves as validation of the Middle Eastern Islamic educational works' dominance over the Islamic teaching legacy in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia.

This type of transmission is common in Islamic learning practice.<sup>6</sup> Establishing an authoritative book as a reference is a crucial aspect of sustaining the authenticity and continuity of knowledge of Islamic values in the Islamic scientific tradition. This does not mean that the interpretations of the Qur'an produced by Indonesian ulamas are simply transmissions or media transfers into local languages of interpretations written by ulamas in the Middle East. The writing of Qur'an interpretations in Indonesia flourished in the 1980s with varied approaches, author backgrounds, and dynamic social, political, and theological situations. There are unexpected facts in it, where Indonesian ulamas in fact have created innovative interpretations of the Qur'an, specifically philosophically, that we do not find in the interpretations written by Middle Eastern ulamas, which serves as the point of reference of this study. This is found, for example, in the interpretation of *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl* by Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (1917-1994 AD)—hereinafter referred to as Misbah. Misbah used *Al-Iklīl* to express his criticism of social, political, and religious issues in Indonesia, in addition to explaining the messages contained in the Qur'an. Misbah's strategy is unique and exceptional in the history of writing and publishing Qur'anic exegesis in Indonesia. The present study will examine three critical problems in relation to this phenomenon; first, Misbah analyzed and critiqued social, political, and theological concerns in *Al-Iklīl*; second, the model of criticism he used and the purpose of the criticism; and third, the context of the criticism he made, the causal elements, and the repercussions that transpired.

Through these three issues, we can learn two important things in the history of Qur'an interpretation in Indonesia: first, the dialectic of Qur'an interpretation with social, political, and religious realities in Indonesia; second, the phenomenon of interpretation of the Qur'an which is used as a medium for criticizing government policies and the Muslims behavior in Indonesia; and third, the critical attitude of the ulamas from pesantren (Javanese term for Islamic boarding school) in the midst of the hegemonic and authoritarian New Order government.

## Literature Review

In addition to the structure of the Arabic language, social, cultural, and political aspects must be examined in the interpretation of the Qur'an. In the aspect of language, Riffat Hassan (born 1943 AD) developed three major milestones in the understanding of the Qur'an by: First, understanding the terms in the Qur'an by referring to all classical lexicons to determine what each word means in the culture where it is used; second, philosophically and consistently examining the use of words in the Qur'an; and third, determining the ethical meaning of every message in the Qur'an.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1960s, Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1966 M.) placed the philosophical aspect of the language of the Qur'an as a space to discover what the Qur'an aspires to.<sup>8</sup> In the 2000s, Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943-2010 AD), a liberal and controversial thinker in the field of Qur'anic studies, introduced the concept of interpretation of the Qur'an, referring not only to aspects of the meaning of the Qur'an's vocabulary,

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H. Johns (2006), "Qur'anic Exegesis in the Malay-Indonesian World: An Introduction Survey," in Abdullah Saeed (ed.), *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Indonesia*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 17-41.

<sup>4</sup> Peter G. Riddell (1989), "Earliest Qur'anic Exegetical Activity in the Malay-Speaking State," *Archipel*, Vol. 38, pp. 107-124; Peter Riddell (1990), "The Use of Arabic Commentaries on the Qur'an in the Early Islamic Period in South-East Asia: Report on Work in Progress," *Indonesia Circle School of Oriental & African Studies. Newsletter*, Vol. 18, No. 51, pp. 3-19; Peter G. Riddell (1993), "Controversy in Qur'anic Exegesis and Its Relevance to the Malay-Indonesia World," in Anthony Reid (ed.), *The Making of an Islamic Political Discourse in Southeast Asia*, Clayton: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies Monash University, Monash Papers on Southeast Asia - No. 27, pp. 59-81.

<sup>5</sup> Peter G. Riddell (2001), *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian World: Transmission and Responses*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

<sup>6</sup> Will Kynes (2020), "Morality and Mortality: The Dialogical Interpretation of Psalm 90 in the book of Job," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol. 44, No. 4, pp. 624-641.

<sup>7</sup> Riffat Hassan (1994), "Women's Interpretation of Islam," in Hans Thijssen (ed.), *Women and Islam in Muslim Society*, The Hague: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> Amīn al-Khūlī (1961), *Manāhij Tajdīd fī Al-Naḥwi wa Al-Balāghah wa Al-Tafsīr wa Al-Adab*, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'rīfah, pp. 296-297.

but also to the implicit meaning (*maghzā*) contained in it. According to Abu Zayd, the last point is the purpose of the Qur'an.<sup>9</sup>

On the social front, Ḥassan Ḥanafī (1935-2021 AD) developed a dialectical interpretation of the Qur'an with specific, temporal, and actual social realities. According to Ḥanafī, the interpretation of the Qur'an must be based on the interpreter's life experience and begin with a study of human problems before returning to the Qur'an for theoretical solutions, which is then put into practice. This paradigm of Ḥanafī interpretation is based on the concept of *asbāb al-nuzūl* that reality always precedes revelation.<sup>10</sup>

Social and human sciences as well as triadic elements in interpretation (text, interpreter, and audience as object), are important aspects in such a frame of mind, and that interpretation is not only centered on text but also on reality and audience. The interpretation of the Qur'an is related to the interpreter's social, political, origin, and scientific genealogy. As a result, interpretation involves and is influenced by the interpreter's background, community, and way of thinking.<sup>11</sup> These relations become one of the factors of the product of interpretation.<sup>12</sup> Abdul Kader Toyab's study of al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of the word *fitnah* in the Qur'an is one example of the role of social, cultural, and political contexts in the interpretation of the Qur'an.<sup>13</sup> A similar issue may be seen in Burhani's analysis of Ahmadiyah's sectarian translation of the Qur'an<sup>14</sup> and Mustaffa Abdullah's study of the influence of Qadiani's teachings on the interpretation of the Qur'an in Sumatra.<sup>15</sup>

Various studies on *Al-Iklīl* have so far shown the diversity of these external contexts, but have not addressed the dialectical aspect between interpreters and the political context, as well as the use of interpretations as a medium for criticizing government policies and the behavior of Islamic societies. The objects investigated in this study were limited to three things. First, the topics in *Al-Iklīl*. I chose the topics which are in my opinion relevant to the needs of the Islamic community. For instance, Muhammad Sholeh's research on the quality of the ḥadīth used by Misbah in explaining the verses of the Qur'an,<sup>16</sup> Islah Gusmian who has examined Misbah's views on the family planning program in Indonesia,<sup>17</sup> Maya Kusnia who examines the concept of *bid'ah* (heresy) in the interpretation of *Al-Iklīl*,<sup>18</sup> and Zainal Abidin who analyzed *Al-Iklīl* from a gender perspective.<sup>19</sup>

Second, the inclusion of elements of Indonesian tradition and culture in *Al-Iklīl*. This research's approach is predicated on the notion that Qur'anic interpretation has a relationship and effect with external components, both in the form of traditions and ways of thinking. Ahmad Baidhawi conducted this type of research, examining the effect of Javanese tradition on *Al-Iklīl* and the usage of Pegon (modified Arabic to write Javanese) in writing the exegesis,<sup>20</sup> Jannit studied the Indonesian elements in *Al-Iklīl*,<sup>21</sup> and Supriyanto examined the elements of pesantren tradition in *Al-Iklīl*.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1994), *Maḥmūd Al-Naṣṣ: Dirāsah fī 'Ulūm Al-Qur'ān*, Beirut: al-Markaz al-Ṣāqafī al-'Arabī; Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1994), *Naqd Al-Khiṭāb Al-Dīnīy*, Cairo: Sīnā li al-Nasyr.

<sup>10</sup> Ḥassan Ḥanafī (1981), *Dirasāt Islāmiyyah*, Cairo: Maktabat al-Anjīlu al-Miṣriyyah, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Grant S. Osborne (1991), *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, p. 401; Sahiron Syamsuddin (2009), *Tafsir Studies*, Yogyakarta: Elsaq Press, p. xvii.

<sup>12</sup> Islah Gusmian (2021), *Khazanah Tafsir Al-Qur'an Indonesia*, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Salwa; Muhammad Mustaqim Mohd Zarif (2022), "Scripture and Politics in Malaysia: The Qur'anic Exegesis of Abdul Hadi bin Awang," *Al-Bayan*, Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 1-22.

<sup>13</sup> Abdulkader Tayob (1993), "An Analytical Survey of Al-Ṭabarī's Exegesis of the Cultural Symbolic Construct of Fitna," in Gerald R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef (eds.), *Approaches to the Qur'an*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmad Najib Burhani (2015), "Sectarian Translation of the Qur'an in Indonesia: The Case of the Ahmadiyah," *Al-Jami'ah*, Vol. 53, No. 2, pp. 251-282.

<sup>15</sup> Mustaffa Abdullah, Andi Putra Ishak, and Abdul Karim Ali (2019), "Pengaruh Mirza Basyiruddin Mahmud Ahmad dalam Tafsiran Al-Qur'an dan Penyebaran Ajaran Qadiani di Sumatera, Indonesia," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, Vol. 14, No. 2, pp. 9-23.

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Sholeh (2015), "Studi Analisis Hadis-Hadis Tafsir Al-Iklīl Karya K.H. Misbah Zain bin Mustafa (Surat ad-Dhuha sampai Surat An-Nas)," Undergraduate Thesis, State Islamic University of Walisongo Semarang.

<sup>17</sup> Islah Gusmian (2018), "Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl and Family Planning in Indonesia," Proceedings of the International Conference on Qur'an dan Hadits Science, pp. 84-87.

<sup>18</sup> Maya Kusnia (2018), "Penafsiran Misbah Mushtofa terhadap Ayat tentang Bid'ah dalam Tafsir Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl," Undergraduate Thesis, State Islamic University of Sunan Ampel Surabaya.

<sup>19</sup> Ahmad Zainal Abidin, M. Imam Sanusi Al-Khanafi and Eko Zulfikar (2019), "Tafsir Gender Jawa: Telaah Tafsir Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl," *Musawa*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 1-18.

<sup>20</sup> Ahmad Baidowi (2015), "Aspek Lokalitas Tafsir Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl Karya KH Mishbah Musthafa," *Nun*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Robbi Jannit (2017), "Nuansa Keindonesiaan dalam Tafsir Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl Karya KH Misbah Zainal Musthafa," Undergraduate Thesis, State Islamic University of Sunan Gunung Jati Bandung.

<sup>22</sup> Supriyanto (2016), "Kajian Al-Qur'an dalam Tradisi Pesantren: Telaah atas Tafsir Al-Iklīl Fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl," *Tsaqafah*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 281-298.

Third, the method of interpretation used in *Al-Iklīl*. In this study, the focus is on the paradigm as well as the orientation and purpose of writing Qur'anic exegesis. This type of study was conducted by Amirul Mukminin who analyzed the characteristics of the interpretation method in *Al-Iklīl*,<sup>23</sup> Faisal Hilmi who examined the method of interpretation in *Al-Iklīl*,<sup>24</sup> and Iskandar who analyzed the sufistic approach of *Al-Iklīl*.<sup>25</sup> This article examines an issue that has not been studied by the aforementioned researchers, which is Misbah's criticism in *Al-Iklīl* of social, political, and religious issues in Indonesia during President Soeharto's reign.

## **Object of Study and Methods**

The subject of this research is *Al-Iklīl*, particularly in the passages used by Misbah to convey criticism of social, political, and religious problems in Indonesia. Researchers' studies on Misbah and his interpretations, as well as Indonesian ulama readings of the Qur'an, are used as secondary data to expand this study. Misbah's history, biography, and sociopolitical function, as well as the social, political, and theological circumstances in which this interpretation was produced, were used as supporting data. This study used three methodologies: descriptive, historical, and explanatory.

The first method is the descriptive method. This method was used to explain the history of the writing of *Al-Iklīl*, the origins and background of Misbah's life and religiosity, the context of the verses of the Qur'an that Misbah used as a medium in criticizing social, political, and religious issues, his method of interpretation, and the political context of the Indonesian government under the leadership of President Soeharto. This method was used to collect comprehensive and factual data and descriptions of the historical map of *Al-Iklīl* and the Indonesian government's social and political context.

The second one is the historical method. The method is not only linear and vertical, but it is also horizontal.<sup>26</sup> The definition of history here is not atomistic, but holistic.<sup>27</sup> Misbah's critique of social, political, and religious issues in Indonesia during the New Order regime was examined using historical methods, involving elements other than the text of the Qur'an, which are the audience of the interpretation, the social and political context of the interpretation, and the social and political background of the interpreter. Therefore, the problems were studied synchronically to see the dialectic between *Al-Iklīl* and the politics of the New Order regime, so that external elements of the Qur'anic text can be found in *Al-Iklīl*.

The third method is the explanatory method. The causal logic underpins this method. Misbah's dialectic and critique in *Al-Iklīl* of the New Order regime's political policies and the conduct of Islamic society in Indonesia are explained using this method. These conduct and policies were criticized because they contradicted Islamic teachings' ideals and values. The elements that create and affect the critique may be identified in a comprehensive and holistic manner using this analytical paradigm, even when the same causes do not always yield the same outcomes. In this sense, *Al-Iklīl* and Misbah are positioned as two entities that are interconnected with social, cultural, and political contexts. The interpretation of the Qur'an, like knowledge and understanding in general, is psychologically and socially tied to the interpreter's life, cultural, social, and political background, as well as the worldview he created.<sup>28</sup>

## **Results**

### ***Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa, Socio-Political Activities, and Islamic Literacy***

Misbah was born in the village of Sawahan, Gang Palen, Rembang, Central Java, to the couple Zainal Mustafa and Chadijah in 1917 AD. He was the third of four children; Mashadi (later known as Bisri

<sup>23</sup> Amirul Mukminin (2022), "Karakteristik Kitab Tafsir Al-Iklīl fī Ma'āni Al-Tanzīl Karya KH. Misbah Mustofa," Undergraduate Thesis, State Islamic University of Raden Intan Lampung, pp. 5-6.

<sup>24</sup> Faisal Hilmi (2015), "Metode dan Corak Tafsir Al-Iklīl fī Ma'āni Al-Tanzīl Karya KH Misbah bin Zainul Mustofa," Undergraduate Thesis, State Islamic University of Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta.

<sup>25</sup> Iskandar (2015), "Penafsiran Sufistik Surat Al-Fatihah dalam Tafsir Tāj Al-Muslimīn dan Tafsir Al-Iklīl Karya KH Misbah Musthofa," *Fenomena*, Vol. 7, No. 2, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Mohammed Arkoun (1990), *Al-Fikr Al-Islāmi: Naqd wa Ijtihād*, London: Dār al-Sāqī; Misnawati, Samsul Bahri, and Muhammad Nuzul Abrar (2022), "Pemikiran Mohammed Arkoun dalam Penafsiran Kontemporer," *Mudarrisuna: Media Kajian Pendidikan Agama Islam*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 271-290.

<sup>27</sup> Anton Bakker and Achmad Charris Zubair (2000), *Metodologi Penelitian Filsafat*, Yogyakarta: Kanisius, p. 46.

<sup>28</sup> Moh. Asror Yusuf and Ahmad Taufiq (2020), "The Dynamic Views of Kiai in Response to the Government Regulations for the Development of Pesantren," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 1-32.

Mustafa), Salamah, Misbah, and Ma'shum. His father was an entrepreneur who was well-known for his generosity and who admired kiai (Javanese term for ulama) for the depth of their knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

After graduating from the People's School (*Sekolah Rakyat*) in 1928 AD, Misbah followed in the footsteps of his older brother, Bisri Mustafa, and enrolled in Pesantren Kasingan in Rembang, Central Java, where he studied under the guidance of Kiai Khalil bin Harun. Misbah studied Arabic grammar in this pesantren, and he also finished studying the book of *Alfiyah ibn Mālik* 17 times. Aside from Arabic grammar, he also studied *fiqh*, *kalām*, *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, and *taṣawwuf*, among other Islamic sciences. In 1938 AD, he then pursued his study in Pesantren Tebuireng in Jombang, East Java, under the direction of K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari, founder of Nahdlatul Ulama (largest Islamic organization in the world, also known as NU). In this pesantren, he explored many disciplines of study to supplement what he had learned at Pesantren Kasingan. He was renowned as a bright student at Pesantren Tebuireng, particularly in the subject of Arabic grammar. Because of his brilliance, his peers frequently referred to him as a source of reference.<sup>30</sup>

After graduating from Pesantren Tebuireng, in 1948, he married Masrurah, the daughter of K.H. Ridwan, the founder of Pesantren Al-Balagh in Bangilan, Tuban. Misbah's parents-in-law asked him to go to Bangilan to teach Islamic studies at Pesantren Al-Balagh. Misbah was given complete control of the pesantren and its operations by his father-in-law due to his ability in teaching various disciplines. Misbah devoted his life at this pesantren, together with his family, to teaching the *santri* (students of pesantren).

Misbah was engaged in preaching and politics in addition to teaching. Originally, he was a member of Masyumi (The Council of Indonesian Muslim Associations), a party with a large following among Indonesia's Muslim community. Soon after leaving Masyumi, he joined the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangun, also known as PPP), and then, under political pressure from the New Order administration, he joined the Functional Group Party (Golongan Karya, often known as Golkar), a party that supported the New Order regime's agenda. Misbah, who had just been active in Golkar for a short period of time, quit and thereafter completely stopped being involved in politics.<sup>31</sup>

His decision was motivated by differences in perspectives and political ideals between himself and lawmakers from various political parties. Politics, according to Misbah, is a form of preaching and worship. As a result, when he discovered issues in a political party that were contradictory to Islamic beliefs and the participants refused to address their wrongdoing, Misbah left the party, even if it was labeled Islamic.

He also maintained a critical stance against non-political attitudes and opinions that were not in accordance with Islamic values. Misbah once published a Reader's Letter in the *Serial Media Dakwah* magazine regarding the equal status of men and women in Islam, according to documents preserved by Muhammad Nafis. This letter which was written on April 1, 1987 was addressed to the editor of the *Serial Media Dakwah* magazine. The letter explained that in issue No. 153, the magazine reported on Sanwani Toyib's letter to Amien Rais discussing the status of men and women in Islam. On February 14, 1992, Misbah also wrote a letter to Abdurrahman Wahid and Habib Luthfi, two young figures in Nahdlatul Ulama at the time. This letter discusses the use of the nickname "Gus" in pesantren, which he claims to frequently have negative connotations and is often misused.

Misbah spent his time after leaving politics teaching, writing, and translating numerous Islamic works into Javanese and thus using the Pegon script. His publications include a wide range of subjects, including grammar, *fiqh*, interpretation, *ḥadīth*, and sufism. In the realm of Qur'anic exegesis, he wrote *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī at-Tanzīl* and *Tāj al-Muslimīn*. The Javanese language and the Pegon script were used to write these two works. He also translated *Al-Jalālayn* along with an explanation in Javanese using the Pegon script entitled *Nibrās al-Muslimīn*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Achmad Zainal Huda (2005), *Mutiara Pesantren: Perjalanan Khidmah KH. Bisri Mustofa*, Yogyakarta: LKiS, p. 9.

<sup>30</sup> Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (2006), *Shalat dan Tatakrama*, Tuban: Penerbit Al-Misbah.

<sup>31</sup> Islah Gusman (2016), "K.H. Misbah ibn Zainul Musthafa (1916-1994 M): Pemikir dan Penulis Teks Keagamaan dari Pesantren," *Jurnal Lektur Keagamaan*, Vol. 14, No. 1, p. 115.

<sup>32</sup> Gusman (2016), "K.H. Misbah ibn Zainul Musthafa (1916-1994 M)," p. 115.

In the field of ḥadīth, he translated Arabic ḥadīth literature into Javanese using Pegon script. Among them are *Riyāḍ aṣ-Ṣāliḥīn*, *Al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaghīr*, *Bulūgh al-Marām*, dan *Arba'in al-Nawāwī*. In the field of fiqh, he translated *Faḥḥ al-Qarīb*, *Faḥḥ al-Majīd*, *Safīnah al-Najāh*, *Al-Muhazzab*, *Faḥḥ al-Mu'in*, *Masā'il al-Barzakhiyyah*, and *Kifāyah al-Akhyār*. In addition to translation works, in the field of fiqh he also wrote a number of books including *al-Mabādi' al-Fiḥiyyah*, *Masā'il al-Janā'iz*, *Faṣalātan*, *Manasik Haji*, *Al-Nūr al-Mubīn*, *Masā'il al-Nisā'*, *Masā'il al-Rijāl*, *Fuṣūl al-Arba'iniyyah*, and *Anda Ahlussunah Anda Bermazhab*.<sup>33</sup>

In the field of Arabic grammar, he translated the main literature used in pesantren to study Arabic grammar, such as *Matn al-Jurūmiyyah*, *Jawāhir al-Kalāmiyyah*, *Aṣ-Ṣarf al-Waḍiḥ*, and *Naḍm Qawā'id al-I'rāf*. Moreover, he wrote *Sullam al-Naḥwi*. In the field of akhlaq (morality), he translated *Naṣāiḥ al-'Ibād*, *Tanbīh al-Ghāfilīn*, *Qurrah al-'Uyūn*, *Bidāyah al-Hidāyah*, *'Aqīdah al-Awwām*, *Hidāyah al-Ṣibyān*, and *Al-Kharīdah al-Bahiyyah*. His original books on morality include *Al-Tazkirah al-Haniyyah fī Khuṭbah al-Jum'ah* and *Al-Jawāhir al-'Ālamīyah min Asrār as-Sā'ah*. In the field of Sufism, he translated *Sharḥ Al-Ḥikam* and *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*. Apart from these, he also translated *Risālah al-Mu'āwanah wa al-Muzāharah wa al-Muwāzarah* and *Ḥizb al-Naṣr*.<sup>34</sup>

Misbah's writings and translation exhibit his depth of knowledge and the range of subjects that he acquired. Misbah was not only able to articulate his clerical role in pesantren and his social role in society in the face of limited economic resources and political pressure from the New Order regime led by President Soeharto, but he was also persistent in developing the literacy tradition in pesantren. In fact, before he passed away on Monday 07 Dzulqā'dah 1414 H/April 18, 1994 AD, at the age of 78, he was in the process of writing another Qur'anic exegesis, *Tāj al-Muslimīn*, and six untitled religious manuscripts. Misbah had also started a publishing and printing business at the pesantren, which he used to publish his own works.

#### ***Al-Iklīl, History and Its Writing Methods***

Misbah started writing *Al-Iklīl* in 1977 and finished in 1985. His goal of writing this exegesis was to provide Muslims with insight so that they could live balanced lives in both world affairs and the hereafter, and to make the Qur'an a guidance in life.<sup>35</sup> The title chosen for this exegesis reflects this goal as well. The word *al-Iklīl* means 'crown'. This term is used in the belief that the Qur'an would become a crown and a guardian for Muslims, allowing them to find honor and safety both in this world and in the afterlife.

The Ihsan publisher and bookstore in Surabaya was in charge of the publication and distribution of *Al-Iklīl*. Misbah sold it to the owner of the Ihsan publisher, but there is no information on how much money he received. According to Muhammad Nafis, the revenues from the sale of *Al-Iklīl* were put towards building the Al-Balagh mosque and pesantren. There is no documented evidence on how many times this exegesis was produced. However, it appears that *Al-Iklīl* was printed numerous times based on the varying cover colors of the same volume. *Al-Iklīl* was printed on opaque paper, as was customary at pesantren at the time. The idea was to keep the price low enough for students and the general public to be able to afford it.

*Al-Iklīl* was written in line with the *muṣḥaf* sequence and printed with references to the chapters of the Qur'an, hence it consists of 30 volumes. Except for chapter 30, which is named *Tafsīr Juz 'Ammā fī Ma'ānī al-Tanzīl*, each volume is given the same title by adding the chapter number. The thickest volume is volume 10, which has 294 pages, while the thinnest volume is volume 27, which has 80 pages. The numbering is arranged sequentially, which starts with number 1, for each volume, except for volume 30. Volume 30 has 192 pages, whereas volumes 1–29 have 4,482 pages. The total number of pages is 4,674.

Technically, *Al-Iklīl* is divided into three components. The first part is the translation of each word in the verses of the Qur'an that are written diagonally under the Arabic word (*makna gandul*). The second component is the *maknawiah* translation, which is an explanation of each verse in the sequence of verses. Third, the section that explains one topic from a series of verses. Misbah provides a

<sup>33</sup> Gusmian (2016), "K.H. Misbah ibn Zainul Musthafa (1916-1994 M)," p. 116.

<sup>34</sup> Gusmian (2016), "K.H. Misbah ibn Zainul Musthafa (1916-1994 M)," p. 116.

<sup>35</sup> Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl, Juz 10*, Surabaya: Toko Buku Ihsan, p. xx.

comprehensive explanation in this section, both related to the context of verse revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), the relationship between verses (*munāsabah*), Arabic grammar, quotations of ulamas' opinions whose expertise is in the Qur'anic exegesis, and the relationship of verse context to social, political, and religious issues.

Misbah uses basic, unambiguous language to explain the meaning of the passage, and he complemented it by examples of cases that have taken place in real life. For example, while teaching Surah Al-A'rāf: 55, which deals with the ethics of prayer, according to Misbah, it is inappropriate for someone to pray with a loud voice or by shouting, because Allah is All-Hearing. According to him, prayer should be said quietly.<sup>36</sup> In other parts, he explains complex concepts using visuals so that the reader may understand them better. One of which is when he discusses the surah's opening verse (*fawātiḥ al-suwar*). Misbah depicts these phrases that have no grammatical value as official letter numbers in government agencies. The meaning of the numbers and letters in the letter number is a code known only to the office and the people who work there.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, the use of *makna gandul* can help readers comprehend the meaning of Arabic text. For starters, this strategy explains the grammatical meaning of each word. In this method, the reader learns the Arabic terminology used in the Qur'an. Second, this strategy shows the meaning of particles and conjunctions, which have multiple meanings in Arabic grammar. Finally, using methodically ordered symbols, this technique indicates the position of words in the sentence structure. Words that are *mubtada'* (subject) at the top, for example, are represented by the letter *mīm* in small size, whereas words that are *khobar* (subject complement) are represented by the letter *khā'*, also in small size, written above the word. This practice is part of a long-standing tradition at pesantrens in Java.

In the context of Indonesian political history, *Al-Iklīl* was written in the 1980s, under the New Order dictatorship led by President Soeharto. The government operated in a repressive and hegemonic style throughout this period.<sup>38</sup> Critical expressions and opinions in the media, books, academic spaces, music and theatrical performances, and even in parliament were frequently suppressed. The reasons typically given by the government at the time were to ensure that Indonesia's social and political environment were stable and free of turmoil, allowing economic growth to proceed properly.<sup>39</sup>

To increase authority and eliminate ideological disagreement, the New Order dictatorship streamlined political parties through a policy of political party unification. Mass political power and participation were systematically reduced during that era by not allowing politicians from political parties to sit in government bureaucracies, particularly ministerial positions—one of the bureaucratic elites in politics.<sup>40</sup> The bureaucracy's power was co-opted and controlled to serve the authorities rather than the people, such that the bureaucracy functioned as both a servant and a political machine for the New Order dictatorship. The legislature's and the judiciary's duties and functions were reduced, concentrating power entirely in the hands of the executive.<sup>41</sup>

Misbah composed and published *Al-Iklīl* in the midst of such political dynamics. As an individual who was born and raised in the pesantren tradition, he did not just carry out his clerical obligations in the manner of teaching Islamic studies in his institution. Furthermore, through *Al-Iklīl* and his other works, he had contributed significantly to the development of literacy traditions and the publication of Islamic writings in the pesantren culture. In the 1980s, when the book publishing industry in Indonesia had not yet evolved significantly, Misbah started this important role from pesantren. The publishing house he established at his pesantren is one example of the initiatives he pioneered in order to achieve economic, political, and religious freedom through the domain of literacy.

<sup>36</sup> Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 8, Bangilan: Toko Buku Ihsan, p. 1274.

<sup>37</sup> Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 1, Surabaya: Toko Buku Ihsan, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Riswanda Imawan (1997), *Membedah Politik Orde Baru*, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar.

<sup>39</sup> Sofian Effendi (1990), "Beberapa Hambatan Struktural Pelaksanaan Pengawasan Legislatif," in Akhmad Zaini Abar (ed.), *Beberapa Aspek Pembangunan Orde Baru*, Solo: Ramadhani, p. 6; Budi Irawanto (1999), *Film, Ideologi, dan Militer: Hegemoni Militer dalam Sinema Indonesia*, Yogyakarta: Media Pressindo; Stanley YAP (2006), "Intelijen, Sensor dan Negeri Kapatuhan," in Andi Widjajanto (ed.), *Negara, Intel, dan Ketakutan*, Jakarta: PACIVIS, Center for Global Civil Society Studies, University of Indonesia.

<sup>40</sup> Akhmad Setiawan (1998), *Perilaku Birokrasi dalam Pengaruh Paham Kekuasaan Jawa*, Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, p. 112.

<sup>41</sup> Riswanda Imawan (1997), *Membedah Politik Orde Baru*.

### **Diversity of Issues and Critical Construction**

The Family Planning (*Keluarga Berencana*, also known as KB) program and Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ - Indonesian national Qur'an competition) are two key political programs that were formed during the New Order regime that Misbah denounced in *Al-Iklil*. KB is an Indonesian government program mandated by Presidential Instruction No. 26, 1968.<sup>42</sup> The Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI) provides support for the program, as long as its implementation does not conflict with Islamic law.<sup>43</sup> Masjfuk Zuhdi, a fiqh scholar at the time, also supported this policy. According to him, the family planning program is a form of *tanẓīm al-nasl* (family planning), not *taḥdīd al-nasl* (birth control). As a result, according to Zuhdi, the program does not violate Islamic principles.<sup>44</sup>

Misbah, in contrast to the MUI and Zuhdi, opposed the family planning program. He made this remark while discussing Q.S. al-Qaṣaṣ [28]: 4. This verse tells the story of Pharaoh's concern of an astrologer's warning that his rule will be usurped by a male descendant of the Israel ethnic group. Pharaoh made two critical judgments in light of these prophecies. First, imposing forced labor for the Egyptian people descended from Israel ethnic group. The goal was to inhibit their growth and conception. Second, declaring that every child born as a male from the Israel ethnic group shall be murdered.<sup>45</sup> The passage does not mention the family planning program explicitly, but Misbah used Pharaoh's political tactic to criticize the program. Misbah made the following criticism in a straightforward statement:

*Kang mengkene iki kedadihan diulangi ana ing zaman sak iki. Raja dunya, yaiku Amerika lan Rusia pada usaha ngurangi rikate pertumbuhan penduduk, ana ing kalangan umat Islam lewat Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa nuli lumaku ing negara-negara sak dunya iki, termasuk Indonesia kanthi alasan pangan bakal ora bakal ngukupi, nguwatirake akihe pengangguran lan liyo-liyane.*<sup>46</sup>

Translation: This is repeated in the present era. World leaders, particularly the United States and Russia, are attempting to decrease Muslim population growth through the United Nations, which is then implemented around the world, including in Indonesia. The reason is that the world's food supply is insufficient to meet the demands of the world's population, there is widespread unemployment, and other factors.

According to the passage above, Misbah's rejection is due to three factors. First, from a political standpoint, Misbah believes that the family planning program is a political effort to slow the rate of Muslim population growth. In terms of numbers, this strategy would diminish the number of Muslims in Indonesia. As a result, Muslim political representation was weak, and Muslims' interests would ultimately be readily subjugated by the government.

Second, from a theological standpoint, Misbah believed that the objective of family planning is to reduce the number of unemployment and limited natural resources. Misbah stated that Muslims should not be concerned about the fate of children born, citing Q.S. Al-An'ām [6]: 151, which talks about the prohibition of murdering infants as a mercy from Allah, for fear of becoming destitute and unable to provide for them. According to Misbah, there is no reason to be concerned about the growing number of births because God has prearranged every human life on this earth.<sup>47</sup>

The second policy that Misbah criticized was Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an (MTQ). In Islam, reading the Qur'an must be *tartīl* (in proper order) (QS. Al-Muzammil [73]: 4; QS. Al-A'rāf [7]: 204) and according to the knowledge of *tajwīd* (set of rules or reading Qur'an properly). Referring to the advice of the Prophet Muhammad, reading the Qur'an should also be in good and beautiful voices and tunes.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Mahfudli Sahly (1995), *Syahwat, Jima', dan KB*, Solo: CV Aneka, p. 152.

<sup>43</sup> Departemen Agama RI (2003), *Himpunan Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, Jakarta: Bagian Proyek Sarana dan Prasarana Produk Halal, Direktorat Jenderal Bimbingan Masyarakat Islam dan Penyelenggaraan Haji Departemen Agama RI.

<sup>44</sup> Masjfuk Zuhdi (1997), *Masailul Fiqhiyah*, Jakarta: PT Gunung Agung; Masjfuk Zuhdi (1986), *Islam dan Keluarga Berencana*, Surabaya: Bina Ilmu.

<sup>45</sup> Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (1985), *Al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī at-Tanzīl*, Juz 20, Surabaya: Toko Buku Ihsan, p. 3370.

<sup>46</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī at-Tanzīl*, Juz 20, p. 1985.

<sup>47</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī at-Tanzīl*, Juz 8, pp. 1184-1185; Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklil fī Ma'ānī at-Tanzīl*, Juz 20, p. 1985.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Qayyim Al-Jauziyah (1425H/2004), *Zād al-Ma'ād Fī Hadyi Khair Al-'Ibād*, 1st ed., Beirut: Muassasah al-Risālah, p. 470; Muhyiddīn Abū Zakariya Al-Nawawī (2004), *Al-Aẓkar Al-Nawawī*, 1st ed., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyah, p. 166.



Reading the Qur'an was thus linked to the realm of sound arts for this final reason. However, it is staged and contested in a cultural context. This tradition was then accommodated in MTQ.<sup>49</sup>

The Indonesian government officially and fully supported MTQ initiatives. This support was given because, in addition to religious values and Islamic symbolism, these activities were cultural events with economic potential for the New Order administration. Misbah condemned MTQ from an economic standpoint, claiming that they may lead to unethical actions and devalue the Qur'an. He expressed his concern when explaining Q.S. Al-Tawbah [9]: 31. This passage contains the Jews' and Christians' total obedience to their rabbis and priests, considering them God.<sup>50</sup>

The subjects discussed in this verse are Jews and Christians. The theme discussed had nothing to do with the behavior of Muslims, but Misbah used it as an analogy to criticize MTQ. According to Misbah, some Muslims in Indonesia behave similarly to the Jewish and Christian communities, in that they obey religious leaders without being critical. In fact, some of their behavior contains *bid'ah* (new things that in the context of values or guidance there are no examples from the life of the Prophet Muhammad or his Companions, either explicitly or implicitly).<sup>51</sup> Misbah presented the MTQ case in a clear narrative to communicate his critique of this activity.

*...semono ugo MTQ. Mandar penulis tau nompo crita yen MTQ iku kanggo ngasilake dana kanggo pembangunan. Akhire ayat-ayat Qur'an dikaset kanggo hiburan, seneng-seneng... wong-wong kang ngaku ulama lan zuama podho anggunake al-Qur'an kanggo hiburan, kanggo seneng-seneng, kanggo golek dana pembangunan.*<sup>52</sup>

Translation: Same thing with MTQ (Musabaqah Tilawatil Qur'an). The author had heard that the MTQ was used to raise funding for development. Eventually, the Qur'anic passages are used as entertainment. Individuals claiming to be ulamas and leaders use the Qur'an for entertainment and fundraising.

There are three grounds behind this critique, as stated in the statement above. First, MTQ practices are *bid'ah*, which cannot be accepted since there is no reference, explicit or implicit, in the Prophet Muhammad's words or conduct that can be utilized as a legal foundation. Second, the goal of hosting MTQ tends to convert the Qur'an to become a form of entertainment rather than a guidance to life. Finally, the Qur'an is recited with beautiful tunes or voices for monetary and worldly reasons, such as fundraising, rather than seeking Allah's pleasure.

Misbah, in addition to condemning the New Order government's political systems, denounced certain religious practices of Muslims in Indonesia, which he claimed contradicted Islamic teachings. This variability results from deviations in *tarekat* practice (a unique method used by travelers on the path to God to moderate their desires through numerous stages), commercialization of religion, excess in religion, and religious rites inherited from Buddhism.

In Indonesia, the *tarekat* institution has grown over a long period of time and found its place in Nahdlatul Ulama.<sup>53</sup> Misbah does not deny the existence and role of the *tarekat* in the diverse Muslim community, but he criticized the views of some *tarekat* followers in Indonesia who believe that in order to achieve salvation, one must join a *tarekat* organization.<sup>54</sup> According to Misbah, *tarekat* is not the sole option for Muslims to be saved. According to Misbah, life safety can also be obtained by someone who consistently follows the instructions of the Qur'an and Sunnah. He based this criticism on Q.S. Al-Jinn [72]: 16. When explaining Q.S. Al-Tawbah [9]: 31, he also strongly criticized the belief of some followers of *tarekat* about the *tarekat* members' special closeness to Allah.<sup>55</sup> This kind of belief, according to Misbah, is a spiritual disease that *tarekat* adherents must avoid.

<sup>49</sup> Howard M. Federspiel (1994), *Popular Indonesian Literature of the Qur'an*, Ithaca: Cornell Modern Indonesia Project, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University.

<sup>50</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 10, p. 1664.

<sup>51</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 10, p. 1664.

<sup>52</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 10, pp. 1667-1668.

<sup>53</sup> Sri Mulyati (2005), *Mengenal dan Memahami Tarekat-Tarekat Muktabarah di Indonesia*, Jakarta: Kencana, p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 29, Surabaya: Toko Buku Ihsan, pp. 4429-4430.

<sup>55</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 10, p. 1702.

Another *tarekat* principle that he critiqued is the teaching of the disciple's unconditional obedience to the master (*murshid*). This type of instruction will instill, according to Misbah, the notion that everything the *murshid* does must be correct. This is contrary to Islamic beliefs.<sup>56</sup> Misbah challenged Kiai Muslih's work *al-Futūḥāt al-Rabbāniyyah*, which teaches about unconditional obedience.<sup>57</sup> Along with this, Misbah also questioned the excessive admiration of Sheikh 'Abdul Qādir al-Jailānī, such as by hanging his portrait on the prayer room wall and recounting his history with particular ceremonies. He conveyed this criticism when explaining QS. Al-Nisa' [4]: 171.

This verse talks about the prohibitions of religious excess. The theme of this verse has no direct connection with the growing practice of loving God's saints (*wali*) among Indonesia's diverse Muslim community. However, when explaining this verse, Misbah associated it with the excessive love and praise of Muslims towards Sheikh 'Abdul Qādir al-Jailānī. According to Misbah, there is no need to give special treatment to one of Allah's saints. According to him, this kind of behavior is part of excess in religion, and this kind of attitude is prohibited in Islam.<sup>58</sup>

Misbah's second religious concern is the commodification of religion by some *murshids* and *tarekat* followers. They capitalize the *tarekat* institution to gain financial benefit, higher status, and global standing. Misbah did not precisely name the individual in question, but he believed that such action is opposed to the goals and character of *tarekat*. Misbah elaborated on the criteria that members of *tarekat* should possess, namely: *tawāḍu'* (humble), *inkisār* (feeling humiliated before Allah), *ḥubb al-khumūl* (covering self-goodness and self-glorification), *'iffah* (actions are the same as words), *zuhd* (keeping distance from the world), *wara'* (keeping oneself from anything that is haram and shubhat), *īthār* (putting others first), and *tawakkul* (surrendering to Allah).<sup>59</sup>

Misbah critiqued the third religious practice of Muslims: excessive activity in worship. He opposed the usage of loudspeakers during worship as one of the examples. Using technology, such as loudspeakers, in the practice of worship is common among Muslims. However, according to Misbah, this should not be done in worship that is directly linked to God, such as when making *du'ā'*, *zikr*, and *ṣalāt*. He imparted three arguments for the improper usage of loudspeakers in worship. For starters, such an action is a rejection of God's omniscience as well as religious excess. Misbah argues that prayer must be done with *taḍarru'* (hearts are presented and brought closer to Allah), *khufyah* (softening the voice), and remembering sins while interpreting Q.S. Al-A'rāf: 55—this verse talks about the ethics of praying.<sup>60</sup> Since Allah is All-Hearing and All-Close, the Prophet Muhammad once reprimanded a Companion who recited the *takbīr* in a loud voice.<sup>61</sup> He conveyed a similar argument when explaining Q.S. Al-Tawbah: 31<sup>62</sup>—this verse criticizes Jews and Christians for blindly following their rabbis and priests. Second, Misbah recognized that this behavior violated Islamic precepts. This was his argument while analyzing Q.S. Al-A'rāf: 55, the verse regarding the prohibition against religious excess.<sup>63</sup>

Fourth, Misbah criticized the incorporation of Buddhist elements into Muslim religious activities. He realized that religious activity comprises not only theological but also cultural factors. For example, the practice of prayer encompasses culture, such as clothing, locations, and other tools involved. Misbah opposed the *slametan* and *sesaji* rituals in this regard. *Slametan* is a group prayer that asks God for protection while also expressing thankfulness for the blessings that God has bestowed. In addition to the theological aspects, the *slametan* ritual includes a cultural and social dimension in which many people from many backgrounds come and a broad selection of cuisine known as *sesaji* is offered.<sup>64</sup>

Misbah satirizes Muslim communities who perform *slametan* and give offerings in his interpretation of QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 12. This passage is about hypocrites who believe they are the most virtuous even if they commit evil on the planet. This passage has nothing to do with Muslims in terms of the subject and issue being discussed, but Misbah related it to the practice of *slametan* and *sesaji* by Muslims as

<sup>56</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 10, pp. 1667-1668.

<sup>57</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 10, p. 1675.

<sup>58</sup> Misbah bin Zainil Mustafa (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 6, Surabaya: Toko Buku Ihsan, pp. 837-838.

<sup>59</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 10, p. 1704.

<sup>60</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 8, pp. 1276-1277.

<sup>61</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 8, pp. 1278-1279.

<sup>62</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 10, p. 1667.

<sup>63</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 8, pp. 1279-1280.

<sup>64</sup> Masdar Hilmy (1994), "Islam and Javanese Acculturation: Textual and Contextual Analysis of the Slametan Ritual," Master's Thesis, McGill University, p. 41.

examples of hypocrisy. He believed that the ceremony was wrong, but those people believed it was the right thing to do.<sup>65</sup>

## Discussion

### ***Qur'anic Exegesis: Understanding the Text and Understanding Reality***

Misbah's approach of interpreting the Qur'an in *Al-Iklīl* is a unique phenomenon in Indonesian Qur'an interpretation history. Misbah's interpretation of the Qur'an is not only linear and not fixated on the text, it also refers to issues beyond the text. He could simultaneously use Qur'anic exegesis to criticize social, political, and theological problems. He expresses his dissatisfaction in two ways. For starters, the problem being criticized is directly related to the topic of discussion in the passage being interpreted. For example, in Q.S. Al-Jinn [72]: 16 when defining *tarekat* and in Q.S. Al-A'rāf: 55 when discussing the ethics of prayer.

Secondly, the issue he criticizes has no direct relation to the topic of the Qur'anic verse he is interpreting. For example, consider the MTQ events. This issue is addressed in three places, none of which are immediately relevant to the verses' topics: Q.S. Al-Tawbah [9]: 31, this verse talks about the blind allegiance of Jews and Christians to their rabbis and priests; Q.S. al-Zukhruf [43]: 3-4, this verse talks about the glory of the Qur'an as a guide to life; and Q.S. Al-Sajdah [32]: 47, this verse talks about the narrative and signs of the Day of Judgment.

Conceptually, Misbah's interpretation is founded on two perceptions: 'text awareness' and 'reality awareness'. Text awareness refers to the interpreter's awareness of the meanings contained in the Qur'anic text and their relational meanings, both in the context of relations between texts (*siyāq al-kalām*), relations with history at the time the Qur'an was revealed (*siyāq al-tanzīl*), and relations with the social, cultural, and political circumstances of Arab society at the time the Qur'an was revealed. Meanwhile, reality awareness refers to the interpreter's understanding of social, political, and religious events that transpired within the time period the interpretation was written. The text of the Qur'an remains the primary object of interpretation, but in Misbah's hands, the text's meaning is contextualized while also serving as a forum to study and criticize social, political, and religious concerns in Indonesia. As a result, *Al-Iklīl* has created a strong interaction between the interpreter, the text of the Qur'an, and the social, political, and religious circumstances in Indonesia at the time this interpretation was written.

Misbah's interpretation in *Al-Iklīl* is conceptually comparable to Hassan Ḥanafī's hermeneutic principles, which are based on particular, temporal, and realistic features. Ḥanafī believes that Qur'anic exegesis must be based on the interpreter's own experiences, and that it should begin with a study of human issues before returning to the Qur'an and formulating a theoretical explanation.<sup>66</sup> Although not arranged systematically, Misbah's interpretation in *Al-Iklīl* has conveyed this realistic view by critically scrutinizing social, political, and religious challenges in Indonesia.

Misbah paved the path for the need to allow room in Qur'anic exegesis for expressing a critical view of social reality through *Al-Iklīl*. Even while the Qur'an is permanent (*al-naṣṣ mutanāhiyah*) from a textual standpoint, interpretation of it will continue to evolve organically in every period and is connected with the dynamics of Islamic civilization. Misbah's approach in writing *Al-Iklīl* is a creative and productive reading model of the Qur'an's text. *Al-Iklīl* shows that interpretation is both an 'exegesis' (explanation of the text with an objective analysis) and an 'eisegesis' (interpreting the text based on subjective reading, interpreter's thoughts, and interest in the text). This is similar to the concept of 'presupposition' in Gadamer's hermeneutics.<sup>67</sup>

### ***Political Implications and Response to the New Order Regime***

Misbah's aforementioned concerns were raised during the 1980s, when Indonesia was led by President Soeharto. This period is known as the New Order, and it is notorious for its hegemonic and oppressive policies. While authorities silenced critical voices, when the academic, art, and culture spaces lacked

<sup>65</sup> Misbah (1985), *Al-Iklīl fī Ma'ānī Al-Tanzīl*, Juz 1, p. 15.

<sup>66</sup> Hassan Ḥanafī (1981), *Dirasāt Islāmīyah*, p. 69.

<sup>67</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer (1986), "Text and Interpretation," in Brice R. Wachterhauser (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, p. 396.

freedom and independence in freely expressing views and ideas, from the social space of pesantren, Misbah appeared to convey his criticisms through literacy, which is through his interpretation of the Qur'an. In the 1980s, when this interpretation was written, many kiais and pesantrens played important roles in the implementation of government programs, such as the Family Planning program.<sup>68</sup> Amidst this general trend, Misbah took a different path, challenging a number of policies of the New Order government and the religious practices of Muslims that were contrary to Islamic teachings.

Misbah's critiques have ramifications for his sociopolitical relationships with the kiais and the New Order administration, which were volatile. His self-criticism in the context of religious matters at the time became a point of contention among the kiais. His opposition to the Family Planning program, for example, ran against to both the government and the opinions of other kiais, including K.H. Bisri Mustafa, Misbah's older brother. According to Bisri Mustafa, family planning programs are permissible if the primary goal is to keep the mother and child healthy. Several other kiais who knew about Misbah's rejection of the use of loudspeakers in religious practices also considered his action as excessive and irrelevant to the necessities of Muslims.<sup>69</sup>

Misbah's critiques of the New Order regime were considered as an impediment to the viability of government projects in the political context. As a result, the New Order administration employed two ways to overcome them. First and foremost, via political strategy. The government used this policy by urging Misbah to join the Golkar party and become active in it. Golkar had been a supporting party as well as a political machine for the New Order administration since 1971. This way, it will be easier for the government to control Misbah's actions. While they were successful in convincing Misbah to join the Golkar party, this method failed since Misbah's beliefs and ideals did not alter, and he eventually withdrew his membership in the Golkar party.<sup>70</sup>

Second, by bureaucratic means. In response to Misbah's critique, the New Order administration used a bureaucratic and legal approach, instructing officials at the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia's Research and Development Center to analyze Misbah's opinions and criticisms written in *Al-Iklil*. The aim was to collect precise and reliable data in the context of unfavorable issues and constraints to government activities. This government directive was implemented in secrecy and without an official letter.<sup>71</sup> The New Order administration assigned the same task to Masjfuk Zuhdi, a fiqh scholar. Unfortunately, regardless of what the government had schemed, it was unable to change Misbah's attitude or convictions.<sup>72</sup> Until the day he died, Misbah never amended or retract his views and criticisms.

Misbah interpreted the Qur'an, fundamentally not just reading the text of the Qur'an, but also representing the social and political context in which his interpretation takes place, according to Louis Brenner.<sup>73</sup> In such a practice, the extraction of meaning from the text is not intrinsic to the text, but is produced through an active and dynamic process, both from the side of the text and the interpreter.<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion

Misbah blazed a new trail in the history of Qur'anic exegesis in Indonesia with his interpretation in *Al-Iklil*. Firstly, in an academic context, he positioned interpretation not just as a means of comprehending God's words in the Qur'an, but also as a venue to express criticism of political powers and Muslim conduct that is contrary to Islamic teachings. His criticisms have an epistemological link with the context of the verse being interpreted, but there are discontinuities and diversions from the passage being interpreted.

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<sup>68</sup> Masjfuk Zuhdi (1986), *Islam dan Keluarga Berencana*.

<sup>69</sup> Muhammad Nafis (2015), *Interview with Muhammad Nafis*; Masjfuk Zuhdi (1993), *Masail Fiqhiyah*, Jakarta: CV Haji Masagung.

<sup>70</sup> Muhammad Nafis (2015), *Interview with Muhammad Nafis*.

<sup>71</sup> M. Syatibi Alhaqiry (2015), *Interview with M. Syatibi Alhaqiry*, an employee at the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia.

<sup>72</sup> Muhammad Nafis (2015), *Interview with Muhammad Nafis*.

<sup>73</sup> Louis Brenner (1993), "Introduction," in Louis Brenner (ed.), *Muslim Identity and Social Change in Sub-Saharan Africa*, London: Hurs and Company, pp. 5-6.

<sup>74</sup> John Fiske (1990), *Introduction to Communication Studies*, London and New York: Routledge, p. 164; Nafiu Ahmad Arikewuyo (2022), "Politicization of Religion and Religionization of Politics in Islam: The Madkhaliyah and Surūriyah Narratives as Case-Studies," *Jurnal Usuluddin*, Vol. 50, No. 2, pp. 113-122.

Second, using the interpretation of the Qur'an to express criticism is a daring and unconventional political stance in the period of the hegemonic and authoritarian New Order regime. Through *Al-Iklīl*, Misbah refused to submit to this dictatorial system. Misbah's behavior exemplifies the independence of ulamas in pesantren when acting and expressing their beliefs they consider to be true.

Finally, in addition to criticizing government policy, Misbah also engaged in self-criticism. His firm and straightforward stance on Muslim behavior and various pesantren customs that undermine Islamic teachings is a direct self-criticism and a reflection of real ulama and intellectual. Misbah established a new tradition in the history of Qur'an interpretation in Indonesia through his exegesis, *Al-Iklīl*.

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