

Negotiated Islamic Moderation: Religious Counsellors and the Politics of the State

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Abstract: This article aims to explain the Islamic moderation practices of religious counselors and the relationship between Islamic moderation discourse and state politics in Indonesia. The research results show that the government has made religious instructors the apparatus tasked with communicating government policies, including Islamic moderation, to the community. Despite their position as state apparatus, religious instructors are able to negotiate the discourse of Islamic moderation because of their involvement with various socio-religious organizations and non-governmental organizations, as well as with their religious cultural communities. Furthermore, Islamic moderation is part of state politics to create a democratic state. Various political and social inclusions are carried out by creating moderation policies in both the political and religious realms. The state involves its formal apparatus and institutions, civil society and non-elite actors as agents of Islamic moderation. However, the expression of discourse and practice of Islamic moderation is nothomogenous, because each agent appropriates state moderation discourse according to the external and internal determinations that surround it.

Keywords: Islamic Moderation, Religious Counsellors, Politics of the State, Inclusion

Introduction

Cases radicalism are still prevalent in Indonesia. CRCS reported 25 cases relating to discourses on heretics and religious blasphemy in 2009, and 20 similar cases in 2012. The Wahid Institute also shows various incidents of violence experienced by certain religious groups. For instance, in 2015, there were 158 incidents with 187 acts and a number of these cases involved state or non-state actors. (Hasse J, Mega Hidayati, 2018) In 2019, the Setara Institute released a list of cases of intolerance in Indonesia, recording 655 instances where individuals' religious rights were violated between 2014 and 2019. (Muhammad Hafiz, Ismail Hasani, 2020)

Several studies show various factors that cause the emergence of radicalism, not only religious factors but also social, economic and political ones, both at the national and global levels. (Qodir, 2014) (Azra, 2005) This diversity of triggering factors in turn gave rise to diverse radical movement orientations as well such as political orientation (power struggles and criticism of globalization that is far from ideal), religious and cultural (cultural awakening/counter dominant culture). (Eric Hiariej, 2010) (Hibban, 2014) (Hasse J, Mega Hidayati, 2018) While among young people, radical tendencies are also influenced by several factors that are almost the same, such as psychological problems, domestic and international political conditions, textual religious texts, and the loss of role models so as to look for new charismatic figures. (Rindha Widyaningsih, et al, 2017) To overcome this problem, the government has established various deradicalization programs, for example discourse of moderation.

Islamic moderation is a form of moderation developed by the government in the spectrum of religious moderation. (Al-Qur'an, 2017) (RI, 2019) Through The Ministry of Religious Affairs, Islamic moderation is implemented through its various programs and policies, such as creating thematic interpretations on Islamic moderation, socializing Islamic moderation in various institutions and forums both at regional, national and international levels, and disseminating through its structural apparatuses. (Yudhiyansyah, 2014)

Religious counsellors as state apparatuses occupy a strategic position in carrying out the dissemination of Islamic moderation discourse in the various communities they serves. (Ahmadi, 2019) The previous studies have focused on the role, methods and strategies of communication in the community. (Rosyid, 2015) (Cikdin, 2016) (Novaili, 2016) There is no study regarding on how religious counsellors understand and practice Islamic moderation in society. Apart from that, several studies also confirm the existence of a relationship between discourse of Islamic moderation and state politics. (Yudhiyansyah, 2014) (Umar, 2016) (Rizky Alif Alvia, Irfan Ardhani, 2023) However, the issue of how the Islamic moderation discourse is distributed and realized by state apparatus, especially religious counsellors, has not been explored in depth. This will reveal how religious instructors negotiate the discourse of Islamic moderation which is part of state politics

Research Methods

This research includes field research (Hadeli, 2006) using a qualitative approach (Sugiyono, 2006), with its object being the practice of Islamic moderation of religious counsellors in Banyumas. Using the purposive sampling technique, we took four samples of religious counsellors in Banyumas.

Data collection methods used were in-depth interviews with religious counsellors in Bayumas using unstructured in-depth interviews (Sugiyono, 2006), document studies, and moderate participant observation of various phenomena in the field (Sugiyono, 2006). In this data collection, researchers employed the triangulation method (Emmert et al., 1971; Sugiyono, 2015) and the triangulation technique of data sources. This method is used to obtain data about the profile of religious counsellors in Bayumas and their Islamic moderation practices.

The obtained data are then processed through several steps (a) taking notes in a logbook, (b) doing the electronic recording and organizing according to their categories. In addition, the data is organized by giving code to each data subsystem, according to their respective classifications.

After the data is collected, the organization and processing of data are proceed through Miles and Huberman's analysis stages cited by Sugiyono (Kaelan, 2005; Sugiyono, 2006), namely; data reduction, data display, and conclusion (Laverty, 2016).

Theoretical Review

Islamic Moderation

In religious field, moderation refers to the tendency to be in a middle position between two extremes. Moderation is also synonymous with the word *wasathiyah* which means the best choice. Kamali defines *wasathiyah* as "a recommended posture that occurs to the people of sound nature and intellect, distinguished by its aversion to both extremism and manifest neglect." (Kamali, 2015) Moderation is considered as one of the values in the Qur'an that contributes to the development of social harmony and balance in both personal and social affairs, both in the domestic and public spheres. (Kamali, 2015) (RI, 2019)

Religious moderation is commonly understood as a religious attitude that balances between the practice of one's own religion (exclusive) and respect for the religious practices of others of different beliefs (inclusive). This balance or middle ground in religious practice will undoubtedly prevent us from excessive extremes, bigotry and revolutionary attitudes in religion. As hinted earlier, religious moderation is the solution to the presence of two extreme poles in religion, the ultra-conservative or extreme right pole on the one hand, and the liberal or extreme left on the other. (RI, 2019)

Shihab defines moderation (*wasathiyah*) as balance in all matters of life, both worldly and religious, which is always accompanied by efforts to adapt to the situation faced based on religious guidance and the objective conditions experienced. Moderation is not just choosing the middle path, but there is an element of balance accompanied by an attitude of not overdoing or lacking, and an attitude that does not avoid difficult situations. Moderation refers to the balance of spirit and body, world and afterlife, religion and state, individual and society, ideas and reality, old and new, reason and text, religion and science, tradition and modernity, and so on. (Shihab, 2019)

Azra said that Islamic moderation in Indonesia is manifested in the form of *tawasuth* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), *ta'adul* (justice) and *tasamuh* (tolerance) in various aspects of life. This term is synonymous with *wasathiyah* Islam which in international Islamic studies is often translated as 'justly-balanced Islam' or also 'middle path Islam'. In the Indonesian context, Azra claims that moderation is the character or identity of Indonesian Islam. He argued that the Islamization process in Indonesia took place peacefully by emphasizing inclusivism, accommodation and acculturation with local culture. Various changes in Islam brought the practical thinking of Indonesian Muslims closer and more in line with Islamic orthodoxy. (Azra, *Islam Wasathiyah: Moderasi Islam di Indonesia*, 2021)

In more detail, the Ministry of Religion establishes three principles of Islamic moderation, namely justice, balance and tolerance. The character of Islamic moderation includes a comprehensive understanding of reality, knowledge of priority laws, avoiding excessive fanaticism, prioritizing principles and principles in religion, comprehensive understanding of religious texts, open to differences, strong commitment to truth and inclusive justice. (RI, 2019)

Religious Counsellors

Religious counsellors are civil servants who are given full duties and responsibilities, authority and rights by authorized officials to carry out religious guidance or counseling and development to the community through religious language. (RI D. A., 2012) However, in its development, recruitment of religious counsellors is not only in civil servant formations, but also in the non-one. Both are under the auspices of the Ministry of Religion, especially in the Directorate General of Community Guidance. In carrying out their work, non-civil servant religious counsellors must coordinate with civil servant religious counsellors. (Islam, 2017)

Religious counsellors are state apparatus whose legal and formal role is to provide religious guidance and counseling, participate in development through religious language, and provide religious direction. This role is carried out in order to improve religious quality, harmony between religious communities, and active participation in the success of national development. Religious counselors have several functions, namely informative, educative, consultative and advocative. (Cikdin, 2016) (Indrajaya, 2017)

In this case, the state is very interested in the existence of religious counselors. The growth of development requires several components, namely community and religious community participation in making development a success, religious communities as the basic capital of development, religion as a motivator for development, and religious counseling as a medium and means for realizing development goals. (Mufidah, 2015) (Islam, 2017)

These religious counsellors are positioned as communication mediators from government to society, and vice versa from society to government. To maximize the communication process, the government also accommodates religious figures and religious communities as religious counselors. With this recruitment model, religious and community leaders are expected to be able to participate and contribute intensively in achieving national development programs, especially in the field of religion. Religious counselors, in accordance with government decisions, have eight areas of specialization, namely counseling in alleviating illiteracy in the Koran, *sakinah* families, zakat management, *waqf* empowerment, halal products, religious harmony, radicalism and splinter sects, and NAFZA and HIV/ AIDS. (Rosyid, 2015) (Novaili, 2016) (Islam, 2017)

The description above shows that religious counselors are structurally, one of the state apparatuses that communicate government policies to the community. In the context of regional political locality, religious counselors also socialize regional government programs to the community. (Saad, 2021) However, the relationship between religious counsellors and the government is dialectical, where in certain cases the government asks for the consideration of religious counsellors in formulating a policy. (Saad, 2021)

Results and Discussion

Religious Counsellor and the Dynamics of Moderation

Religious instructors are state officials who play an important role in communicating state policies to the public using religious language. Development can run well if it is supported by community participation which is considered a capital of national development. (Mufidah, 2015) (Islam, 2017) The task of religious instructors is to provide information, education, consultation and advocacy to the community regarding religious issues, including maintaining harmony between religious communities. (Cikdin, 2016) (Indrajaya, 2017)

The Islamic moderation discourse is one of the government's priority policies which has been integrated into the National Medium Term Development Plan. Through the Ministry of Religion, Islamic moderation and religious moderation are made one of the national priorities which are implemented in several priority activities: strengthening middle-path religious perspectives, attitudes and practices; strengthening harmony between religious communities; strengthening religious and cultural relations; improving the quality of religious life services; and development of economic and religious resources. (RI K. A., 2019) In this context, religious counsellors as government officials are tasked with communicating and realizing these activities in society. For this purpose, religious counselors undergo religious moderation training to provide cognitive insight related to religious moderation and Islamic moderation. (Nihayah, 2021)

In reality, religious counsellors have a variety of meanings adapted to the social and cultural context of their community, although in some respects there are general similarities. Tantowi, for example, explains Islamic moderation as: (Tantowi, 2021)

"Religious insights that are not extreme right extreme left, can still socialize with different elements of society, remain harmonious, how to appreciate, respect each other, not be too fanatical about something we consider to be true.

Meanwhile, Robiatun, one of the religious counsellors in the East Purwokerto region, said that Islamic moderation as: (Nihayah, 2021)

"If moderation is neutral, the religious counsellors means that we have to protect everything, we must be tolerant, to avoid being intolerant so it really needs, it means that religious counsellors must be in charge of everything, we must be embraced all groups"

The counsellors emphasized the attitude of being in the middle, neutral, not extreme right and left so as to create community harmony and protect all different elements of society. (Kamali, 2015) Islamic moderation implies respect for other views and avoids excessive fanaticism. Tolerance is also one of the things that is closely related to Islamic moderation. (RI K. A., 2019) However, nevertheless, both seem to be more inclined to

emphasize moderation from the extreme right. This can be shown from Robiatun's statement when alluding to the significance of moderation according to which "It must be neutral. So just avoid radicalism, because now there are so many radical groups." (Nihayah, 2021)

In social interactions, religious counsellors use an interpretive scheme of Islamic moderation established by the Ministry of Religion. Representations of Islamic moderation, such as being tolerant, neutral, being in the middle between two extremes, and respecting other views, are included in the definition and characteristics of Islamic moderation according to the government. (Al-Qur'an, 2017) (RI K. A., 2019) The meaning of moderation which is considered to be counter to radicalism, is a form of government appropriation in the Indonesian context. In this case, Islamic moderation is interpreted as a counter to radicalism and at the same time as a de-radicalization program. (Tazul Islam, Amina Khatun, 2015)

Though the religious counsellors employ the government interpretative schema of Islamic moderation, their practice adapt to the conditions of their local community and their involvements to Non-Government Organization (NGO). Robiatun, for instance, is more inclined to the views of NU and Muhammadiyah mass organizations which are considered to have a clear school of thought (*mazhab*). (Nihayah, 2021)

"Anyway, so that I am not radical, I usually say follow the *clear in Indonesia*, if not NU Muhammadiyah, do not have to follow strange streams... that's why what *is proposed*, NU Muhammadiyah, which clearly has a *madzhab*.

This attitude responds to the condition of their religious congregation, most of whom are elderly, so it will be difficult for them to accept a diversity of religious opinions. Therefore, religious instructors only convey the opinions of the most popular religious social organizations, such as NU and Muhammadiyah. (Nihayah, 2021) Apart from that, because the government also recruits religious figures who belong to religious communities, religious counsellors only provide views that are in accordance with the ideology of their community.

The moderation practices of religious counsellors are also shaped by their involvement in various non-governmental organizations. Tantowi, for example, understands that openness and tolerance are not only limited to within Muslims, but also between religious communities. His involvement in the Solidarity of Interfaith Religious Counselors organization means he has lots of interactions and activities with interfaith adherents and people. (Tantowi, 2021)

This shows that there is some knowledge that forms the interpretive schemes of religious counselors. Even though they are state apparatus who receive knowledge of Islamic moderation from the Ministry of Religion, their involvement in various social religious organizations and the social culture of their religious communities also shape their interpretation and realization of Islamic moderation. This is what makes the Islamic moderation practices of religious counselors diverse because of the various social structural determinations that surround them.

Islamic Moderation and the Politics of the State in Indonesia

The term moderation gives rise to various meanings. In a political context, Schwedler defines moderation more narrowly as "movement from a relatively closed and rigid worldview to one more open and tolerant of alternatives perspectives." (Schwedler, 2006) However, the meaning of the term moderation can vary depending on the context. Karakaya and Yildirim emphasize that the diversity of meanings of moderation emerges when it is applied in different mechanisms such as inclusion, participation, organizational interests, party autonomy, social learning, and socio-economic factors. (Tazul Islam, Amina Khatun, 2015)

Furthermore, Schwedler stated that there is a hypothesis that inclusion can improve moderation. Meanwhile, exclusion can increase radicalism. Inclusion and exclusion are positioned as a continuum, where stronger moderation exists in democratic, pluralist and inclusive societies. Meanwhile, radicalism is greater in societies that are exclusive, repressive and authoritarian. If inclusion increases, radicalism will decrease, so inclusion is preferred based on both normative and practical reasons. (Schwedler, 2006)

Schwedler's statement shows that there is a strong connection between inclusive politics and moderation and democratization. The state uses inclusionary politics to create moderation in the political realm. It's just that this relationship is not simple and linear, because democratization processes are much more complex than the inclusion and moderation hypotheses above. Schwedler shows that political actors in Yemen and Jordan were included in pluralist processes resulting in moderate attitudes although at different levels. (Schwedler, 2006)

In Muslim countries, moderation has become the country's political imagination towards democratization. In Jordan, Islamic movements are starting to move towards a tradition of moderation, amidst the existence of conservatism movements. (Moaddel, 2004) In Egypt, according to Wickham, ideological moderation was developed through inclusion mechanisms in political processes. The Islamist party carries out

ideological moderation to gain public acceptance and at the same time oppose the government which is considered undemocratic. (Wickham, 2004) In the case of Iran, moderation helps explain the evolution of Islamists into Islamic reformers, and the domestication of radicals in the context of less democratic regimes, thus not contributing to democratic consolidation and integration. (Tezcur, 2010) In Turkey, moderation can lead to democratization if supported by, what Somer calls, “a country ‘centre’” or a democratic domestic and international context. (Somer, 2014)

Aji and Hannase map the experiences of countries in post-colonial Southeast Asia in dealing with the strengthening of Islamism which has the potential to threaten national disintegration. There are three models of political accommodation that are carried out by utilizing religious moderation in political and democratic processes. First, moderation through the process of nation-state integration as carried out in Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. (Fakhrudin Alwi, Yon Machmudi, 2023) Second, moderation through a democratization process, as is happening in almost all countries in the island region. Third, moderation by civil society is prominent in Indonesia and Malaysia. (Burhani, 2012) (Hanapi, 2014) (Gutomo Bayu Aji, Mulawarman Hannase, 2022)

Islam and Khatun differentiate the discourse of moderation in the West and Islam. In the West, the discourse of moderation is associated with democratization, deradicalization and pluralism. Meanwhile, in Muslim scholarship, moderation is associated with responses to theological extremism and counter-terrorism. (Tazul Islam, Amina Khatun, 2015) In this context, the discourse of moderation becomes an important political agenda to fight global terrorism and radicalism. The American government needs to cooperate with liberal Islamic groups, which according to Khan represent moderate Muslims who reject Islam as a violent ideology. (Khan, 2007)

Burhani stated that the discourse of moderate Islam in the West is defined more by the appropriation of American political interests. This is what makes some Muslims reluctant to associate themselves as part of moderate Islam. Barlas insists that the dissemination of moderate Islamic ideas supported by Washington actually causes negative meanings. The term is considered an invention of the George Bush administration to divert the discourse of the war on terror as a war on Muslims by discriminating between a friendly, tolerant and peace-loving moderate Islam and a puritanical Islam associated with terrorism (as defined by Washington). El Fadl pointed out that Bush's call for a war on terrorism as a crusade reinforced the perception of a war between Christians and Muslims in the call. Moreover, the dichotomy between moderates and puritans has led to wars not only outside Islam but also within Islam itself. (Burhani, 2012)

John L. Esposito and Graham E. Fuller saw that the criteria for moderate or puritan assessment is in terms of their political positioning on the Palestinian/Israeli issue, Algeria, Kashmir, and Iraq. Similarly, Aid Ullah Jan and M.A. Muqtedar Khan also see the criteria for moderate labelling as more political than religious. (Burhani, 2012)

Burhani expresses the paradoxical attitude of Islamic intellectuals towards the concept of moderate Islam. In the West, Islamic intellectuals avoid placing themselves in that line, because the concept of moderate Islam is politically constructed by the West to “tame” them. While in Indonesia, many people actually cult moderate Islamic positions compared to others (radical Islam). (Burhani, 2012)

Political bias in labelling certain individuals or groups as moderate or radical is also recognized by Schwedler. In some literature on political transitions, the term moderate is aimed at political actors who support the existing political system. Meanwhile, groups that want substantive changes to the political system are labelled as radical. “The real democratizers may be the radicals, calling into question the frequent association of moderation with such democratic norms as toleration and compromise”. (Schwedler J. , 2001)

In Indonesian context, several studies examine the emergence and development of moderation in Indonesia in both political and religious contexts. Alvian and Ardhani stated that the discourse of moderation in Indonesia is used according to the political interests of its leaders. During the Megawati and SBY era, the discourse of moderation was used to show the international community that Indonesia was not linked to the global terrorist network. However, during the Jokowi era, the discourse of moderation was used more to maintain national unity. (Rizky Alif Alvian, 2023)

Regarding radicalism and hardline groups, the Indonesian government uses various approaches. Soewarno pointed out that during SBY's reform period, the government tried to be more democratic towards hardline Islamic expressions so that they seemed less assertive and had an impact on the growth of hardline Islam. Meanwhile, during the Jokowi era, the government had discursive and legal strategies to strengthen secular nationalism, so that the problem of hardline Islamic movements was faced with a semi-authoritarian approach. Soewarno confirmed that:

“The Indonesian liberal democratic political approaches could enhance Islamic politics and the growth of hardline Islamism. In contrast, authoritarian or semi-authoritarian approaches to secular nationalism created more stability for the growth of moderate Islam in Indonesia”. (Soewarno, 2022)

The meaning of Islamic moderation and its implementation in countries varies greatly depending on the internal and external determinations that surround it. In general, the discourse of Islamic moderation or moderate Islam is part of the global war against terrorism. Umar, for example, criticized the political construction of the moderate Islam discourse that had been launched by the Indonesian government since 2004. According to him, moderate Islam is one of the articulations of Islam which is constructed as a different foreign political policy in each political regime. (Umar, 2016) According to Irawan, the stagnation of Islamic development in the Middle East and Islamophobia in the West also influence the construction of Islamic moderation in Indonesia. (Irawan, 2017)

In this context, the state plays an important role in forming and realizing the idea of Islamic moderation. The Ministry of Religion uses three strategies to strengthen the idea of religious moderation, namely 1) socialization and dissemination of the idea of religious moderation; 2) institutionalization of religious moderation into binding programs and policies; and 3) integrating the idea of religious moderation in the 2020-2024 National Medium Term Development Plan. (RI K. A., 2019) Islamic moderation and religious moderation are made one of the national priorities which are implemented in several priority activities: strengthening middle-path religious perspectives, attitudes and practices; strengthening harmony between religious communities; strengthening religious and cultural relations; improving the quality of religious life services; and development of economic and religious resources. (RI K. A., 2019)

In particular, the Ministry of Religion also made a thematic interpretation of Islamic moderation from the perspective of the Koran. (Al-Qur'an, 2017) Yudhiyansyah mentioned several government programs to realize Islamic moderation, such as inter-religious dialogue, seminars, establishing anti-terrorism groups and issuing various fatwas on terrorism by the MUI. (Yudhiyansyah, 2014) Even the MUI as a semi-formal institution has developed Islamic moderation or *wasathiyyah* Islam which NurIchwan calls "a puritanical moderate Islam" to refer to the strengthening of puritanical conservative tendencies in the institution. (Ichwan, 2013)

Several studies on Islamic moderation discourse developed in Indonesia show a diversity of perspectives and at the same time the existence of discourse that is not yet established and fixed. Hilmy shows the diversity and theoretical vagueness of moderate Islam in Indonesia. Nevertheless, Hilmy identified several characteristics of the concept of Islamic moderation in Indonesia, such as having a non-violent ideology in preaching Islam, adopting a modern way of life with all its derivative concepts, the use of rational thinking, the use of contextual approaches to understanding Islam, the use of *ijtihad*. (Hilmy, 2013)

Based on his study of the concept of Islamic moderation in Indonesia represented by NU, Burhani concluded that the meaning of moderate in Indonesia is more theological and related to the doctrine of *aswaja*, while in America it is more political because it is related to Bush's political doctrine of the war on terror (Burhani, 2012).

This shows that the Islamic moderation discourse is closely related to the country's political interests in the process of democratization and the creation of a democratic state. As emphasized by Schwedler that the debate about moderation is within the framework of the dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion. Inclusion will increase moderation, while exclusion will increase radicalism. Discussions about moderates and radicals arise in the context of the benefits and risks of democratic inclusiveness, the challenges of democratization and the substance of democracy itself. (Schwedler J. , 2001)

The state not only involves the state apparatus in disseminating and implementing the discourse of moderation, but also accommodates religious social organizations as representatives of civil society. Apart from that, the state also recruits community and religious figures as religious instructors to moderate their ideology and behaviour both individually and in groups. According to Schwedler, it is important for non-elite actors to be involved in democratization processes. (Schwedler J. , 2006) With this mechanism, the discourse of Islamic moderation will become more entrenched and gain public acceptance, especially at the grassroots level.

Conclusion

Radicalism and terrorism encourage countries to deradicalize through mainstreaming moderation discourse. By making moderation a political policy, the government integrates the discourse of moderation in development program plans and uses its apparatus to implement these programs. In this case, religious instructors become important mediators and communicators in socializing the discourse of Islamic moderation to society. Even though their existence as state apparatus determines the insight and practice of Islamic moderation, their involvement with various socio-religious organizations and non-governmental organizations, as well as with their religious cultural communities, forms diverse cognitions and practices of Islamic moderation.

Moderation is also part of state politics to create democratization and the formation of a democratic state. Various political and social inclusions are carried out by creating moderation policies in both the political and religious realms. The state also involves its formal apparatus and institutions as agents of moderation. Civil

society and non-elite actors are also involved in the project of moderating society to create a democratic society and state.

Referring to Schwedler's statement, inclusion can improve the quality of moderation in a country which will have an impact on the quality of democracy. Moderation is interpreted as "becoming truly committed to democratic practices". Therefore, moderation is closely related to liberal ideas about individual rights, and democratic ideas on tolerance, pluralism and cooperation. Moderation refers to positive attitudes that lead to democracy and adopting processes that reject militancy including radicalism and terrorism. However, the expression of discourse and practice of Islamic moderation is nothomogenous, because each agent appropriates state moderation discourse according to the external and internal determinations that surround it.

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