

Women's Defense in Aceh Leadership Polemics: Ahmad At-Thayyib's Perspective on Women's Leadership Laws

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ABSTRACT

This study responds to the ongoing polemic regarding women's leadership laws in Aceh, a subject of heated debate ahead of the 2024 regional elections. It examines the reporting of serambinews.com and its defense of women in response to the prohibition of female leadership in Aceh. The study's purpose is to analyze the ideological underpinnings of serambinews.com's reporting through the lens of the Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar University, Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib. Using a qualitative critical research approach, data collection was carried out through reading and note-taking techniques. Data analysis employed Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework, encompassing three dimensions: text, discursive practices, and socio-cultural practices. The findings were then compared with Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib's perspective on women's leadership laws. The study uncovered a linguistic discourse advocating for women's leadership in Aceh, highlighting the processes of its production and consumption and the socio-cultural context behind this advocacy. The implications underscore the media's role in shaping public perceptions and discourse on sensitive socio-religious topics, such as women's leadership. Furthermore, it emphasizes the importance of aligning media narratives with moderate religious interpretations, like those of Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib, to foster balanced and progressive viewpoints. This research contributes to understanding how critical discourse analysis can unveil ideological currents in media narratives and offers insights into the intersections of religion, gender, and media in shaping public opinion.

Keywords: *Ahmad at-Thayyib, critical discourse analysis, media narratives, socio-religious issues, women's leadership*

1. INTRODUCTION

The role of women in Indonesia's political arena frequently garners attention, often reigniting debates about women's leadership within the framework of Islamic law. A notable instance occurred during the 2004 presidential election when Megawati Soekarno Putri and Hasyim Muzadi faced scrutiny from a sharia perspective. Despite Megawati's partnership with KH Hasyim Muzadi, a respected cleric from Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), 24 clerics from NU East Java convened on June 3, 2004, to examine the permissibility of female leadership under Islamic law. This forum declared it *haram* (forbidden) to elect a female president, asserting that women may lead only in dire

emergencies (Liputan6, 2004). Similar fatwas had been issued earlier, such as in 1999 by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and the Islamic Forum (FUI) (Sadzali, 2004).

In Aceh, a province governed by Islamic law, the controversy resurfaces during electoral seasons, including the 2024 regional elections, where only four women are contesting leadership roles. These candidates are Afridawati (Simeulue regent), Illiza Saaduddin Jamal (Banda Aceh mayor), Meutia Apriani (Langsa deputy mayor), and Nurhayati (Simeulue deputy regent) (Widadio, 2024). Predictably, the *fatwa* prohibiting female leadership has been invoked again. Tengku Sheikh Hasanoeel

Basry, widely known as Abu Mudi, stated that leadership roles are exclusively for men, citing the Quranic verse "*Arrijalu qawwamuna 'ala nisa'*" (men are guardians over women). He also emphasized that it is sinful for women to assume leadership roles (Lubis, 2024).

This recurring controversy has prompted the researcher to analyze how women's activists defend their political and leadership rights in *serambinews.com*'s coverage, particularly in the article titled "*Larangan Perempuan Pemimpin, 'Hantu' Jelang Pilkada Banda Aceh*". Using Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis, this study explores the linguistic and contextual aspects of women's defense in these reports. Additionally, it examines the perspective of Grand Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib on women's leadership laws.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), which examines language use within a critical paradigm, provides a robust framework for this study. Discourse is understood not merely as language but as a reflection of context and social practice. According to Fairclough and Wodak, CDA regards discourse and its use in speech and writing as forms of social practice. Fairclough's CDA model incorporates three dimensions: text (analyzed linguistically to uncover ideologies), discursive practices (focusing on text production and consumption), and sociocultural practices (linking text to social context) (Darma, 2014).

The findings of this analysis are compared with the views of Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib, born in 1946 in Dashna Governorate, Qena, Egypt. Known for his moderation and advocacy for tolerance, dialogue, and civil society, Sheikh At-Thayyib embodies Islamic moderation. Recognized as one of the 50 most influential Muslim figures globally in 2024 (Putri & Hardiyanto, 2023), his views provide a balanced perspective on the topic of women's leadership (Putri & Hardiyanto, 2023).

There are several previous studies related to researcher research. First, Rizqia Urfa & Asrofah's research (2024) entitled "*Analisis Wacana Kritis Nourman Fairclough Terhadap Berita Pembatalan Uang Kuliah Tunggal di Media Massa*". Second,

Hafiane Insaf research (2024) entitled "*A Critical Discourse Analysis of Al Jazeera English and BBC News Headlines*". Third, Dhiyah & Abdul Basid research (2024) entitled "*Tracking The Death of The Iranian President In BBC 'Arabi News Reports: A Critical Analysis From Norman Fairclough's Perspective*". Fourth, Fajar dan Andi Sugirman research (2024) entitled "*Kepemimpinan Perempuan dalam Islam Perspektif Hak Asasi Manusia dan Maqashid Syariah*". Fifth, Muhammad Mizan, Arif Firdausi NR, dan Muhammad Mukharom Ridho research (2024) entitled "*Kepemimpinan Perempuan Dalam Al-Quran: Studi Komparasi Tafsir Al-Azhar Dan Tafsir An-Nur*".

Researchers found similarities between this study and some of the aforementioned previous studies above. The similarities between this research and the first three previous studies both use Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (Urfa & Asrofah, 2024; Insaf, 2024; Dhiyah & Basid, 2024). The similarity of this research with the last 2 previous studies is that both discuss the law of women's leadership in Islam. (Fajar & Sugirman, 2024; Mizan et al., 2024). The difference between this research and the first three previous studies is the news object studied and this research is also different from the second previous study which also examines Van Dijk's ideological perspective (Urfa & Asrofah, 2024; Insaf, 2024; Dhiyah & Basid, 2024). The difference between the researcher's research and the last two previous studies lies in the perspective aspect. This study examines the law of women's leadership from the perspective of Grand Sheikh al-Azhar Ahmad at-Thayyib, while the fourth previous study examines the law of women's leadership from the perspective of human rights and *maqashid sharia*, and the fifth previous study examines the law of women's leadership from the perspective of tafsir. al-Azhar and tafsir an-Nur. (Fajar & Sugirman, 2024; Mizan et al., 2024).

This study diverges from previous works in its focus on *serambinews.com*'s reporting and its integration of Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib's perspective. While Fajar and Sugirman examined women's leadership through the lenses of human rights and *maqashid sharia* (higher objectives of Islamic law), and Mizan et al.

compared Quranic interpretations, this research uniquely employs Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib's moderate views to contextualize the findings of critical discourse analysis. By combining these

approaches, this study offers novel insights into the ideological undercurrents of media narratives and their role in shaping public discourse on religion, gender, and leadership in Aceh

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This research employs a critical qualitative approach, utilizing a critical paradigm to examine its object of study. The discourse is analyzed not only linguistically but also in relation to its broader context beyond the discourse itself. The primary data source is the *serambinews.com* article titled '*Prohibition of Women Leaders, "Ghosts" Ahead of Banda Aceh Pilkada*'. Secondary data sources include other news articles discussing the polemics surrounding the prohibition of electing female leaders.

The data collection techniques used in this study include reading, observing, and recording. Researchers thoroughly read the *serambinews.com* article '*Prohibition of Women Leaders, "Ghosts" Ahead of the Banda Aceh Pilkada*' to extract relevant data. Additionally, researchers observed a video of Grand Sheikh Al-Azhar Ahmad At-Thayyib discussing his fatwa on the equality of rights between men and women in Islam (Al-Thayyib, 2023). After identifying relevant data, the researchers documented their findings through systematic recording.

The study applies Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework, which consists of three dimensions: text, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices. In the text dimension, the discourse is analyzed through vocabulary choices and sentence structures used in the text. For discourse practices, the analysis focuses on the processes of text production and consumption, including how the text is created, distributed, and interpreted. The sociocultural practice dimension examines the situational context behind the polemic, highlighting the socio-cultural dynamics that shape and influence the discourse. By integrating these dimensions, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of the discourse surrounding the prohibition of female leadership, shedding light on its linguistic, procedural, and contextual aspects.

3. FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

3.1 Dimensions of Text

Data 1

"Memilih dan dipilih merupakan hak politik warga negara Indonesia, termasuk perempuan," tegas Presidium Balai Syura Ureung Inong Aceh, Khairani Arifin.

The sentence in Data 1 is a declarative sentence. It is classified as such because it conveys a statement. According to Surono et al. (1993), declarative sentences are typically used by speakers or writers to present information, making the content newsworthy for listeners or readers. Similarly, Ramlan (1983) explains that declarative sentences are used to convey information to others, eliciting a response in the form of attention, often reflected in visual cues such as attentive gazes (Astuti, 2016).

The sentence begins with two active verbs and one passive verb. The word *memilih* is an active verb, while *dipilih* is a passive verb. These words represent the complex rights afforded to women, particularly in the political realm. The word *merupakan*, following *memilih* and *dipilih*, means "to give form to" or "to constitute," as defined in the *KBBI* (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, n.d.). The sentence also employs the term "warga negara Indonesia" (Indonesian citizens), a broader reference encompassing Aceh as part of Indonesia. This is an example of the rhetorical device *synecdoche totum pro parte*, where the whole is mentioned to represent a part (Noviyanti et al., 2023). The use of the word *tegas* conveys a strong affirmation by Khairani Arifin, an Acehese female figure, asserting that Indonesian women unequivocally have equal political rights. According to the *KBBI*, *tegas* means clear, explicit, true, definite, or certain (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, n.d.).

Data 2

“Khairani menilai penolakan terhadap perempuan pemimpin berasal dari penafsiran sempit ajaran Al-Qur'an. Selain itu, hukum nasional Undang-Undang Pemerintah Aceh (UUPA) melindungi hak-hak perempuan. Qanun Aceh Nomor 9 Tahun 2019 Tentang Penyelenggaraan Penanganan Kekerasan Terhadap Perempuan dan Anak juga menegaskan hak perempuan menduduki posisi eksekutif dan legislatif di Aceh.”

The sentence in Data 2 is also a declarative sentence, as it provides information or news (Astuti, 2016). The structure begins with the subject *Khairani*, followed by the predicate *menilai*, and the object *penolakan terhadap perempuan pemimpin*. The description follows as *berasal dari penafsiran sempit ajaran Al-Qur'an*. According to the *KBBI*, the word *menilai* means to estimate, evaluate, appreciate, or consider (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, n.d.). In this context, *menilai* conveys the idea of "considering" or "assuming." Thus, Khairani suggests that the rejection of women's leadership stems from a narrow interpretation of the Qur'an.

The word 'sempit' has various meanings such as less than the required size, petty (of thoughts, views, knowledge, etc.), crowded (of a village, etc.), little or almost lacking (of money, income, etc.), irritable; impatient (of a person's character), urgent (of time), and difficult (of life) (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, n.d.). In this context, *sempit* refers to shortsightedness or a lack of comprehensive understanding of the Quranic verses.

The conjunction *selain itu* links this statement with the preceding paragraph (Nugraha et al., 2015). It indicates that Khairani's argument goes beyond the narrow interpretation of the Qur'an, extending to the Aceh Government Law (UUPA), which protects women's rights. The UUPA serves as a legal framework safeguarding women's political rights. Additionally, Aceh Qanun Number 9 of 2019 on the Prevention and Handling of Violence Against Women and Children explicitly affirms women's rights to hold executive and legislative positions in Aceh. This regulation acts as a subject, with its predicate emphasizing or guaranteeing these rights.

In summary, Data 2 presents three core arguments from Khairani refuting the rejection of women's leadership: (1) the rejection arises from a narrow interpretation of the Qur'an, (2) women's rights are protected under the Aceh Government Law (UUPA), and (3) women's rights to occupy executive and legislative positions are explicitly affirmed in Aceh Qanun Number 9 of 2019. These arguments effectively combine religious and governmental constitutional perspectives to reinforce the legitimacy of women's leadership.

Data 3

“Ke belakang, sejarah Islam juga mencatat peran penting tokoh perempuan seperti Sayyidah Khadijah, Sayyidah Aisyah, dan Sayyidah Fatimah dalam mendukung dan menyebarkan ajaran Islam. Tidak ada larangan bagi perempuan untuk berpartisipasi dalam politik dengan menjadi pemimpin.”

The sentence in Data 3, like the previous data, is a declarative sentence. The phrase '*ke belakang*' at the beginning serves as an invitation to reflect on the historical contributions of women. In this context, Islamic history functions as the subject or actor that records or witnesses the significant roles of women. Three notable Muslim women are mentioned: Sayyidah Khadijah, Sayyidah Aisyah, and Sayyidah Fatimah. The conjunction '*dan*' connects these names as a coordinating conjunction within the sentence (Maulina, 2018). The order of mention appears chronological, starting with Sayyidah Khadijah, the Prophet Muhammad's first wife and a prominent supporter of early Islam, followed by Sayyidah Aisyah, his youngest wife, and concluding with Sayyidah Fatimah, his daughter. The sequence emphasizes their distinct contributions and historical seniority.

The statement '*Tidak ada larangan bagi perempuan untuk berpartisipasi dalam politik dengan menjadi pemimpin*' asserts that women's political involvement and leadership are not prohibited. This argument is framed to legitimize the active political roles of women, drawing on historical examples to illustrate that such contributions are neither new nor taboo. In ancient times, many women had very important roles such as Sayyidah Khadijah, Sayyidah Aisyah, and Sayyidah Fatimah.

Data 4

“Sejarah Aceh sendiri juga merekam bagaimana perempuan bisa menjadi seorang pemimpin yang kuat. Ada empat Ratu yang memimpin Aceh selama 59 tahun, yaitu Sultanah Safiatuddin Tajul Alam, Sultanah Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin, Sultanah Zakiatuddin, dan Sultanah Kamalat Shah. Balai Syura menulis, kepemimpinan empat ratu ini didukung dua ulama besar, Nuruddin Ar-Raniri dan Abdurrauf As-Singkili.”

The sentence in Data 4 is also a declarative sentence. It highlights the history of Aceh as the subject, with the predicate *‘merekam’* (records), indicating the progress of women who became strong leaders. According to the *KBBI*, *‘merekam’* means to record or document events (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, n.d.). This meaning aligns with the context, where Aceh's history is credited with documenting the leadership of its female rulers.

Then the next sentence displays *‘empat ratu’* (four queens)—Sultanah Safiatuddin Tajul Alam, Sultanah Nurul Alam Naqiatuddin, Sultanah Zakiatuddin, and Sultanah Kamalat Shah who ruled Aceh for 59 years—, which act as subjects. The phrase *‘didukung dua ulama besar, Nuruddin Ar-Raniri dan Abdurrauf As-Singkili’* emphasizes the support these queens received from two influential Islamic scholars. The passive verb *‘didukung’* shifts the focus to the contribution of the ulama, underscoring their approval and backing of female leadership. This data legitimizes women's leadership in Aceh's history by demonstrating that it was not only culturally accepted but also religiously endorsed by prominent scholars, reinforcing the argument against claims that female leadership is problematic from an Islamic perspective.

Data 5

“Balai Syura merespon fenomena ini, dengan meminta pemerintah meningkatkan pemahaman masyarakat tentang hak-hak perempuan dalam politik, serta menghapus stereotip dan prasangka gender yang dapat menghalangi partisipasi perempuan. Calon Kepala Daerah dan tim suksesnya juga diminta agar berkompetisi secara fair dalam seluruh proses pemilihan kepala daerah, tanpa harus melakukan politisasi

agama/politisasi Syariat Islam untuk menjegal calon pemimpin perempuan.”

The sentence in Data 5 is also a declarative sentence. The phrase *‘Balai Syura merespon fenomena ini’* identifies the subject, Balai Syura, and its predicates *‘meminta’* (requesting) and *‘menghapus’* (eliminating). The organization calls for the government to improve public understanding of women's political rights and to eradicate stereotypes and gender biases that hinder women's participation.

The term *‘stereotip’*, as defined in the *KBBI*, refers to a conception of a group's characteristics based on subjective and inaccurate prejudice. Combined with the word *‘prasangka’* (prejudice), these terms underscore the unfair and unfounded attitudes that obstruct women's political engagement. This language emphasizes the inappropriate nature of gender-based biases.

In the following sentence, *‘Calon Kepala Daerah dan tim suksesnya juga diminta agar berkompetisi secara fair’*, the focus shifts to election candidates and their campaign teams. The passive verb *‘diminta’* suggests a directive urging candidates to compete fairly without resorting to the politicization of religion or Islamic law to discredit female candidates. The term *‘politisasi’* is defined as the act of making actions, ideas, or concepts political. This highlights a call to avoid exploiting religious sentiments to undermine women's leadership.

The five datasets collectively form a discourse advocating for Acehnese women amidst the polemics surrounding the permissibility of female leadership. These arguments are articulated using declarative sentences that assert women's rights and challenge the politicization of religion to delegitimize women's participation in leadership roles. Historical references to the achievements of Muslim women and the religious endorsement of Aceh's female rulers are used to substantiate the legitimacy of women's leadership. These examples demonstrate that female leadership is as natural and valid as male leadership, both historically and religiously.

3.2 Dimensions of Discourse Practice

This news article, which defends women against the

polemics over women's leadership in Aceh, was published in response to ongoing debates about the permissibility of female leadership under Islamic law in Aceh. Some individuals argue that it is *haram* for women to assume leadership roles, citing the opinion of Abu Mudi, a prominent cleric in Aceh who also serves as an official in the Adil Sejahtera Party (Widadio, 2024). On the other hand, others believe that such debates should no longer persist, asserting that the current sociopolitical context differs significantly from that of 2017, and that people are now more discerning in their judgments (Nasir, 2024).

This contentious debate attracted significant media attention, prompting several news outlets to cover the issue. One of these, *Serambinews*, published a piece defending women's political rights. As an Aceh-based news agency, *Serambinews* reported on both sides of the debate, including opinions both supporting and opposing women's participation in politics. The article drew on insights from the Presidium of Balai Syura Ureung Inong Aceh, Khairani Arifin, to highlight the organization's stance against efforts to undermine the political rights of Acehnese women. The article, titled '*Larangan Perempuan Pemimpin, "Hantu" Jelang Pilkada Banda Aceh*', aimed to inform the public about the concerns and advocacy of an organization representing Acehnese women's aspirations (Nasir, 2024).

3.3 Dimensions of Sociocultural

The sociocultural dimension examines the context beyond the text itself. The article '*Larangan Perempuan Pemimpin, "Hantu" Jelang Pilkada Banda Aceh*' reflects Aceh's unique sociocultural environment, which is deeply rooted in Islamic law. Aceh is governed under a special autonomy that incorporates sharia-based regulations, and the role of ulama (Islamic scholars) is profoundly influential, with their opinions highly respected within the community.

The current polemic over women's leadership traces back to tensions in 2016, when a prominent Acehnese cleric, Abu Sheikh H. Hasanoel Bashry (known as Abu Mudi), declared in a YouTube broadcast that "a woman running for office is committing a sin, as it involves duties that are not lawful for her to perform" (Widadio, 2024). In May 2024, another cleric, Tgk Zainuddin Ubiet, reiterated this view, stating that Abu Mudi's

remarks were based on Quranic verses and hadiths, and as Aceh adheres to Islamic law, these should be upheld (Bara News, 2024).

In opposition to these views, the Balai Syura Ureung Inong Aceh challenged the fatwa prohibiting female leadership. The organization argued that this prohibition stems from a narrow interpretation of Islamic scripture. They presented historical examples of influential Muslim women such as Sayyidah Khadijah, Sayyidah Aisyah, and Sayyidah Fatimah, as well as Aceh's own history of female leadership under four sultanahs. Additionally, they emphasized that women's rights are protected under both national laws and Aceh's local *Qanun* (Lubis, 2024).

3.5 Women's Leadership from the Perspective of Ahmad At-Thayyib

Grand Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib, is a leading Islamic scholar who consistently advocates for women's rights in Islam. According to Sheikh At-Thayyib, Islam grants men and women equal rights. In one of his lectures, he stated:

“فالمراة في الإسلام شقيقة الرجل، والنساء جميعا فيما يقول النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم شقائق الرجال.”

This translates to: "Women in Islam are the siblings of men; as the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said, women are the counterparts of men." The term شقيقة (sibling) underscores the equality of rights between men and women. Sheikh At-Thayyib further reinforced this with the statement:

كل من المرأة والرجل مساو في أصل الإنسانية

Every woman is equal to men in humanity (Al-Thayyib, 2023).

In the political aspect, Sheikh Ahmad at-Thayyib argues

فإن الإسلام كفل المرأة من الحقوق السياسية، حق المشاركة في اختيار قادة المجتمع والقائمين على أمره

"Islam guarantees women's political rights, including the right to participate in choosing community leaders and decision-makers." He also affirmed that women have the right to assume leadership roles. As a demonstration of

this principle, Al-Azhar has appointed women to lead several strategic positions (CNN Arabic, 2024).

4. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Based on Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework, which examines the dimensions of text, discourse practice, and sociocultural context, this study reveals strong opposition to the fatwa prohibiting the election of female leaders. This opposition aligns with Sheikh Ahmad At-Thayyib's perspective, which supports women's rights to leadership roles.

The study underscores the critical role of media in shaping public perceptions and discourse on sensitive socio-religious issues, such as women's leadership. It also highlights the importance of aligning media narratives with moderate religious interpretations, such as those of Sheikh At-Thayyib, to foster balanced and progressive views. This research contributes to understanding how critical discourse analysis can uncover underlying ideological dynamics in media and offers insights into the interplay between religion, gender, and media in shaping public opinion.

One limitation of this study is its focus on the text dimension, specifically vocabulary and sentence types, while offering a narrower analysis of Aceh's sociocultural context. Future research could expand upon this study by exploring broader socio-structural dimensions for a more comprehensive understanding.

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