

Fragmentation of Authority in Muslim Liquid Society: A Crisis of Legitimacy, Epistemic Pluralism and Religious Negotiation in the Digital Age

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Abstract. This article examines the phenomenon of religious authority fragmentation within the context of Muslim liquid society, a social condition in which the boundaries of tradition, institutions, and scholarly hierarchies dissolve under the waves of modernity, globalisation, and the digital revolution. Employing a sociology of religion framework and critical discourse analysis, this study traces how traditional ulama authority undergoes systemic delegitimisation. At the same time, new religious actors such as social media preachers, Muslim influencers, and online communities fill the emerging power vacuum. The researchers gathered data through an in-depth literature study of contemporary Islamic sociology, digital media studies, and cross-national religious phenomena. The findings indicate that authority fragmentation not only produces a legitimacy crisis but also gives rise to a complex epistemic pluralism in which actors with diverse social capital contest, negotiate, and continuously construct religious truth. This study argues that Muslim liquid society is not an outright threat to Islam, but rather a dynamic arena of theological and social negotiation that nonetheless requires institutional recalibration to prevent moral relativism and community polarisation.

Keywords: Authority Fragmentation; Muslim Liquid Society; Digital Media.

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation, reflexive modernity, and the information technology revolution have simultaneously eroded the traditional foundations that have been the backbone of Islamic religious authority for centuries. The ulama, as the heirs of the prophets and holders of Islamic scientific authority, now face existential challenges that come not from outside Islam, but from within the Muslim community itself. New figures with large digital social capital, even without adequate formal religious education, can gather millions of followers and influence the religious understanding of the masses on a scale that even the most influential Islamic boarding school scholars cannot reach [1].

Researchers cannot adequately understand this phenomenon without referring to sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity [2]. Author [2] describes the contemporary social condition as liquid, in which previously solid

and permanent social structures, such as family, state, and religion, are now dissolved and lose their binding power. In the Muslim context, liquid modernity results in what might be termed a Muslim liquid society: a condition in which religious identity, practices, and authority become highly fluid, changeable, and constantly renegotiated. Muslim individuals no longer accept religious authority as something given and unquestionable, but rather as something to be tested, chosen, and even rejected if it is deemed irrelevant to their needs and life experiences [3].

The fragmentation of religious authority in this context is not just an ordinary sociological problem. It touches the heart of fundamental theological questions: Who has the right to interpret sacred texts? Whose voice is the most authoritative in determining the norms of halal-haram, legal-void, and true-perverse? In the classical Islamic scientific system, these questions have relatively well-established answers for scholars who have connected scientific sanad, master the Arabic

language, understand the ulum of the Quran and ulum al-hadith, and are religious in fiqh and usul fiqh. However, in the digital ecosystem of the 21st century, this scientific hierarchy continues to be undermined by the logic of knowledge democratisation and the power of content virality [4].

The impact of authority fragmentation is not singular or linear. On the one hand, it opens up opportunities for more inclusive interpretive pluralism, women's empowerment in religious discourse, and a more contextual revitalisation of Islam. On the other hand, it also nourishes internet-based radicalism, horizontal sectarian conflicts, and moral relativism that erode the cohesion of the Muslim community. It is in this tension between opportunity and threat that the Muslim liquid society operates, and this is where the academic significance of this study lies [5].

This paper aims to:

- 1) Examine the conceptualisation of liquid society in the context of contemporary Islam;
- 2) Analyse the mechanisms and dynamics of fragmentation of religious authority in the digital ecosystem;
- 3) Identify the implications of epistemic pluralism that arise from such fragmentation; and
- 4) Formulate a critical perspective on the prospects for the recalibration of religious authorities in liquid conditions. This paper moves within the tradition of the sociology of critical religion by drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Bauman, Bourdieu, Roy, and other contemporary Islamic scholars.

Research on Islamic religious authority in the digital age has grown rapidly since the first decade of the 21st century. However, most of the existing studies still focus on the technological aspect (the use of social media by certain Islamic groups) or the political aspect (Islamic relations with the state). Studies that systematically link Bauman's concept of liquid society with the dynamics of fragmentation of Islamic authority comprehensively are still relatively rare. This article intends to fill this gap and make a theoretical contribution to the development of contemporary Islamic sociology.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a library research design guided by a critical religious sociology perspective. The researchers chose a literature study because this research examines a conceptual-theoretical phenomenon at a macro-sociological scale, making the analysis and synthesis of existing scientific literature more appropriate than micro-ethnographic field research. This approach is in line with the tradition of sociology of knowledge which prioritises the elaboration of conceptual frameworks as a basis for subsequent empirical research [6].

The data sources of this research include three categories. First, the primary literature consists of key theoretical works, notably Zygmunt Bauman's work on liquid modernity, Pierre Bourdieu's work on fields and habitus, Olivier Roy's work on globalised Islam, and the work of Dale Eickelman and Jon Anderson on Islam and new media. Second, secondary literature includes articles from Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed scientific journals on Islamic religious authority, digital media, and contemporary Muslim society. Third, reports and empirical data from various leading research institutions such as the Pew Research Centre, Wahid Foundation, and PPIM UIN Jakarta provide quantitative data as the basis for empirical arguments.

The researchers collected data by conducting systematic searches of academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and other digital libraries, using relevant keywords in Indonesian, English, and Arabic. The data analysis uses the critical discourse analysis (CDA) technique developed by the author [7], which allows researchers not only to summarise the content of the literature, but also to identify the power relations, ideologies, and interests hidden behind academic narratives of Muslim religious authority. The stages of analysis include: 1) Critical reading and annotation of sources; 2) Identification of key themes and sub-themes; 3) Cross-source mapping; and 4) Interpretive synthesis.

To ensure the reliability of the arguments constructed, this study applies the principle of theoretical triangulation, which involves using several different theoretical frameworks to analyse the same phenomenon, then comparing the consistency and complementarity between the frameworks [8]. In addition, the principle of dialogism is also used in discussions where conflicting perspectives are presented and dialogued

explicitly, rather than reduced to a single narrative that ignores the complexity of the phenomenon.

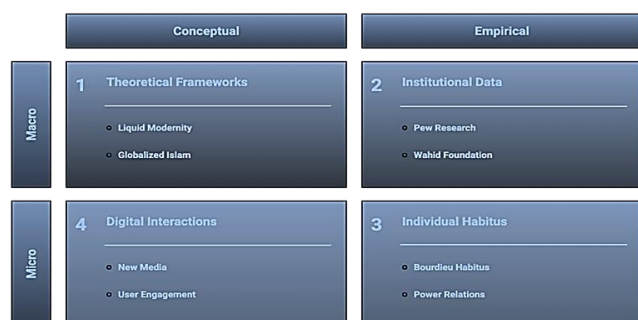


Figure 1 – Research Methodology Mapping

Theoretical Framework. The concept of liquid modernity launched by Zygmunt Bauman in 2000 is one of the most influential sociological diagnoses of the condition of contemporary society. Bauman argues that if the first phase of modernity, which he calls solid modernity, is characterised by the development of solid institutions and stable hierarchies, then the second phase of liquid modernity is actually marked by the systematic erosion of all forms of solidity [2]. Everything that was once solid is now melting: employment relationships have become precarious, family ties have become looser, national identities have become more fluid, and most importantly for this study, religious authorities have lost their traditional binding power.

In the context of Islam, this liquid condition produces an interesting paradox: on the one hand, there is a revival of religious revival, which can be seen in the increasing interest in Islamic studies, Muslim fashion, and halal tourism; but on the other hand, there is authoritarianism, a reduction in the readiness of individual Muslims to submit uncritically to any religious authority [9]. Muslim liquid society does not mean non-religious Muslims, but Muslims who are very religious but in a very personal, eclectic way, and not tied to any single religious institution.

Author [10] further identified that in a liquid society, consumption replaces production as the axis of organising social life; this has direct implications for the religious realm: individuals treat religion as an object of consumption that they choose, adjust, and even abandon like a product in the free market. The phenomenon that authors [11] call Sheilaism, which is a religion that is

highly personalised and customised based on individual preferences, reaches a much higher intensity in the era of social media.

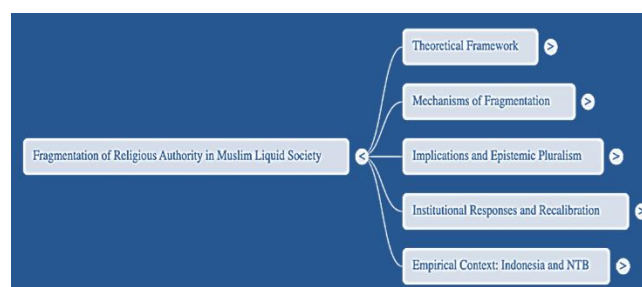


Figure 2 – Theoretical Mind Mapping

Pierre Bourdieu provides an invaluable analytical tool for understanding the dynamics of religious authority through the concepts of field, habitus, and capital. In Bourdieu's perspective, the religious realm is a social field in which there is a constant struggle to seize and defend symbolic capital, namely the collective recognition of one's legitimacy to speak on behalf of religion. Traditional scholars obtain symbolic capital through long-term investment: studying for many years in Islamic boarding schools or universities, obtaining scientific sanad from trusted teachers, and building a reputation through dedication and example [12].

In the digital ecosystem, the logic of symbolic capital accumulation has undergone a dramatic shift. Capital, which was previously cultural, in-depth knowledge of Islamic texts, now has to compete with social-digital capital, number of followers, viral reach, and visual storytelling ability in determining who the Muslim community hears. In other words, the Islamic religious field is undergoing a fundamental restructuring where new rules of the game are being written, and traditional scholars who do not master the 'language' of this new terrain are at risk of being marginalised [4].

Habitus, which consists of dispositions that individuals internalise through long-term social experience, also experiences disturbances under conditions of liquid modernity. The traditional Islamic habitus, which teaches respect for teachers, patience in learning, and scepticism of innovation, is not always compatible with the digital habitus that values speed, visual creativity, and the courage to speak up without the need to be an 'expert' first.

Olivier Roy, in his monumental work *Globalised Islam*, puts forward a provocative thesis: globalisation does not lead to the secularisation of Islam, but rather produces a 'purer' form of Islam while eradicating it from its local roots. Roy called this phenomenon the deterritorialisation of Islam, which is detached from certain local cultural ties, ethnicities, and traditions, and then seeks a universal and portable form of expression. This territorialised Islam is easier to move through the internet, more easily adapted by individuals from different backgrounds, but also more susceptible to reductive interpretations that ignore the richness of local traditions [3].

For the author [3], the deterritorialisation of Islam has a direct impact on religious authority. When Islam is detached from its local ties, the authority of local scholars is weakened because they are no longer the sole guardians of tradition. Under this condition, Muslim individuals are free to choose religious references from all over the world through the internet. A Muslim in Jakarta can follow the fatwa of Saudi scholars, listen to the lectures of the Egyptian Ustaz/teacher, and read American Muslim blogs at the same time without feeling any inconsistencies. This phenomenon Roy called neo-fundamentalism, namely Islam that is minimalist, legal-formalistic, and disconnected from the rich theological and Sufi heritage.

Max Weber distinguishes three types of pure authority: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational. In the history of Islam, researchers can understand the authority of scholars as a combination of the traditional type (based on hereditary scientific heritage) and the charismatic type (based on the community's recognition of profound knowledge and exemplary moral character). In the conditions of liquid modernity, these two types of authority undergo simultaneous erosion: the traditional type is eroded by the weakening of respect for tradition. In contrast, the charismatic type becomes a commodity that can be artificially produced through image management on social media [13].

Contemporary Islamic scholars such as authors [14–16] have provided an in-depth analysis of the transformation of scholarly authority in the context of the modern nation-state. The times show how Pakistani scholars managed to maintain their relevance by adapting to changing socio-political contexts. Messick analyses how texts and authority are mutually exclusive in Yemen's

Islamic scholarly tradition. Hallaq argues that the modern nation-state has taken over functions previously held by the clerics, thus creating a structural crisis of authority.

More recently, author [4] developed the concept of Muslim to describe Muslims who increasingly mediate their religious lives through the internet. For Muslim, authority is not something found in institutions or traditions, but rather something that is searched for, independently verified, and constructed through navigation among various online sources; this is a new form of what author [17] calls the reflexive self of the individual who constantly reflects and reconstructs their identity and beliefs based on the information that is constantly flowing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Collapse of the Traditional Scientific Hierarchy. The fragmentation of authority in Muslim liquid society is first seen in the collapse of the traditional scientific hierarchy that for centuries governed the distribution of Islamic religious authority. In the traditional system, the chain of scientific transmission (isnad or sanad) serves as a quality control mechanism that ensures that only those with adequate qualifications are entitled to issue religious fatwas or guidance. This system, while not perfect, has a coherent internal logic and an effective self-correction mechanism [16].

In the digital age, digital technologies almost completely bypass this mechanism. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok don't know the sanad system; anyone with internet access, good speaking skills, and the courage to appear in front of the camera can become an Ustaz/male teacher and Ustazah/female teacher with hundreds of thousands of followers in a matter of months. Data from We Are Social 2023 shows that Islamic religious content is one of the most popular content categories in Indonesia, with millions of views per day [18]. But this popularity does not correlate with the scientific depth of the content in question. On the contrary, the data shows that the most viral content tends to be the simplest, most emotional, and free from theological complexity [19].

This phenomenon creates what can be called the 'democratisation paradox': on the one hand, more people have access to religious knowledge; On the other hand, there is no mechanism to ensure that the knowledge disseminated is accu-

rate, contextual, and responsible. Research by PPIM UIN Jakarta 2020 [20] found that around 40% of Indonesian Muslim respondents trust social media more than Islamic boarding school scholars for daily religious questions; this is a very clear indication of how far the fragmentation of authority has gone.

The fragmentation of authority means not only the weakening of traditional authority, but also, and this is equally important, the emergence of new religious actors that previously had no place in the classical Islamic authority ecosystem. These actors can be classified into several categories. First, 'celebrity-preachers' are figures who have a formal religious education background but adopt a celebrity communication format [19]. They combine the content of religious lectures with attractive appearance, lifestyle, and personal branding. In Indonesia, figures like this have become a phenomenon in itself with followers that transcend the boundaries of traditional social class.

Second, individual 'Muslim influencers' who establish a Muslim identity as part of their personal brand without a specific claim to be a cleric. They influence followers' religious practices through lifestyle demonstrations (Islamic lifestyle), not through scientific authority [21]. Their influence includes hijab trends, halal tourism choices, halal food brands, and even certain worship practices. Third, digital activist-ideologues are groups that use digital platforms to spread religious interpretations that contain certain ideologies, from radical Islamism to progressive liberalism [5].

The proliferation of these non-traditional actors creates what author [22] calls the "feudalisation of public space," in which certain interests dominate a public space that should foster rational deliberation and use the media to strengthen their influence. In the Muslim religious context, this feudalisation is manifested in the mastery of Islamic discourse by actors who have the financial and technological capital to dominate the algorithms of digital platforms, not by those with depth of knowledge.

The Construction of Religious Truth in a Liquid Condition. One of the most significant implications of the fragmentation of authority is the emergence of epistemic pluralism in the religious realm, a condition in which no single perspective on 'Islamic truth' can claim undisputed epistemic superiority before the broad Muslim public [23]. This epistemic pluralism differs from religious

pluralism (which recognises the truth of different religions) and from classical *ijtihad* (which is a controlled mechanism for producing a diversity of interpretations of Islamic law). Epistemic pluralism in a Muslim liquid society is far more radical: it questions the authority of anyone, even learned scholars, to define what is 'right' in Islam.

This phenomenon has a historical precedent in Islam of debates between schools of *fiqh*, between *Ash'ariyah* and *Mu'tazilah*, between *Sufis* and *fuqaha*, but what distinguishes it from historical pluralism is this: in a liquid state, no 'arbitrator' or institutional arbitration can resolve disputes. In the classical tradition, despite the diversity of opinions, there is always a mechanism, either through *ijma*, the policy of the ruler, or the authority of a particular *madrasah*, that can provide minimal certainty for the laity. In liquid conditions, these mechanisms have weakened or completely disappeared [14].

A Muslim liquid society is a society in which individuals constantly negotiate their religious identity. Author [17] argued that in late modernity, the self becomes a reflexive project that individuals must actively construct and reconstruct rather than passively accept as an inheritance. In the context of Islam, this means that being a Muslim no longer involves following hereditary traditions but instead requires individuals to make an active choice that they must continually renew and maintain in relation to the alternative identities available in the global marketplace of ideas.

The digital space is the main arena for this religious identity negotiation. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube provide a stage where different versions of Islam are contested: progressive Islam versus conservative Islam, local Islam versus transnational Islam, inclusive Islam versus exclusive Islam. Individual Muslims navigate between these various contestations and construct a bricolage religious identity, taking elements from various traditions and combining them into a uniquely personal mosaic of identity [3]. This bricolage process does produce innovative and context-responsive forms of religiosity, but it also has the potential to produce uncontrolled syncretism.

Authors [24] study of new public Muslims shows that urban educated Muslim groups, especially those who have secular education but still maintain Islamic commitments, play an important role in building a new public Islamic discourse. This group often feels uncomfortable with both tradi-

tional Islam (which is considered rigid and irrelevant) and Islamist groups (which are perceived as too political and not inclusive). They create a 'middle' Islamic discourse space characterised by rationality, inclusivity, and openness but which also, because it lacks a strong institutional structure, is vulnerable to further fragmentation.

Faced with the increasingly intensive fragmentation of authority, traditional cleric institutions responded with a variety of strategies. Some opt for a defensive-isolationist strategy: refusing to engage with the digital ecosystem and emphasising the need to return to classical Islamic scholarly institutions as the only legitimate source of authority. This strategy tends to be effective only for communities that are already isolated from the mainstream of modernity. It is ineffective in winning the 'hearts and minds' of digitally connected urban Muslims [14].

Others have opted for an adaptive strategy: entering the digital ecosystem while trying to maintain traditional scientific standards. In Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) with its NU Online platform is an interesting example of this strategy. NU Online strives to present Islamic content based on the scientific tradition of Islamic boarding schools in a format that is easily accessible and relevant to digital Muslims. Author [25] shows that this strategy has a moderate success rate; NU Online has succeeded in reaching audience segments that are already sympathetic to NU traditions, but is less successful in reaching Muslims who do not have a certain madzhab/affiliation.

In Malaysia, JAKIM and the State Islamic Religious Council (MAIN) are taking a more regulatory approach: seeking to control digital religious content through Ustaz certification mechanisms and accreditation of religious platforms. This approach faces a fundamental dilemma: it effectively blocks content that certain actors clearly distort, but it also has the potential to suppress a healthy diversity of interpretations and create a rigid "official state Islam" [26].

One of the dark sides of the fragmentation of religious authority is its potential to nourish radicalisation. In conditions where there is no authority strong enough to stem extreme interpretations, radical groups have the opportunity to take advantage of the emptiness of such authority to spread their ideology [5]. The internet has become an 'echo chamber' that brings together individuals who already have extremist tendencies

with content that further reinforces these tendencies, in a very dangerous feedback loop.

The Wahid Foundation report 2020 [27] on online radicalisation in Indonesia shows that most individuals exposed to radical ideologies experience the process of radicalisation through social media, rather than through direct recruitment by formal organisations; this confirms the thesis that the fragmentation of authority creates a 'niche' that can be filled by radical narratives offered as a solution to the confusion of religious identity experienced by individuals who are 'lost' in the jungle of digital content. The vacuum of trusted and legitimate authority has become a structural loophole exploited by groups with extremist agendas.

The most pressing question that arises from the above analysis is: is it possible to calibrate religious authority in the conditions of a Muslim liquid society, and if so, what form should it take? The argument in this paper is that recalibration is indeed possible and necessary, but not in the form of a restoration of hierarchical-traditional authority that has collapsed. Relevant recalibration is a phased recalibration of the recognition of the liquid condition as an irreversible reality, while seeking to establish new mechanisms that can guarantee the quality of public religious discourse [23].

The literature identifies several promising directions for recalibration. First, it highlights the development of digital religious literacy, namely the ability of Muslim individuals to evaluate digital religious sources critically, verify theological claims, and recognise signs of ideological manipulation. This literacy needs to be integrated into the formal and non-formal education systems of Muslims [28]. Second, the building of a digital scholar network that is horizontal and collaborative, not a vertical hierarchy that relies on a single authoritative figure, but a constellation of scholars who validate and correct each other in an open digital ecosystem.

Third, strengthening the role of Islamic educational institutions (Islamic boarding schools, madrasas, Islamic universities) as centres for producing quality and relevant religious knowledge. These institutions need to transform not only by digitising content, but also by rethinking the 'authority', 'qualifications', and 'relevance' of Islamic scholarship in a liquid context. Fourth, there needs to be active dialogue between religious institutions, digital platforms,

and the government to develop a more responsible digital ecosystem without denying freedom of expression [25].

What is important to emphasise is that this recalibration is not about 'stopping change' or 'restoring the past'. Muslim liquid society is a reality that will not recede. The challenge is how to navigate these conditions in such a way that the diversity of interpretations that exist can enrich, rather than divide, the Muslim community. In the language of the author [29], reform is needed through contextual *ijtihad* rooted in a rich Islamic tradition but responsive to contemporary realities.

Based on the findings above, this article recommends several things. For Islamic educational institutions, it is necessary to revitalise the curriculum that integrates religious digital literacy as a core competency, not just an addition. For Islamic organisations such as NU and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia, it is necessary to develop a more sophisticated digital communication strategy based on in-depth audience research. For governments and regulators, it is necessary to develop a digital media policy that provides space for a diversity of Islamic discourse while providing an effective mechanism to counteract content that encourages violence and discrimination.

For the academic community, this research opens up several urgent research agendas: an ethnographic study of how Muslims in various local contexts experience and respond to the fragmentation of authority; comparative research on the differences in fragmentation dynamics in different Muslim countries and the development of more sophisticated theoretical models to capture the complexity of Muslim liquid society. Thus, the study of the fragmentation of authority does not stop at a mere diagnosis, but rather as a starting point for a broader agenda of research and action for the realisation of a critical, cohesive, and civilised Muslim community.

Limitations and Future Research. This study is limited by its reliance on digitally accessible discourse, potentially overlooking offline Muslim communities where authority remains centralised. The analysis may underrepresent non-English-speaking and non-Arabic-speaking populations, as well as closed platforms like private WhatsApp or Telegram groups. Furthermore, the fluid nature of "liquid society" makes it difficult

to capture longitudinal shifts in legitimacy. Finally, the researcher's own positionality within digital spaces inevitably shapes the selection of epistemic conflicts, limiting generalizability across diverse Muslim-majority contexts.

In an age where digital platforms dissolve traditional hierarchies, the title "Fragmentation of Authority in Muslim Liquid Society: A Crisis of Legitimacy, Epistemic Pluralism, and Religious Negotiation in the Digital Age" captures a pressing reality that demands urgent scholarly and practical attention. I strongly recommend that researchers, policymakers, and religious communities move beyond diagnosing the problem and instead develop adaptive frameworks for managed pluralism.

First, map the digital ecosystem of Islamic authority, identify who speaks, why audiences trust them, and how algorithms amplify certain voices over others. Without this empirical grounding, the crisis remains abstract.

Second, design digital literacy programs that do not simply defend classical *ulama* but equip ordinary Muslims to navigate epistemic pluralism, critically distinguishing between productive disagreement and dangerous distortion.

Third, facilitate what I call "negotiation spaces": moderated online forums where participants can debate competing fatwas transparently instead of silencing opposing views; this turns fragmentation from a threat into a creative tension.

Finally, I recommend a comparative ethnographic study across three platforms (YouTube, TikTok, and Telegram) focusing on a single contentious issue such as halal finance or gender relations. Such a study would reveal how legitimacy is performed, challenged, and reassembled in real time. Without this grounded research, the discourse on Muslim liquid society risks becoming as fragmented as the reality it describes. Act now, before the crisis hardens into permanent chaos.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has systematically examined the phenomenon of fragmentation of religious authority in the context of Muslim liquid society. It uses a theoretical framework built on Bauman's concepts of liquid modernity, Bourdieu's *terrain* and symbolic capital, Roy's deterritorialisation of Islam, and Weber's typology of authority. This paper succeeds in identifying that the fragmenta-

tion of authority is not just a surface change in the way Muslims worship, but a structural transformation that touches the epistemic and institutional foundations of Islam. This study summarises its main findings in four points.

First, the collapse of the traditional scientific hierarchy is an inevitable symptom of the condition of liquid modernity, and not solely due to the moral or intellectual decline of the people.

Second, the proliferation of non-traditional religious actors creates a new field of authority competition that needs to be understood not as an anomaly, but as a structural feature of contemporary Muslim society.

Third, the epistemic pluralism resulting from this fragmentation contains both emancipatory potential and disintegrative risks that religious institutions, policymakers, and Muslim communities must actively manage.

Fourth, recalibrating religious authority in liquid conditions requires an innovative approach that

does not simply reproduce past hierarchical models.

Theoretically, this article contributes to the development of contemporary Islamic sociology by offering a conceptual framework of Muslim liquid society as a more precise analytical tool than existing concepts. In practical terms, this article provides a foothold for Muslim cleric stakeholders, educators, policymakers, and activists to respond to the challenge of authority fragmentation in a more planned and contextual way.

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