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Digital *Dalang* (Puppet-masters): Visual Satire and the Unmaking of Islamism in Indonesia

In a provocative essay, Christopher Pinney argues passionately that “visual theory is in crisis, a crisis with revivifying potential, because we have rediscovered the potential of the visual to create crisis” (2017: 73). What sort of visual theory helps us to understand the making and unmaking of Islamism? In this paper, I consider the role of visual culture in the rise and demise of Islamist politicians and pop preachers in Indonesia. As but one of many examples, Islamic hardliner Rizieq Shihab, once an ardent supporter of the 2008 anti-pornography law, fled the country after being summoned by police concerning sexually explicit Whatsapp conversations with his alleged mistress. Within hours, social media lit up with various satirical memes calling out Shihab’s hypocrisy.

I describe a generation of loosely-affiliated online activists who deploy humor, satire, disgust, and outrage in to unmask what they perceive as the moral vacuity, insincerity, and duplicity of Islamist projects. In doing so, I juxtapose Pinney’s account of the problem (and solution) of visual theory, with the questions that animate Islamic social media in Indonesia: What kinds of creative labor, negotiations, contestations, and politics inform the creation of images involved in the online unmaking of Islamism? What sorts of virtues, Islamic and otherwise, do such images invoke? In some respects, this case study of the strategic *unmaking* of Islamism appears to answer Pinney’s call for the revolutionary potential of visual critique. On the other hand, “reawakening the revolutionary potential” of visual critique in Indonesia has also expanded the reach of the state into the digital lives of its citizens and recalibrated the fault lines between so-called “good” and “bad” Muslims.