

INCoH 2017
The Second International Conference On Humanities

**DISAGREEMENT AMONGST HADITH CRITICS: A CRITICAL
REVIEW ON LAKNAWĪ'S RULES OF RECONCILIATION**

Umar Muhammad Noor (a)*

*Corresponding author

(a) School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Penang, Malaysia, umarmnoor@usm.my

Abstract

Disagreement over the authenticity of hadith (prophetic tradition) is a common event in hadith discourse. A hadith that authenticated as sound by a critic sometimes is judged as weak by other. This reality sparked question on best method in dealing with such cases. The topic is understudied until 'Abd al-Ḥay Laknawī (1848-1886) proposed four rules of reconciliation in his two books namely *Zafar al-Amānī* and *al-Ajwibah al-Fāḍilah*. The current article will shed light on those rules and evaluate its acceptability using recent findings in hadith studies. In addition, the study aims at unearthing the connection between the rules and the nature of Laknawī's Islamic scholarship as a whole. It has found that Laknawī's rules of reconciliation are considerably practical yet trivial. Despite its popularity in modern hadith studies, the rules contain a handful problematic issues and weaknesses. It has also proved that Laknawī's prevailed preference to the opinion of critics from the *mu'tadil* (moderate) group clearly reflects his scholarship which promotes the concept of moderation in cases disputed by the traditionalist and reformist groups in India and evidently inspires later scholars.

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Keywords: Reform, hadith critics, *mutasāhil*, *mutashaddid*, *mu'tadil*, moderation.



1. Introduction

The main objective of hadith criticism is to ascertain the authenticity of hadith, and to separate the sound hadiths from the weak ones (al-Suyūfī, 2004). Hadith criticism involves thorough examination which is focused to various aspects relating to transmitter's reliability, the contiguity of *isnad* (chain of transmission) and the accuracy of *matn* (hadith wordings). Although it is tied to systematic and meticulous principles, hadith critics often fall into disagreement. Hadith that is authenticated as sound by some critics could be deemed as weak by others, and vice versa. The event mainly starts from 4th/10th century in which the subjectivities begin to influence the hadith criticism due to the proliferation of schools of fiqh (*madhabs*). Scholars with inclination to certain school of thought (*madhhab*) often attempt to manipulate hadith discussion to make it seen in line with the rulings of their *madhhab*. It continues to modern times when current hadith scholars rarely agree on the status of various hadiths due to personal sentiments as well as sect fanaticism (Noor, 2017).

2. Problem Statement

Despite of its significance in hadith discourse, the topic on how to interact with disagreement on hadith authenticity, and how to choose the right opinion in such cases, is hardly found in classical hadith literature. The topic is understudied until the middle of 19th century. The earliest discussion on the matter to propose practical solutions is that in the works of modern scholar 'Abd al-Ḥay Laknawī of Farangi Mahal India (d.1886). His lengthy elaboration about the reality of disagreement amongst hadith critics and how to reconcile it can be found in *Zafar al-Amānī fī Sharh Mukhtaṣar al-Jurjānī* and *al-Ajwibah al-Fāḍilah 'an al-As'ilah al-'Asharah al-Kāmilah*. In both works, Laknawī has formulated four rules of reconciliation that are extracted from statements and practices of previous scholars. One of the rules suggests to evaluate and critically compare the basis and arguments of the critics involved. The remained three suggests to pick up the most reliable opinion offered by the critics based on the acquaintance of their overall scholarship. Since the Laknawī's rules are widely accepted among modern hadith scholars, it is important to study its acceptability as well as to examine the context in which the rules come into existence. Needless to say that the problem studied in this paper is differ from that in Soroni's "Formulasi Imam 'Abd al-Hay al-Laknawi Terhadap Hadis Diperselisihkan Statusnya" for his work merely an elaboration about Laknawi's rules without in-depth analysis and critical examination.

3. Research Questions

This research will answer the following questions: To what extent do these rules can be seen as applicable in the eyes of hadith scholars at current time? How did Laknawi come up with these rules of reconciliation?

4. Purpose of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine Laknawi's rules of reconciliation in term of its acceptability in light of hadith criticism framework. It will also study the forces behind the existence of those rules.

5. Research Methods

This study is a qualitative in nature. The library research methodology is utilised in data collection which includes Laknawi's works as well as books and articles related to the topic. Using content analysis method, the study carefully analyzes the nature of Laknawi's intellectual and religious activities as reflected in his biography. It proceeds to investigate the correlation between his main ideas and India's socio-cultural condition in late 13th/19th century. Realising that Indian scholars at his time had divided into two groups, namely reformists and traditionalist, this study tries to identify Laknawi's position in the conflict. It then continues to examine Laknawi's rules of reconciliation by comparing it with the opinions of past and current scholars.

6. Findings

6.1. 'Abd Al-Hay Laknawī: A Moderate Reformist

Muhammad 'Abd al-Ḥay bin 'Abd al-Ḥalīm al-Laknawī, Abū al-Ḥasanāt, was born in October 24, 1848. His father was a prominent Islamic scholar in Farangi Mahall, India. According to Robinson (2001), Farangi Mahall's ulemas played an important role in education, social and religious affairs in the 18th to 20th centuries. 'Abd al-Ḥay Laknawī is considered as the last most influential figure of this state. With his death, the family has lost its scientific position and international rank of Islamic madrasahs (al-Nadwī, 1995).

Upon completing his Quranic memorization, Laknawī started learning fundamental Islamic subjects. Under his father's direct supervision, he learned Arabic, *Sarf*, *Nahw* and *Balaghah*, as well as rational subjects such as maths, logic, and philosophy. Above all, he favoured hadith sciences and penned several works relating to various aspects of hadith studies. Despite having strong tendency to Hadith, Laknawī maintained his inclination to Hanafī *madhhab* as source of his legal reference. He was not interested in joining Ahl-i Hadith group, a powerful reformist movement in India, that extremely encourages *ijtihād* (independent judgement) and censures *taqlīd* (blind adherence). In fact, he expressed strong opposition to the movement and its propaganda. However, it does not mean that he totally against reform. He was persistent in pursuing reforms by applying critical thinking towards various Hanafī tenets and rulings. He asserted that any rulings that violated the content of sound hadith must be discarded. He also criticized the attitude of some *madhhab* proponents who used to ridicule the scholars or rulings that belong to other schools (Mamdūh, 1438 H). He also noted that the existence of hadith in fiqh literature does not guarantee its authenticity. Hence, those hadiths should not be taken for granted. Instead, one must exercise caution in accepting and using it (al-Laknawī, 1964).

It is then prevalent that Laknawī is a traditionalist strived for reform without joining reformists current. The very basis of his reform is the concept of moderation (*wasaf*), as he once said: "Every time I

come to a problem that requires serious ponder, I am always inspired to take the middle path". Therefore, he did not throw away old traditions in the expense of reform. He chose to preserve the scholarly traditions rather than starting anew. His model of reform become an attractive choice for later scholars who sought to preserve tradition amidst the challenges of modernism. One of them was Muhammad Bakhīt al-Muṭṭī, a Hanafi scholar and Egyptian mufti of the period 1921-1928, in the context of the proliferation of modern Egyptian movements (Quadri, 2013).

6.2. Laknawī's Rules of Reconciliation

Disagreement in hadith criticism, according to al-Laknawī (1416 H), is a common event yet quite difficult to handle. In such cases, one can identify the right opinion only after applying any of these four rules of reconciliation. First, one should examine carefully the arguments of each parties involved, then he can "take the opinion that evidently true and leave the others as false." Citing al-Suyūṭī, Laknawī gave a few examples for the application of this rule. One of them was hadith on *tasbiḥ* prayer, which was stated as false by Ibn al-Jawzī, but is elevated as sound, fair (*hasan*), or weak by other scholars. Laknawī stated that if a skilled researcher carefully examines the basis of their arguments, he would definitely reject Ibn Jawzī's opinion, and concludes that some of the *isnāds* undoubtedly have reached fair status. (Soroni, 2016)

Scrutinizing the basis of arguments is undeniably an effective way to reconcile disagreements amongst critics. Other than Laknawī, It is also suggested by several contemporary scholars such as Muqbil Al-Wādi'ī (2004), Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sulaymānī (2000) and Abū Ishāq al-Ḥuwaynī (1408). However, the application of this rule required set of skills and expertise which are not within the capacity of all scholars or students of hadith. According to Mamdūḥ (1438), even al-Laknawī himself is unable to translate the rule into action in most of his discussions about hadith criticism. Most of the time he merely cites from the previous scholars, then subjectively rejects one criticism by another without examining their respective arguments.

Mamdūḥ's remark is closely related to the second, third and fourth of Laknawī's rules of reconciliation. These rules basically suggest to observe the scholarship background of those critics who involved in disagreement. Laknawī came up with the categorization of hadith critics into three types namely *mutasāhil* (lax), *mutashaddid* (strict) and *mu'tadil* (moderate). In short, *mutasāhil* is a specific label for critic whose assessments to transmitter or hadith often higher than he or it deserves. He, for example, gives assessment for a hadith as sound whereas it does not fulfil the criteria. The opposite is *mushaddid*, which is a label for critic whose assessments for transmitter or hadith always lower than he/it should be, such as stating hadith as weak despite of it actually worths sound. The *mu'tadil* is in the middle of these two categories. It is a label for someone who constantly gives accurate grading to transmitter or hadith. Laknawī's second rule of reconciliation simply stipulates that in cases of disagreements between a critic that belongs to *mutasāhil* category and another critic from the *mu'tadil* one, the opinion of the latter must be preferred. His third and fourth rule also state to prefer the *mu'tadil*'s opinion in disagreements that happen between the *mu'tadils* and *mushaddids*.

The categorization of critics undeniably offers practical solutions for those who has minimum expertise in hadith criticism. They will be able to choose one of the conflicting opinions by simply knowing to which category that certain critic belongs to. By offering these rules, it seems that Laknawī had opened the opportunity for wider audience to participate in hadith criticism which in the classical period was limited

to elite of scholars. As Karagozolu observed (2018), it has become one of the growing trends in the hadith discourse in the post-classical period. The scholars have shifted from one-by-one *isnād* analysis to the general principles that facilitate the reader on how to determine the status of hadith. In the case of Laknawī's rules of reconciliation, the criticism presented by a critic is examined not in terms of its arguments, but mostly within the broader framework of their scholarship in general.

In a broader context, Laknawī's rules of reconciliation reflect the basis of his reformist thought which place the concept of moderation at its very heart. Facing the fact that Islamic scholars in India has been divided into Ahl-i Hadith and Hanafites, he tried to offer solutions that can narrow the gap between the two groups. In line with their reform agenda, Ahl-i Hadith criticised tradition and practices in Indian community that in their view violated the Sunnah of the Prophet. In doing so, they referred to certain scholars who could be categorised as *mutashaddid*. On the other hand, the defensive position adopted by the Hanafites made them seek support from opposite type of scholars whose assessment could be considered as *mutasāhil*. Thus, he proposed a moderate (*mutawassiṭ*) stance that lies between two extremes. The opinion of *Mu'tadils* must always be favoured in reconciling conflicts of references.

However, Laknawī's categorization of critics actually contains several weaknesses, therefore should not be perceived as an absolute generalization. The categorization in most of the time is lack of sufficient evidence. One critic often considered as *mutasāhil* or *mutashaddid* because of his opinion on one particular aspect of hadith criticism whereas assessment from other aspects might lead to place him in the opposite category. Laxity (*tasāhul*) label given to al-Dāraqūṭnī, for instance, is not related to his overall practice in hadith criticism, but rather limited to one particular part of his approach, namely his treatment when dealing with vague transmitters (*majhūl*) (Al-'Uthmān, 2008). Hence, when a critic is labelled as *mutasāhil* or *mutasahaddid*, we have the right to ask: on what basis this assessment is built? Is it concluded from thorough examination or just selected samples? This is the reason why categorizing a critic in one of the three categories often incites contention. For example, Laknawī's decision to place al-Suyūṭī amongst the *mu'tadil* category is contended by Abū Ghuddah (1416 H) who believes that he should be placed among the *mutasāhils* due to his prevalent habit of elevating weak hadiths into sound category based on a questionable methodology.

In his *al-Ajwibah al-Fāḍila*, Laknawī answered a question whether the expertise level of the critics must be seen as one of the considerable factors in reconciliation. Al-Laknawī (1964) asserted that this aspect should not be taken into account. A less-skilled critic might discover defects that an expert had failed to see. He also dismissed the superiority of early critics over the later ones saying that the critics from early period might overlook defects in hadith. Based on this notion, Laknawī put early expert's opinion like Ahmad bin Hanbal and al-Bukhārī in equal position to later critics such as al-'Irāqī and Ibn Ḥajar. His stance clearly demonstrated the spirit of reform in Laknawī's thought. Previously Yemeni reformist al-Amīr al-Ṣan'ānī (1985) dismisses all privileges whatsoever in early hadith scholars in term of hadith evaluation. The only advantage that the classical scholars had, he said, is less number of intermediaries between them and the prophet. As it comes to expertise, he considers both classical and modern scholars as equally capable in hadith criticism. In fact, the modern critics might have superiority over their predecessors due to easy access to the vast hadith compilations that were not made available before modern time. This notion has

become the basic of modern hadith criticism which refuses to accept blindly previous assessment on hadith (Noor & Shah, 2016).

However, recent findings in hadith studies find this notion lack of supportive evidence. In fact, they find that classical critics enjoyed several advantages which the later can only see in books such as personal relationship with hadith transmitters and strong memory. Therefore, recent scholars urged to give superiority to the early hadith critics and accept their criticism without question. Dividing hadith critics into *Mutaqaddimīn* (classical) and *Muta'akhirin* (post-classical), al-Malyabārī and al-Sa'ad noted that the two groups of scholars were not only separated by timeline, but also distinguished by level of expertise. The *Mutaqaddimīns*, those who lived in the period of *riwāyah* (living tradition), which ended approximately at the beginning of the 5 /11 century, renowned for their accuracy in determining hadith authenticity. Their criticism was based on genuine *ahl al-Ḥadīth* methodology that relied heavily on the observation of hidden defects. On the other hand, the *Muta'akhirins* come into the scene after the real masters in hadith has gone and hadith discussion had been influenced by deductive logic of the legists (*fuqahā's*). Therefore, their assessments often contradict to those of the *ahl al-Ḥadīth's*. Due to this fact, *mutaqaddimin's* prepositions should be placed higher than the assessment of later generation (Noor & Shah, 2016).

7. Conclusion

Disagreement among critics over the authenticity of certain hadiths is a common event but understudied until the 14/20 century. As the first scholar who addresses the issue intensely, 'Abd al-Ḥay Laknawī formulated four rules of reconciliation to assist his contemporaries in selecting the most reliable opinion. One of these rules undeniably is an effective way to reconcile disagreement amongst critics. However, the other three remain disputable due to of its trivial nature. Nevertheless, these rules reflect Laknawī's stance in dealing with his socio-intellectual condition in which Indian Islamic scholars have divided into two distinctive groups. Firstly, the Hanafites who want to preserve the centuries-old tradition, and secondly the Ahl-i Hadith who strive for change. With his concept of moderation, Laknawī promotes a middle position which is evidently found attractive for some of later scholars.

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