

Essay

SABYAN GAMBUS: POPULARITY AND CHANGE

In recent months, especially during the holy month of Ramadan, we Indonesians have found ourselves drawn to the music of Sabyan Gambus. And it's not just Muslims who find them enchanting.

This group — consisting of Nissa (lead vocalist), Anisa (backing vocalist), Ayus (bajwanist), Tebe (violinist), Kana (darbuka player) and Wayan (percussionist) — went viral after they uploaded various *shalawat* (the salutation upon the prophet of Muhammad) on YouTube. Much to everyone's surprise, the *shalawat* posts have been viewed dozens or even hundreds of millions of times. Almost all their songs and *shalawat* are still trending on YouTube now.

Their swift rise to popularity is startling, with "Sabyan fever" breaking out in different segments of society, such as children, teenagers and adults. Even Vice President Jusuf Kalla expressed his admiration for the group.

What is behind their fame? Is it to do with their rare music genre, which leaves virtually no competitor, particularly among young people? Are we drawn to the "Nissa factor" with her angelic voice, lovely face and hospitable manner? Or can we claim that it serves as a sign of

public spiritual thirst yearning for peace amid rampant political chaos and violence, such as terror acts, in the country? I reckon all these factors may feed into Sabyan's popularity.

Being at the height of its fame, Sabyan's celebrity status and popularity have driven a new wave of change for several reasons.

First, creativity is central to the group's prominence, which has established itself through social media like Instagram and YouTube. This creates direct and close communication with the audience. That a style of communication is particularly interactive and engaging, as most of the group's fans are millennials and savvy internet users. They prefer visual, direct, simple and dynamic means of communication. They cannot find this in traditional media, like newspapers or magazines.

Change unfolds thanks to a contextual comprehension, which is the result of creativity. *Shalawat* is going viral and becoming more prevalent as it is exposed through art, in this case music. Sabyan touches people's hearts and minds through art. Historically speaking, Islam has been accepted in the archipelago by way of art, a part of the local culture. It delivers Islamic campaigns (*dakwah*)



BY DONNY STOFIAN

casily into one's heart and mind, moving people into action and away from brain-washing mode.

While *shalawat* is read in Muslims' daily prayers and mostly heard at the mosque or Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*), it now penetrates malls, hotels, offices, petrol stations and other public areas. Sabyan touches people who cannot be touched by many preachers in the mosque.

Art can touch things that speech is unable to reach.

Second, Sabyan reflects an anti-mainstream approach. Going hand-in-hand with creativity, the group decides to run contrary to current trends. It is a sort of counternarrative. Instead of relying on

great record labels, like many other newcomers or senior musicians, Sabyan establishes its power through social media in its attempt to serve, satisfy and solidify its fan base. However, it has never left its traditional base, which is wedding parties.

Standing on its own feet, Sabyan enjoys more and more fans taking great interest in their *shalawat*. The group leader, Ayus, once admitted that they normally take one or two days off within a week owing to the group's frequent performances, either in the capital or across the country.

The success story of Sabyan reverses the biased media image that Islam is synonymous with terrorism. Sabyan presents a friendly, beautiful face of Islam through art. No one feels judged while listening to its *shalawat*, what is left is beauty and peace.

Third, Sabyan Gambus does not engage in sensation. Some artists ramp up their self-image through sensations, like scandalous affairs or drug addiction. In contrast, Sabyan's image is very natural.

The group's outstanding performance is more fascinating due to Nissa's hospitality and beauty. Her natural beauty invites an honest reaction from netizens and millennials. While many beautiful

girls and ladies are enchanted by her inner beauty, her stunning voice is also admired by great singers. As the icon of Sabyan, Nissa appears as a complete package of adorability.

Sabyan's natural magnetism and image are getting stronger due to their momentum and uniqueness. It gains momentum as it becomes the coolant for the country's recent burning political engine and terror acts across the nation. It is perfect timing. While politics has a polarizing nature, music easily unites people heedless of political preferences.

Meanwhile, the group's uniqueness lies in its musical genre of *shalawat*. While young people are typically more exposed to or prefer K-Pop, R&B and pop music, Sabyan introduces our society to *shalawat* even stronger in a popular manner, pretty much the same as Maher Zein had promoted *shalawat* to the world.

The public support and acceptance of Sabyan's *shalawat* and songs teaches us that an empty sky is much more promising than a crowded space when it comes to starting one's career and developing one's reputation.

— The writer is a lecturer at the Faculty of Cultural Studies at Universitas Widyadarmasurabaya.