

Edited by
Najib Kailani & Munirul Ikhwan

THE NARRATIVES OF RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM IN INDONESIA

Educational Background and Individual Agency



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INTRODUCTION

RADICALISM AND EXTREMISM IN INDONESIA: RELIGIOUS EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND AND INDIVIDUAL AGENCY

Munirul Ikhwan and Najib Kailani



Democratization in post-1998 Indonesia has opened wide doors for individual and association freedom. This development necessitates an intensification of contest between various powers which in turn displays the fragmentation of political and religious authority (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Salvatore and Eickelman 2004; Turner 2007). One of the implications of this new era is the emergence of religious-based radicalism and extremism triggered by jihadi *fatwās* (religious legal opinions) from religious leaders in the Middle East, communal conflicts involving the killing of Muslims, and the victory of global jihadism's influence, which under certain conditions can transform into jihadism and terrorism (ICG 2004). Indeed, not all acts of terrorism were inspired by new movements that emerged during the Reformation Era. The jihadi movement also emerged from the background of old

clandestine movements during the authoritarian New Order government (1966-1998). These old movements were led by religious figures with clear affiliations of Islamic educational institutions, such as Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir with the Al-Mukmin Islamic Boarding School of Ngruki in Sukoharjo, Central Java. This fact then raises the question about the extent to which Islamic religious institutions and education contribute to fostering radicalism and terrorism.

A survey conducted by Center for Islamic and Community Studies (PPIM) of UIN Syarif Hidayatullah in 2017 showed that a large number of students (58.50%) had radical religious views since they were in school or university (Saputra, Nisa, et al. 2018). However, the survey does not provide a clear answer from where and how these students possessed radical religious understanding. The PPIM's survey in the following year linked the radical views of students with the "religious views of their educators" - 56.90% of teachers had intolerant opinions, and 46.09% had radical opinions (PPIM 2018). Once again the survey does not provide a definite answer whether radicalism (and extremism) has a causal relationship with the background of Islamic religious education. Nevertheless, the numbers above indicate an alarming condition related to socio-religious life in Indonesia after the 1998 Reformation. The above survey also provides an explanation as to why radicalism and terrorism emerge and receive sympathy from a number of Indonesian Muslim communities: the educational "environment" has become the initial context. The survey above also partly helps us to answer why the Islamic State of

Iraq and Syria (ISIS) led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (2013-2019) manages to attract hundreds of Indonesians to join Syria and instills sympathy among a number of Muslim citizens in the country.

Several previous studies seem to emphasize the affiliation to religious education institutions to explain the emergence of radicalism and terrorism (ICG 2002). However, the relationship between the perpetrators of radicalism and terrorism and the background of Islamic religious education still leaves important questions. Martin van Bruinessen (2006), for example, questions the causal relationship of religious educational institutions with the religious tendencies of their alumni. He explores how the modern boarding school of Gontor could produce figures who had contrasting religious views, namely Nurcholis Madjid who was known as a liberal Muslim scholar, and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir who was known as the leader of Muslim jihadists. Mark Woodward et al. (2010) even rejects the causal relationship between religious education in Indonesia and the emergence of radicalism and extremism, which actually appears in public universities among students who experience "re-Islamization" -through informal channels- but detached from the tradition of religious learning in general.

Linking radicalism and extremism exclusively to religious educational institutions is an unfair generalization. Farish A. Noor, Yoginder Sikan, and Martin van Bruinessen (2009) are correct in their critique of studies that always link 'radicalism', 'militancy' and 'fundamentalism' to the exclusive

role of *madrasas* (Islamic schools) and *pondoks* (Islamic boarding-based schools). According to them, this viewpoint is very narrow because it seems to negate the other roles of *madrasas* or *pondoks* in providing affordable education and bridging religion and modernity. In other words, the exploration of the religious educational background of individuals exposed to radicalism and terrorism through biographical narratives tends to be neglected in existing studies, including the study by Noor, Sikan, and van Bruinessen above. Excessive attention to figures and networks of radical and extremist educational institutions will lead to the generalization of representation and deny individual agency. Meanwhile, ignoring their religious educational backgrounds by highlighting identity and structural problems also seems to be reductionist.

Radicalism and extremism in Muslim societies can be formed from the life process of the youth in claiming youthfulness. The youth are often seen as a social construction that has certain socio-psychological characteristics as well as certain habitus —ingrained habits that are produced by certain perceptual schemes and thoughts in responding to something (Bourdieu 1977, 18). They are often seen by elite groups as “the future of the nation”, but under certain conditions they are also seen as vulnerable to radicalism and fraud (Harrera 2006; Bayat 2010; Bayat and Herrera 2010). Religious processes during the youth period are important to see how adults’ religiosity is formed. In the Indonesian context, the social, economic and political situations as well as

the perceptions about a dysfunctional state contribute to the rejection (16.44%) of religious figures—who tend to have exclusive and radical religious views— against the idea of a nation-state (Kailani, Ikhwan, and Suhadi 2019). However, this rejection is not only motivated by radical and extreme religious ideology, but also as part of the efforts by a number of religious leaders outside the government to negotiate their position before the state (Hasan 2019).

Terror perpetrators with religious backgrounds who emerged during the Reformation Era and the interest of a number of Indonesian citizens to join ISIS still become puzzles for policymakers and researchers in the social, religious, political and educational fields. What context motivates them and makes them consolidate themselves to commit acts of terror and ‘treason’ has raised questions that require answers, which are not simple. Reading Abu Bakar Ba’asyir, for example, we need to look not only at his educational background, but also the context of his youth, as well as the political position he took against the state. Another aspect that constitutes our question is, of course, those former convicted terrorists who have experienced existentialist experiences.

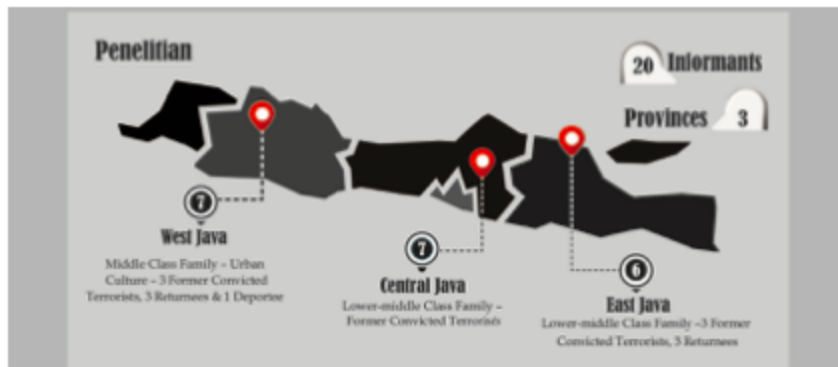
For this reason, this study attempts to look more closely at whether the background of religious education in schools and universities always has a causal relationship with the religious trends of their alumni or not by answering the following questions. Why are some Indonesian Muslims attracted to extremist ideologies and compelled to join radical organizations or ISIS? What are the educational backgrounds

of those former convicted terrorists, Indonesian jihadists who returned to their hometowns (hereinafter referred to as “returnees”), and ISIS deportees? To what extent have their educational backgrounds —both formal and informal— contributed to inculcating or facilitating the growth of extremist and jihadist ideologies within themselves? What are the sources of knowledge that become the important references for those former convicted terrorists, ISIS returnees and deportees? To what extent do their individual narratives and aspirations help orient their religious knowledge? And to what extent do women’s agencies play a role?

Methods and Approaches

Radicalism and extremism are complex issues that do not stand alone. To look more closely at how religious education contributes to shaping individuals, who have been exposed to radicalism, this study uses a qualitative in-depth interview method to explore the history and narratives of their lives. First of all, data collection is carried out through a desk study by exploring information available in media, relevant previous studies, and the results of investigation report (*Berita Acara Pemeriksaan*, BAP). This study involves 20 informants consisting of 13 (thirteen) former convicted terrorists, 6 (six) returnees, and 1 (one) deportee who come from the three provinces of research location: West Java, Central Java and East Java. To protect the privacy of the informants, this book does not mention the real names of those informants; instead, this book uses a pseudonym in its discussion.

West Java is chosen because of its association with an important base for the DI/TII (Darul Islam/ Indonesian Islamic Army) movement. Central Java, especially the Greater Solo in academic studies, is often associated with the center of radical and extremist Islamic movements. Central Java is the base (or the place of origin) of well-known terrorists who become the members of the Pesantren Ngruki and Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) networks. Meanwhile, as for East Java, although generally known as an enclave for the followers of a moderate Islamic organization, NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), a church bombing in 2018 and the presence of several terrorist cells such as Amrozi and friends show the importance of East Java's position as a basis of terrorist networks.



Map of Research and informants

This study employs a life narrative approach that delves into the life history of former convicted terrorists, returnees, and deportees by exploring their educational backgrounds, life aspirations, individual narratives, and their worldview. This study situates individuals (former convicted terrorists, ISIS returnees, and deportees) as agents who

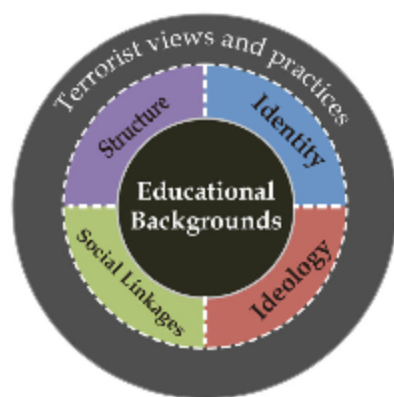
engage in violent acts and religion-based extremism within the framework of narrative theory and argument about the 'self', which is incomplete, fractured, and ambivalent. The theoretical debate over the idea of an incomplete 'self' has attracted the attention of many scholars. Anthropologist Katherine P. Ewing (1990) argues that an individual never actually experiences wholeness, but is always in a moment of ambivalence and inconsistency.

Ewing builds her argument from the study of James W. Fernandez (1986) about religious movements whose members selectively choose religious ideas or about situations to present an experience of stable wholeness even though its components are inconsistent. Ewing, on the other hand, argues that individuals often experience moments of inconsistency that occur due to life aspirations that are not in line with culture or due to a specific momentum that the individual responds to. This moment of inconsistency is always in the process of becoming, negotiating, or adapting to the situation that surrounds him. Ewing's view differs from the argument of symbolic anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz who positions symbols as representations of culture or characteristic concepts about self or individual.

Ewing's argument is further developed by Samuli Schielke (2009) with an articulation that specifically observes the experience of being Muslim. Schielke shows that being pious is not always linear with ethical self-improvement. Being pious is also shaped or influenced by one's life aspirations such as disposition to remain a good Muslim —by

following the instructions of the Qur'an and the Sunnah— on the one hand, but on the other hand, he is still an individual who falls in love, wants to prosper, etc. This momentum is what makes individuals always in a situation of inconsistency, ambivalence and fragmentation. In the context of this research, inconsistent, ambivalent and incomplete 'self' can only be portrayed through the life narratives of individuals who are involved in extremist violent ideology.

The narrative theory is very representative in shedding light on people who are involved in religion-based extremist movements. This theory seeks to understand and analyze how the violent ideology operates at the individual level and how 'individual agency' has a major influence on temporal and contextual acceptance. Several scholars have used this theory in studying vulnerable groups such as women and the radicals and extremists, as in the research by Samina Yasmeen (2007) on Laskar e-Taiba in Pakistan, and that of Minako Sakai and Samina Yasmeen (2016) about women's agency and womanhood.



Theory Illustration

Based on field findings, this study proposes a theoretical argument that educational backgrounds and religious knowledge significantly contribute to make individual exposed to radical and extremist ideologies and encourage him to engage in religion-based terror activities only when mediated by structural factors, identity, socialization or social linkages, and ideology. In other words, these four factors play a major role in shaping and directing certain religious understandings towards the radical religious ones and religion-based terrorist acts.

Religious Education Mediated by Other Factors

Based on data and an analysis of the informants' individual narratives which include family and educational backgrounds, social networks, and structural awareness, this study views that the religious educational background of former convicted terrorists, ISIS returnees, and deportees does not necessarily expose them to radical and terrorist ideologies without the mediation of driving factors. In this case, structural factors, identity, social networks, and ideology significantly orient an individual toward radical religious understanding, extremism, and religion-based violence.

Structural problems such as poverty, unemployment and underdevelopment also encourage individuals to look for ways of resistance that accommodate their aspirations. In the context of the death of leftist criticism, radicalism and extremism have become alternative ideologies of resistance for them (Hadiz 2020). Ideology, which generally plays a

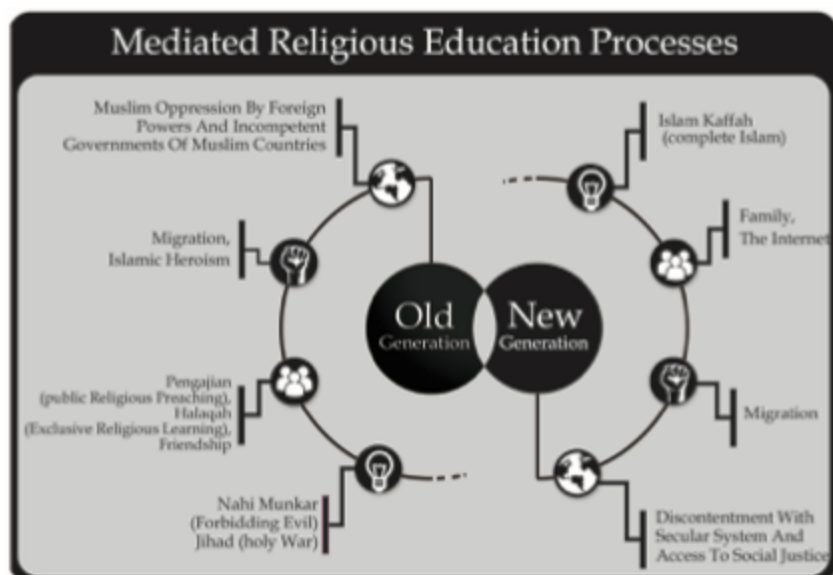
central role in the recruitment process for members of radical movements, is considered to only strengthen a framing that is built on disenchantment with social, political, and economic conditions. Experiences as victims of injustice, discrimination or marginalization that make individuals lack access to economic, social, educational, health and political resources also lead individuals to radical movements, especially among the youth who are still in the process of finding their identity. The youth who are in the transition phase of age growth are more prone to experiencing an identity crisis which causes them to experience what is known as cognitive opening, a micro-sociological process that brings them closer to the acceptance of new, more radical ideas (Wiktorowicz 2005).

In addition, moral shock is also one of the pathways leading to radical and extremist understandings. The factors above are able to make individuals become radical when they meet social linkages that provide them with religious education in the form of knowledge indoctrination. The styles of religious education they receive from formal and informal institutions are mutually interrelated, and expose them to radical and extremist understandings when mediated and supported by structural factors, identity, social linkages, and ideology.

It should be noted that the educational background referred to in this study does not only include formal education—such as schools, madrasas, universities and Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*)—but also informal education—such as public religious preachings (*pengajian*), exclusive religious

circles, social linkages, and the internet. Formal religious education actually does not directly encourage individuals to be exposed to radicalism and extremism if we take into account the structure of the curriculum of formal religious education in general. However, certain informal religious learning channels in schools, universities, or Islamic boarding schools also introduce students to radical Islamic movements and ideologies through individual teachers or lecturers, Rohis (Islamic religious activities in school), or students' religious proselytizing communities such as Campus Proselytizing Unit (*Lembaga Dakwah Kampus*, LDK).

The role of such institutions as schools or universities represented by teachers and lecturers is very significant in stemming or even fostering radicalization practices within the schools' environment. Indoctrination is sometimes also carried out by individual teachers in the teaching-learning processes or through extracurricular activities. The existence of Rohis as part of extracurricular activities in schools can be an entry point for the infiltration process of radical, intolerant, exclusive, and anti-human rights views. In certain contexts, even the anti-Pancasila views can be penetrated by radical groups through these informal channels. At the university level, the students' religious proselytizing communities can be important routes for the regeneration processes of some radical groups in campus. Through their regular meetings, radical activists carry out coaching that leads to indoctrination and regeneration.



However, we need to consider these former convicted terrorists, returnees and deportees not merely as objects of indoctrination of radical and extremist ideologies, but rather as agents. As agents, they have the individual capacity to act independently in determining their own life choices. It seems that Islamic religious education in formal institutions has not been fully capable of exploring students' religious aspirations, individual narratives, and agency. This condition encourages them to look for channels of informal religious education outside schools, universities, or Islamic boarding schools, which they deem fit their individual aspirations and narratives. In the midst of the identity crisis and the structural problems that they encounter, and the inability of formal religious education to capture their aspirations, a number of students are looking to informal education outside. It is in this context that radicalism and terrorism have developed more.

Among former convicted terrorists, for example, formal Islamic religious education is deemed incapable of accommodating their individual religious aspirations regarding, for example, heroism in Islam. They then look for outside sources of education until they find a narrative that “fits” their aspirations. Heroism in Islam is then translated as involvement in the actions of *amar makruf nahi munkar* (commanding right and forbidding wrong). Their involvement in these actions answers a question on the idea of ‘intact’ Islam (*kāffa*), which is not sufficient only to be ‘known’, but has also to be ‘put into practice’. This encourages them to become involved in raids on ‘immoral’ practices and places. At the next level, this heroism can also be realized in *jihād* (war). The justification for *jihād* is deduced from their understanding that the livelihood of the Prophet Muhammad after the age of 40 was not trading, but *jihād* or war.

Another aspect that needs to be considered in this research is the turning point of former convicted terrorists, returnees or deportees, namely the moment when they have stopped or decided to leave the circles of radicalism and terrorism. Individuals, as Katherine P. Ewing (1990) argues, actually never experience wholeness, but always face moments of ambivalence and inconsistency. What factors make radical individuals and terrorists quit their old ideology can be seen from the factor of the individual’s incompleteness. The above points need to be answered in order to unravel the tangled threads of religion-based radicalism and terrorism in Indonesia as considerations for the efforts to create best

practices for religious learning both in formal and informal educational institutions and in the wider community.

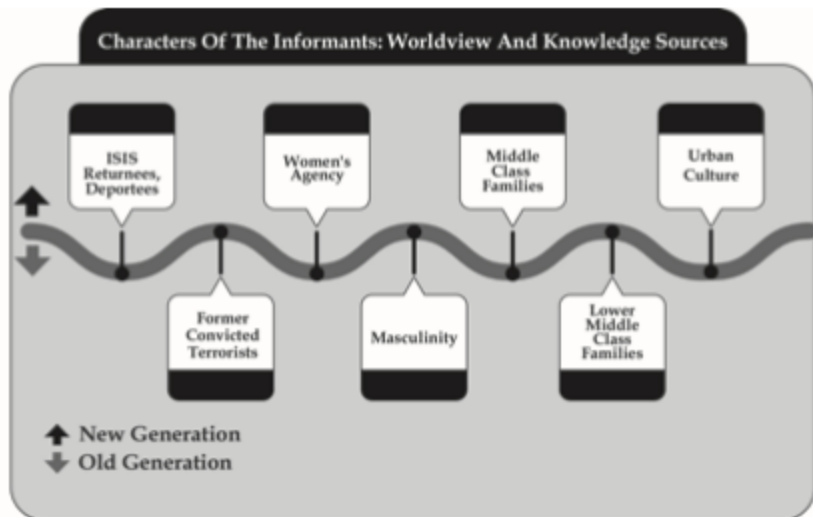
Generational Issues

This research finds two generations of individuals who have been exposed to radicalism and terrorism. This generational difference is seen from their worldviews. The old generation's worldview is much more shaped by their social linkages, while the new generation's is more influenced by open information related to their religious aspirations. The first generation is dominated by the informants from among those former convicted terrorists. In general, they come from the background of lower middle class families. They were exposed to terrorist ideologies through social linkages: public religious preachings, exclusive religious circles, and friendship. Middle and lower social class does not exclusively make individuals radical. Social linkages do shape their structural awareness and introduce them to radical and extremist ideologies. The distribution of this old generation is relatively prevalent, although Central Java appears to be a strong base for this generation. Although they have been released from prison, they seem to still hold strong extremist and radical ideologies. They still believe in a sacred mission regarding the necessity of establishing an Islamic state (caliphate), war against the infidels, and resistance against any elements of *tāghūt*.¹

1 *Tāghūt* is a term used to denote any objects of worship other than Allah. In the context of Islamic religious politics, this term is also used for tyrannical rulers who ignore or even oppose Allah's absolute power and law.

A teacher in a religious learning circle (*ḥalaqa*) is an important figure in orienting this old generation of extremists. Besides, reading books circulating within their social linkages also has a significant influence. Each book contains the ideology and interest of the author who wants the readers to believe in the same ideology. The variety of readings circulating in their social linkages includes *Tarbiyah Jihadiyah* (Jihād Education) by Abdullah Azzam, *Murtad Karena Hukum* (Apostate because of Law) by Abdul Qadir bin Abdul Aziz, *Mimpi Suci di Balik Jeruji* (Holy Dreams Behind Bars) by Ali Ghufron Nurhasyim Mukhlas At-Tenjuluny, *Sekuntum Rosela Pelipur Lara* (A Roselle the Healer of Sorrow) by Imam Samudra, *Senyum Terakhir Sang Mujahid* (The Final Smile of the Mujahid) by Amrozi bin Nurhasyim, *Al-Wala 'wa al-Bara'* (Loyalty and Disloyalty) by Muhammad Sa'id al-Qahthani, and books by Aman Abdurrahman such as *Seri Materi Tauhid* (Series on Tawḥīd Lecture) and *Akidah Para Rasul* (the Faith of the Apostles).

Meanwhile, the new generation is dominated by ISIS returnees and deportees. They generally come from wealthy families and urban culture. Family networks and the Internet are the important contexts that make them exposed to radicalism. Family becomes the first field for the spreading of radical propaganda. This can be seen from the fact that there is a kin relationship among those exposed to radicalism as happened in the context of West Java. When a family member is exposed to radicalism, he becomes an agent of radical groups in recruiting and indoctrinating other family members.



This new generation of radicalism obtains information about radical understandings and movements through the Internet. They tend to be more “independent” in learning extremist ideas that they access from the Internet. Their high curiosity led them to seek knowledge from the Internet sources, such as digital books (e-books) and videos containing radical contents on the Internet. Social media also becomes a channel that connects them with radical group networks. Currently, social media is indeed the most effective means for spreading radicalism. Extremist groups optimize the use of social media to incite and recruit young people to be exposed to radicalism and to engage in the acts of violent extremism, among others, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). ISIS is very active in using the Internet to spread radical propaganda and to recruit members. Ironically, videos on *bay'a* (pledge of allegiance) to the radical group of ISIS in Indonesia are indeed performed by the youth, school and university students.

Among the returnees and the deportees, family and internet-based religious information accommodates their individual aspirations in responding to structural and identity problems. ISIS is seen not only as a prospect for a better future, but also as an answer to structural problems in Indonesia. The transformation of a new identity through the consumption of religious information from families and the Internet encourages them to do something meaningful in their lives, namely migrating under the banner of ISIS. For them, religion is a direct return to the Qur'an, and the story of the Prophet Muhammad is an example of the triumph of Islamic politics. This position makes the construction of the knowledge they acquire has a romanticist and reformist character.

Between the Doctrines of *Ukhuwwa* and *Takfīr*

Chapter 2 examines the educational backgrounds of former convicted terrorists in Central Java. In this chapter, Najib Kailani, Munirul Ikhwan, and Aflahal Misbah highlight the doctrines of *ukhuwwa* and *takfīr* as the basis for the jihadi activism, which become a central discourse within their networks. There are some basic differences regarding the ideology held by each of JI, ISIS, and Tim Hisbah in arousing the spirit of *jihād*. JI builds its jihadi ideology on the doctrine of brotherhood among Muslims (*al-ukhuwwa al-Islāmiyya*), which also includes global Muslim brotherhood. There is a strong desire from former JI convicted terrorists to rise up and fight against countries that oppress Muslims in Muslim-