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Beyond Textual Literalism: Islamic Legal Interpretation and Religious Moderation among Nahdlatul Ulama Youth in Bone Regency

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Abstract

Radical religious narratives are often reinforced by literalist and decontextualized interpretations of Islamic texts that overlook their historical circumstances and the broader objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʻah*). This study examines how young Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) activists in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi, construct religious understandings of radicalism and promote contextual approaches to Islamic interpretation. Employing a qualitative socio-legal approach, the research draws on in-depth interviews with young NU leaders affiliated with NU autonomous organizations, observations of religious study sessions, and documentary analysis of official NU publications. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis, supported by normative examination of relevant principles of Islamic jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). The findings indicate that NU youth understand radicalism as a manifestation of religious extremism (*al-taṭarruf al-dīnī*), which may be associated with rigid textual interpretations, political frustration, and crises of religious identity. In response, they develop contextual interpretations of religious texts, particularly verses frequently invoked to legitimize violence. Their interpretive strategies draw on *uṣūl al-fiqh* principles, including *al-amr baʻda al-nahy li al-ibāḥah*, to distinguish context-dependent religious commands from universal normative obligations. This approach positions religious moderation not merely as an ideological commitment but also as a form of Islamic legal reasoning grounded in contextual interpretation and the pursuit of public welfare. This study contributes to Islamic legal studies and socio-legal scholarship by demonstrating how localized youth-led religious engagement can challenge extremist narratives and strengthen contextual approaches to Islamic legal understanding within Muslim communities in Indonesia.
Keyword: Islamic Legal Interpretation; Religious Moderation; Textual Literalism; Nahdlatul Ulama Youth; Islamic Legal Reasoning.

Abstrak

Narasi keagamaan radikal sering kali diperkuat oleh penafsiran teks-teks Islam secara harfiah dan di luar konteks, yang mengabaikan latar belakang historisnya serta tujuan-tujuan yang lebih luas dari hukum Islam (maqāṣid al-sharīʻah). Penelitian ini mengkaji bagaimana para aktivis muda Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) di Kabupaten Bone, Sulawesi Selatan, membangun pemahaman keagamaan tentang radikalisme dan mempromosikan pendekatan kontekstual dalam penafsiran Islam. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan sosiologis-hukum kualitatif, penelitian ini mengandalkan wawancara mendalam dengan para pemimpin muda NU yang

berafiliasi dengan organisasi otonom NU, pengamatan terhadap sesi-sesi studi keagamaan, serta analisis dokumenter terhadap publikasi resmi NU. Data dianalisis melalui analisis tematik, yang didukung oleh pemeriksaan normatif terhadap prinsip-prinsip hukum Islam (uṣūl al-fiqh) yang relevan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pemuda NU memahami radikalisme sebagai manifestasi dari ekstremisme agama (al-taṭarruf al-dīnī), yang mungkin terkait dengan penafsiran teks yang kaku, frustrasi politik, dan krisis identitas keagamaan. Sebagai tanggapan, mereka mengembangkan penafsiran kontekstual terhadap teks-teks agama, terutama ayat-ayat yang sering dikutip untuk melegitimasi kekerasan. Strategi penafsiran mereka mengacu pada prinsip-prinsip uṣūl al-fiqh, termasuk al-amr ba'da al-nahy li al-ibāḥah, untuk membedakan perintah agama yang bergantung pada konteks dari kewajiban normatif universal. Pendekatan ini memposisikan moderasi agama tidak hanya sebagai komitmen ideologis, tetapi juga sebagai bentuk penalaran hukum Islam yang berlandaskan pada penafsiran kontekstual dan upaya mewujudkan kesejahteraan umum. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi bagi studi hukum Islam dan kajian sosiologis-hukum dengan menunjukkan bagaimana keterlibatan keagamaan yang dipimpin oleh kaum muda dan berorientasi lokal dapat menantang narasi ekstremis serta memperkuat pendekatan kontekstual terhadap pemahaman hukum Islam di dalam komunitas Muslim di Indonesia.
Kata Kunci*:* Penafsiran Hukum Islam; Moderasi Keagamaan; Literalisme Tekstual; Pemuda Nahdlatul Ulama; Penalaran Hukum Islam.

Introduction

Islam as a universal religion (*rahmatan lil-'ālamīn*) encompasses comprehensive guidelines governing both humanity's relationship with the Creator (ḥabl min Allāh) and inter human social harmony (*ḥabl min al-nās*). The core mandate of Islamic teachings is to cultivate security, compassion, and peaceful coexistence rather than intimidation or division. However, the contemporary global and national socio-religious landscape is frequently marred by acts of violence and extremism commifled under the banner of Islam. This manifestation of extreme religious behavior, commonly categorized as radicalism, poses significant threats to social cohesion, constitutional governance, and the image of Islam itself. The emergence of radicalism is often catalyzed by rigid religious understanding, identity crises, and resistance to modern secular political order, transforming theological concepts into instruments of political struggle and social disruption.[1]

Historically, political and ideological radicalism within the Muslim world is not a modern phenomenon; its roots can be traced back to the early post-prophetic period following the demise of the Prophet Muhammad. Historical conflicts during the succession of the Rashidun Caliphs, culminating in the baflle between 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and Mu'awiyah ibn Abi Sufyan and the subsequent arbitration (taḥkīm), led to the formation of the Khawarij faction under Dhual-Khuwaysirah. In the modern era, particularly since the 20th century in the Middle East, Islamic radicalism has been re-ignited by Western political hegemony, nation-state borders, and perceived cultural erosion, giving rise to calls for an absolute return to fundamental Islamic sources (khiwah) through confrontational means.[2] In contemporary academic discourse, radicalism is often linked to terrorism, creating widespread Islamophobia

[1] A. Fauzie Nurdin, *Islam dan Perubahan Sosial* (Semarang: Reality Press, 2005), 16
[2] Ahmad Choirul Rofiq, "Awal Radikalisme Islam: Penyebab Kemunculan Khawarij," *Al-Tahrir* 14, no. 1 (2014): 229

and framing Islam as an inherently violent faith, despite similar radical movements existing across various non-Islamic religious traditions.[3]

Bone Regency, as one of the centers of Bugis civilization and culture in South Sulawesi, possesses a distinct socio-religious dynamic. Its society is known for steadfastly upholding the life philosophies of *Sipakatau* (mutual respect for one another as human beings), *Sipakalebbi* (mutual honoring), and *Sipakainge* (mutual reminding). It is upon these pillars of local wisdom that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has grown and exerted its influence. As the largest Islamic social organization in Indonesia, NU's presence in Bone Regency is not merely administrative; rather, it has become integrated into the local customs, traditions, and religious rituals of the community through the teachings of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) *An-Nahdliyah*.

Amidst the rapid currents of globalization and the evolution of digital technology, religious life in Bone Regency faces increasingly complex challenges. Easy access to information via social media and various digital platforms has facilitated the widespread dissemination of diverse religious ideas and doctrines—including ideologies of radicalism and extremism that operate under the guise of religion. In this context, the youth of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Bone Regency comprising students, university scholars, members of IPNU/IPPNU and the Ansor Youth Movement (Gerakan Pemuda Ansor), as well as students from various Islamic boarding schools (pondok pesantren) occupy a strategic position. At the same time, they face significant challenges in navigating the shifting dynamics of information and religious thought.

The development of radicalism in the digital era is no longer confined to direct, in-person activities within closed circles; it has permeated cyberspace through patterns of dissemination that are covert, structured, and widespread. The younger generation is particularly vulnerable to such influences, largely because they are in a phase of identity formation and exhibit high levels of engagement with digital technology. Radical propaganda is frequently packaged using religious symbols and slogans designed to evoke strong emotions, offering a dichotomous religious perspective and providing simplistic solutions to complex social and political issues. This dynamic tends to foster a form of religiosity that is textual, rigid, and exclusive in its approach to differences a trend that can gradually erode the values of tolerance, religious moderation, and commitment to the nation.

The primary challenge facing the younger generation of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Bone Regency is the conflict between the textual-scripturalist religious approach promoted by radical groups and the contextual-substantivist approach that underpins NU's own religious thought. Radical groups tend to interpret Quranic texts and hadith literally, stripping them of their historical contexts—such as the *asbab al-nuzul* (circumstances of revelation) and *asbab al-wurud* (circumstances of occurrence) while largely disregarding the methodological principles of *usul al-fiqh* (Islamic legal theory). Consequently, countering radicalism cannot be

[3] Abd A'la, *Melampaui Dialog Agama* (Jakarta: Kompas, 2002), 17

achieved solely through moral appeals or the presentation of reactive, defensive counter-narratives. A more fundamental strategy is required: an epistemological approach—specifically, the deconstruction of radicalism which serves as a critical endeavor to uncover, examine, and dismantle the intellectual constructs and religious interpretations that form the basis for the development of radical ideology.

Research Methods

This study utilizes a qualitative field research methodology combined with a normative socio-legal approach to explore the understanding and strategies of young Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) activists regarding religious radicalism in Bone Regency, South Sulawesi. Bone Regency was purposefully selected as the research location due to the noticeable increase in religious activities and organizational expansion among NU youth over recent years, making it an ideal micro-context for observing how moderation principles are articulated at the grassroots level. The research focuses on the subjective perspectives, interpretative frameworks, and educational practices adopted by young NU leaders within various autonomous bodies (Badan Otonom), such as GP Ansor, Fatayat, IPNU, IPPNW, and affiliated student movements.

Data for this study were gathered through three primary collection techniques: in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentary analysis. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants, including youth leaders, preachers, and cadres across NU autonomous organizations in Bone, selected using purposive sampling based on their involvement in religious education and social advocacy. Observational data were collected by aflending youth-led religious study circles (pengajian), seminars, and organizational training programs to observe how religious texts were read and discussed. Additionally, documentary data were retrieved from official statements, internal training manuals, policy briefs, and digital media publications issued by NU youth entities in the region.

The collected data were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis and content analysis techniques, integrated with a normative Islamic legal framework (uṣūl al-fiqh). The analytical process involved transcribing raw interview data, coding recurring conceptual themes (such as textualism, jiḥād, tolerance, and contextualization), and categorizing them according to the core research questions. Normative analysis was applied to evaluate the hermeneutical arguments used by informants when responding to radical interpretations of Quranic verses. To ensure data validity, triangulation of sources and methods was systematically conducted across interview narratives, observational logs, and official documentary materials.

Results and Discussion

1. Conceptualizing Radicalism

The conceptualization of radicalism among young NU activists in Bone Regency reflects a critical engagement with both Western academic discourse and classic Islamic legal traditions. In Western literature, terms such as "Islamic fundamentalism," "Islamic radicalism," "extremism," and "Islamism" are frequently deployed to denote the resurgence of Islamic militancy. As argued by John L. Esposito, many Western analytical categories carry political biases and oversimplify diverse Islamic movements into a monolithic threat.[4] Similarly, Fazlur Rahman observed that fundamentalism in modern times often represents an anti-Western reaction coupled with a literalist interpretation of scripture.[5]

In contrast, young NU activists in Bone frame radicalism through the traditional Islamic concept of al-taṭarruf ad-dīn, as articulated by Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Etymologically derived from ṭarf (edge or margin), al-taṭarruf refers to practicing religion from an extreme, marginal position far removed from the balanced center (wasat). Informants highlighted three fundamental vulnerabilities inherent in radical religious aflitudes:

a. They violate the natural social harmony accepted by the general public;
b. They are inherently unstable and short-lived;
c. They inevitably encroach upon and violate the fundamental rights of others.

Furthermore, the youth cadres emphasize that radicalism is not an intrinsic feature of Islam. As noted by Sartono Kartodirdjo, radicalism is functionally a protest movement employing religious symbols to express extreme rejection of existing social, economic, or political conditions. Crucially, non-Islamic traditions also exhibit radical manifestations—such as the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin by ultra-Orthodox extremists or historic sectarian violence within Christianity. Therefore, young NU activists in Bone actively counter the Western stigma of "Islamic terrorism," asserting that violent radicalism arises not from Islamic doctrine, but from a distorted, narrow interpretation of scripture.

2. Hermeneutical Deconstruction of Textual Radicalism

A central finding of this research is how young NU cadres in Bone engage with textual hermeneutics to neutralize violent interpretations of the Quran. Radical groups frequently utilize specific Quranic verses to justify violence, military aggression, and suicide bombings under the guise of jiḥād. A primary text exploited by radical ideologues is the "Sword Verse", Q.S. al-Tawbah (9) 5:

Translation

> "When the sacred months have passed, kill (in battle) the polytheists (who have been oppressing you) wherever you find them! Capture and besiege them, and keep watch

[4]John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 8.
[5]Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 136.

over them at every vantage point! If they repent, establish prayer, and pay zakat, grant them freedom. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful."

Taken strictly at face value without contextual grounding, this verse appears to command unconditional violence against non-Muslims. However, young NU activists in Bone deconstruct this literalism by applying classical principles of uṣūl al-fiqh (Islamic legal methodology). Specifically, they invoke the legal maxim

'*Al-amr ba'da al-nahy yabqā 'alā mā kāna qabla al-nahy li al-ibāḥah*' (A command issued following a prohibition signifies permissibility, not an absolute mandatory obligation).

Through this legal principle, the younger generation demonstrates that the command to wage war is contingent upon specific historical wartime circumstances, in which a peace treaty is being implemented by the opposing side. The verse does not establish a universal and permanent obligation to kill non-Muslims during times when societies are living in a state of coexistence. To reinforce this contextual reading, young NU leaders contrast textual aggression with explicit Quranic mandates advocating tolerance (tasāmuḥ), peaceful coexistence, and restraint, such as Q.S. al-Mā'idah (5) 77:

Translation:

"Say (O Prophet Muhammad), 'O People of the Book, do not go to extremes in your religion without justification. Do not follow the desires of those who went astray before you and led many astray, and who themselves have strayed from the straight path.'"

The youth activists also draw upon historical precedence (*sīrah nabawīyah*), highlighting the Prophet Muhammad's humane conduct during the Conquest of Mekka (*Fatḥ Makkah*), where general amnesty was declared without bloodshed and the drafting of the Constitution of Medina (*Mīthāq al-Madīnah*), which guaranteed pluralistic rights for Jewish and non-Muslim communities. By integrating textual analysis with historical context (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), young NU activists in Bone show that violent interpretations distort the true normative principles of Islamic law.

The deconstruction of radicalism can be understood as a critical approach aimed at examining and unraveling the mindsets, methods of religious interpretation, and the construction of absolute truth claims developed by radical groups. In the context of the younger generation of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Bone Regency, this process requires critical thinking skills rooted in the *Aswaja An-Nahdliyah* paradigm. This framework of thought is reflected in four core principles: Tawassuth (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), *Itidal* (justice and steadfastness), and *tasamuh* (tolerance toward differences). The application of these principles serves as a vital foundation for building a religious understanding that is inclusive, proportional, and capable of responding critically to radical ideologies.

The process of deconstructing radicalism must be accompanied by the contextualization of religious teachings an effort to interpret religious texts by taking into account the social and cultural dynamics of the local community. In the context of Bone Regency, this approach is realized through a dialogue between Islamic teachings and the socio-cultural realities that have evolved within the society. Moderate Islamic values must be harmoniously integrated with local wisdom as part of an effort to foster an inclusive and adaptive religious understanding. Through such a contextual perspective, the younger generation within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community no longer views religion merely as a rigid collection of doctrines and legal stipulations, but rather as a set of teachings that embody the mission of rahmatan lil 'alamin (a mercy to all creation). This understanding underscores the importance of upholding human values, respecting diversity, and preserving the unity and integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI).

3. Identifying Radical Characteristics and Socio-Political Factors

Amidst the overwhelming flow of information and the complex dynamics of modern religious life, the youth wing of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Bone Regency has taken a proactive stance to fortify the community's ideological defenses. Through vibrant discussion spaces—ranging from regular study circles to public forums involving academics, traditional leaders, and various youth organizations—young NU cadres have critically examined the phenomenon of religious extremism. Drawing from these exchanges of ideas and methodological analyses, they have successfully articulated six key characteristics that serve as hallmarks of radical religious movements:

a. Ideological Absolutism: Treating Islam as a rigid, finalized political ideology governing every minute detail of public administration and statecraft;
b. Literal Transposition: directly adopting middle eastern historical paflerns and texts without accommodating local socio-political realities or contextual conditions;
c. Puritanical Rejection: rejection of non-middle eastern cultures and local traditions (*urf*) under the accusation of religious innovation (*bid'ah*);
d. Counter Western Dogmatism: complete repudiation of external governance concepts (such as democracy, human rights, and constitutionalism) as un-Islamic;
e. Confrontational Stance: open ideological and physical conflict with broader society and legitimate state governance.
f. Instrumentalization of Text: selectively citing scriptural fragments to legitimize violent acts and enforce compliance.

As highlighted by Fauzi Nurdin, radicalism contradicts Islamic principles because its methodology is inherently revolutionary aflempting to overturn existing social values through coercion, violence, and extreme actions.[6] Nevertheless, young NU activists recognize that radicalism is rarely driven by theology alone. As observed by Azyumardi Azra and Alwi Shihab,

[6] Nurdin, *Islam dan Perubahan Sosial*, 18

geopolitical grievances, economic marginalization, local political dynamics, and resistance to unjust global policies significantly fuel radical recruitment.[7] Consequently, NU youth in Bone adopt a holistic approach: while theological deviations must be corrected through persuasive education, legitimate political and social grievances must be addressed through objective governance and civic engagement.

The younger generation within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) understands that the emergence of extremism is not the result of a single, isolated factor. Radicalism often develops from a combination of a superficial understanding of religion and dissatisfaction with socio-political conditions. Guided by this awareness, young NU cadres in Bone have moved away from relying on partial or simplistic counter-measures. Instead, they employ a comprehensive and integrated approach that balances religious and civic dimensions, tailoring interventions to the specific characteristics and needs of each aspect, while simultaneously fostering connections between them.

This perspective aligns with the views of Baharauddin, who asserts that radicalism stemming from distorted interpretations of religious teachings, such as a textualist mindset, the tendency to label others as infidels (*takfiri*), and the rejection of local wisdom and national consensus must be addressed through an educational and constructive approach. In this context, the younger generation within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community is pursuing an epistemological correction, positioning education as the primary instrument for rectifying misguided religious understandings. They maintain that errors in religious interpretation cannot be resolved through violence or unilateral judgment; rather, they require a process of religious learning that prioritizes dialogue, rational argumentation, and a persuasive approach.[8]

Thus, the younger generation of NU in Bone demonstrates rational and critical thinking by recognizing that the appeal of radical narratives does not stem solely from religious doctrine; rather, it is also driven by the ability of these narratives to exploit various social and political issues present within society. Economic inequality, social injustice, a lack of employment opportunities for the youth, and marginalization from the regional development process are among the issues frequently leveraged by extremist groups to foster the perception that the state system has failed to meet the needs and aspirations of the people.

By strengthening civic engagement, the younger generation within NU plays an active role in overseeing the implementation of public policy to ensure it aligns with the interests of the community. This role is manifested through the creation of spaces for citizen participation, acting as a bridge between the aspirations of grassroots groups and

[7] [9]Azyumardi Azra, *Pergolakan Politik Islam* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1996), 107; Alwi Shihab, *Islam Inklusif: Menuju Sikap Terbuka dalam Beragama* (Bandung: Mizan, 1998), 284
[8] Wawancara, baharuddin, kader Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Kab. Bone

policymakers, and advocating for the provision of fair and inclusive public services. The optimal functioning of democratic mechanisms—coupled with the state's presence in ensuring the equitable fulfillment of citizens' rights—can narrow the scope for the emergence of narratives of despair, which are often exploited by radical groups. Consequently, the active involvement of NU youth in civic life serves as a strategy to bolster public trust in state institutions while simultaneously diminishing the appeal of extremist ideologies.

The younger generation of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) in Bone Regency has introduced a comprehensive model of religious moderation oriented toward the public good. Their efforts go beyond strengthening the community's faith and preventing the spread of extremist ideologies—achieved through respectful and soothing religious dialogue—to also encompass the reinforcement of the socio-political order via active civic engagement. Consequently, the synergy between refining religious understanding and bolstering social justice serves as a strategic foundation for maintaining harmony, fostering peace, and strengthening both national resilience and the life of the nation.

Conclusion

Radicalism cannot be aflributed exclusively to any single religion or ideology, as extreme factions can emerge across diverse religious traditions. Within Islamic, the rise of radical movements stems primarily from rigid, textual, and fragmented interpretations of religious texts isolated from their historical contexts and the overarching objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*). This study demonstrates that young Nahdlatul Ulama activists in Bone Regency actively counter radicalism by deconstructing literalist interpretations of scriptural texts such as the Sword Verse using established principles of uṣūl al-fiqh to restore values of tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*) and moderation (*wasatīyah*). By conceptualizing radicalism as al-taṭarruf ad-dīn (*marginal extremism*), Nahdalatul Ulama youth provide a localized, context-sensitive defense against extremist ideologies. To effectively prevent the spread of religious extremism, collaborative efforts among Islamic organizations, community leaders, and educational institutions are essential to promote a contextual, balanced understanding of Islam as a blessing for all creation (*raḥmatan lil-ʿālamīn*).

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