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Unpacking Soft-Radicalism among Indonesian State Islamic University Students

Radicalism remains a significant threat to global security, manifesting in various forms, including violent and non-violent approaches. In Indonesia, soft-radicalism—a non-violent form of radicalism that subtly spreads extremist ideologies through digital platforms—poses a growing threat, particularly among Muslim students at State Islamic Universities (PTKIN). This study examines the experiences, views, and attitudes of Muslim students toward soft radicalism, focusing on their exposure to radical content on social media. Through interviews and focus group discussions, the study reveals that students frequently encounter provocative content that challenges state legitimacy and promotes alternative socio-political systems like the caliphate. While students display critical awareness of these narratives, the persistent exposure facilitated by social media algorithms underscores the need for "inclusive digital navigation skills" for them. The skills to wisely and critically navigate the digital world, filter out potentially damaging information and interact in positive, inclusive, and respectful ways of diversity.

Keywords: Soft-radicalism, State Islamic University students, digital platform, media literacy.

Radikalisme masih menjadi ancaman yang signifikan bagi keamanan global, yang bermanifestasi dalam berbagai bentuk, termasuk pendekatan kekerasan dan non-kekerasan. Di Indonesia, radikalisme lunak –bentuk radikalisme tanpa kekerasan yang secara halus menyebarkan ideologi ekstremis melalui platform digital— menjadi ancaman yang terus meningkat, terutama di kalangan mahasiswa Muslim di Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri (PTKIN). Penelitian ini mengkaji pengalaman, pandangan, dan sikap mahasiswa Muslim terhadap radikalisme lunak, dengan fokus pada paparan mereka terhadap konten radikal di media sosial. Melalui wawancara dan diskusi kelompok terfokus, penelitian ini mengungkapkan bahwa mahasiswa sering menemukan konten provokatif yang menantang legitimasi negara dan mempromosikan sistem sosial-politik alternatif seperti kekhalifahan. Meskipun para siswa menunjukkan kesadaran kritis terhadap narasi-narasi ini, paparan terus-menerus yang difasilitasi oleh algoritma media sosial menggarisbawahi pentingnya "keterampilan navigasi digital yang inklusif" bagi mereka. Sekumpulan keterampilan untuk menavigasi dunia digital dengan bijak dan kritis, menyaring informasi yang berpotensi merusak, dan berinteraksi dengan cara-cara yang positif, inklusif, dan menghormati keragaman.

Kata Kunci: Radikalisme lunak, mahasiswa Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Islam Negeri, platform digital, literasi media.

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Introduction

Radicalism has been a persistent and growing threat to global security, manifesting in various forms throughout history. In Indonesia itself, the danger of radicalism is very destructive. CNBC Indonesia released a series of suicide bombing cases that occurred between 2020 and 2021 as follows:

2000	Ledakan Bom serentak di 13 gereja di Indonesia (Pekanbaru, Medan, Jakarta, Mojekerto, Mataram dll)
2002	Bom Bali I
2003	Bom JW Marriot
2005	Bom Bali II
2009	Bom JW Marriot dan Ritz Calton
2016	Bom dan Baku Tembak Thamrin, Jakarta Pusat
2016	Bom Bunuh Diri di Solo (Depan SPKT Markas Polres Solo)
2018	Bom Bunuh Diri di Surabaya (Terjadi hampir serentak di 3 gereja di Surabaya)
2018	Bom Bunuh Diri di Mapolrestabes Surabaya
2018	Teror Bom di Polres Indramayu
2019	Bom Bunuh Diri di Sibolga, Sumatera Utara
2021	Bom Bunuh Diri Makassar (Gereja Katerdal)

Table 1. Table of suicide bombing cases in Indonesia, released by CNBC Indonesia on December 08, 2022[1]

The rise of a series of radicalism cases, as mentioned above, of course, cannot be separated from the factor of the radicalization movement that continues to infiltrate Indonesian society through the spread of ideas that are synonymous with violence, intolerance, and blind fanaticism.[2] Asrori sees at least five factors behind the emergence of this understanding. The first is global factors, where the situation in the Middle East is considered an inspiration to take up arms and acts of terror. Second, the factor of the spread of Wahabism, which glorifies conservative Arab-style Islamic culture. Third, internal factors from within Muslims themselves where there has been a deviation from religious norms. Fourth, economic hardship caused some former terrorists to return to their old networks because they were willing to supply their needs. Finally, the feeling of being a marginalized element of society can drive someone to get caught up in radical propaganda.[3] In addition to these five factors, Natalia highlights three main sociological factors in the emergence of radicalism in Indonesia: differences in religious doctrines that lead to inter-religious clashes, different interpretations of religious texts, and alienation and dissatisfaction with the socio-political conditions experienced.[4]

Apart from differences of opinion regarding the factors that trigger the emergence of radicalism, it is no less essential to be aware of the forms of radicalization processes that continue to change with the times. In this case, the Indonesian government has issued Presidential Regulation 7 of 2021 concerning the National Action Plan (NAP) for Preventing and Combating Violent Extremism that Leads to Terrorism. In the Presidential Regulation, three pillars are launched to deal with violent extremism, namely the prevention pillar, the law enforcement pillar, and the international partnership and cooperation pillar. In its development, extremism and radicalism movements do not always use violence but also non-violence. In brief, non-violent radicalism or "soft-radicalism" is an ideology that shows a group's disapproval of the socio-political order or system that is being implemented in a society, which is carried out peacefully without violence, without violating applicable norms and laws, to change the status quo into a new socio-political order or system following the ideals of the group.

[1] Aulia Mutiara Hatia Putri, "Jejak Suram Bom Bunuh Diri di RI, Lebih 10 Kali Terjadi," *CNBC Indonesia*, last modified December 8, 2022, accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.cnbcindonesia.com/research/20221208074326-128-394802/jejak-suram-bom-bunuh-diri-di-ri-lebih-10-kali-terjadi.

[2] Imran Tahir and Irwan Tahir, "Perkembangan Pemahaman Radikalisme Di Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmiah Administrasi Pemerintahan Daerah* 12, no. 2 (2020): 74–83.

[3] Ahmad Asrori, "RADIKALISME DI INDONESIA: Antara Historisitas Dan Antropisitas," *KALAM* 9, no. 2 (February 23, 2017): 253.

[4] Angga Natalia, "FAKTOR-FAKTOR PENYEBAB RADIKALISME DALAM BERAGAMA (Kajian Sosiologi Terhadap Pluralisme Agama Di Indonesia)," *Al-Adyan, Jurnal Studi Lintas Agama* 11, no. 1 (2016).

Both violent and non-violent radicalism have significant potential to create divisions in society and threaten state sovereignty. Unfortunately, this soft-radicalism escapes the attention of many.

The destructive threat of soft radicalism should be anticipated by conducting more comprehensive studies in various circles of society, especially among students. Students are easy targets for radical movements.[5] Idealism, critical thinking, innovation, a fighting spirit, and an ability to be easily influenced by new things are among the various factors behind students' ease of exposure to radical movements, which certainly have negative implications for national resilience.[6] Various studies on violence-based radicalism on campus, the narratives used, and the radicalization model implemented have attracted the attention of many circles. On the other hand, research on the characteristics of soft radicalism, the narratives used, and the radicalization model carried out is still lacking. Accordingly, this research is dedicated to examining soft-radicalism comprehensively, focusing on the object of Muslim student groups in State Islamic Universities (PTKIN).

Based on the above background, this study focuses on one major research problem: how are the experiences, views, and attitudes of Muslim students at PTKIN related to issues that have the potential to trigger soft-radicalism?

Radicalism and Indonesian Islamic Education Institutions at a Glance

Research on radicalism and Islamic Education Institutions in Indonesia mainly focuses on the phenomenon of radicalism within Islamic Education Institutions and the role of these institutions in counteracting radicalism. Research on the first topic, as conducted by Hidayat et al., is on the challenges and prospects of Islamic education institutions in the digital era. They concluded that the challenges of radicalism for Islamic education are enormous. This is because Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia are considered the headquarters of the understanding of Islamic fundamentalism, which later became the source of radical movements. Radical groups target Islamic educational institutions to spread their understanding. Therefore, Islamic educational institutions are faced with the challenge of preventing the spread of radicalism. Another critical point they concluded is that radicalism in academic institutions can develop from teachers to students, from institutional leaders to teachers, and from the community or students' parents to their teachers with various forms of intimidation.[7]

Fuad and Arifuddin's research on the influence of teachers in the Islamic religious education curriculum, students' vulnerability to the impact of radical ideologies, and the content of textbooks containing radical tendencies echo this. According to them, these three factors are potential pathways through which radicalism can seep into educational institutions. Furthermore, Hertanto et al. found that the intensity of radicalism did not differ significantly between students in public schools and madrasas. In addition, their research also highlights that radical ideologies have been internalized among youth, which can eventually lead to concrete

[5] Asriani, *Pola Penyebaran Dan Strategi Pencegahan Faham Radikalisme Di Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam* (Lampung: LP2M UIN Raden Intan Lampung, 2019); Saifuddin Saifuddin, "RADIKALISME ISLAM DI KALANGAN MAHASISWA (Sebuah Metamorfosa Baru)," *ANALISIS: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 11, no. 1 (2011); Muhammad Nur Yamin, Millah Hanifah, and Bakhtiar Bakhtiar, "RADIKALISME DI KALANGAN MAHASISWA," *SUPREMASI: Jurnal Pemikiran, Penelitian Ilmu-ilmu Sosial, Hukum dan Pengajarannya* 16, no. 1 (May 6, 2021): 25.

[6] Muhammad Hendri Nuryadi and Pipit Widiatmaka, "Terpaparnya Paham Radikalisme Pada Mahasiswa Dan Implikasinya Terhadap Ketahanan Nasional" 7, no. 3 (2022).

[7] Abas Hidayat, Siti Fatimah, and Didin Nurul Rosidin, "Challenges and Prospects of Islamic Education Institutions and Sustainability in The Digital Era," *Nazhruna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 5, no. 2 (April 3, 2022): 351–366.

actions that can endanger the nation's integrity. The study also indicated that the use of violence to achieve goals is considered normal by a large proportion of the young generation, with many expressing a willingness to join groups that fight for religion and truth, even by using violent means.[8] In the higher education environment, Ismail et al.'s research on radicalism in State Islamic Religious Universities (PTKIN) found that PTKIN in Aceh was relatively free from religious radicalism. This, in addition to the academic system built within PTKIN itself, is supported by Aceh's socio-cultural and political environment, which accommodates the aspirations of implementing Islamic law. Therefore, their research suggests the importance of strengthening academic systems and campus environments that are inclusive and moderate, as well as strengthening cooperation with student families and surrounding communities to prevent the potential threat of religious radicalism. Still, based on research on PTKI in Aceh, Hasan et al. concluded the importance of monitoring programs for off-campus student organizations. On a small scale, this monitoring program can be carried out by departments under the supervision of the faculty. The aim is to monitor off-campus student organizations' activities that could become a forum for spreading radical ideology.[9]

Meanwhile, there has been a lot of research on the role of Islamic education institutions in counteracting radicalism. Syamsul Arifin's study, for example, found that Islamic religious education has an essential role in addressing the issue of radicalism in Indonesia. By focusing on the role of cognitive and emotional factors that can pull individuals towards radicalism and terrorism, Arifin emphasizes the importance of using Living Values Education models (such as collaborative and reflective learning models that are integrated and experiential) as a framework to strengthen Islamic religious education and promote deradicalization.[10] With the same goal, Suparta proposed the importance of implementing a curriculum based on religious moderation in Islamic Education institutions. The curriculum includes learning that emphasizes moderate religious understanding, foreign language skills (especially Arabic and English), the ability to perform ijtihad (reasoning in Islamic law) and preach Islam, and *akhlaqul karimah*. [11] In the context of higher education, Mustakim et al. concluded that an educational approach promoting moderate Islamic values can be an effective strategy for preventing radicalism and violent extremism in Islamic higher education in Indonesia. They also found that the presentation of learning materials adopted from national journals, reputable international journals, websites, and official social media platforms for moderate Muslim intellectuals also contributed significantly to the prevention of hate speech and hoaxes in Islamic higher education.[12]

From the two relevant study topics above, it is clear that so far, studies on radicalism and Islamic Education have not touched on the

[8] Hertanto et al., "The Relationship between Different Social Factors and the Intensity of Student Radicalism," *Journal of Social Studies Education Research* 13, no. 2 (2022): 288–319.

[9] Effendi Hasan et al., "Radicalism Phenomenon at Higher Educational Institution in Aceh: Risks and Recommendation," in *Proceedings of the 1st Aceh Global Conference (AGC 2018)* (Presented at the Proceedings of the 1st Aceh Global Conference (AGC 2018), Banda Aceh, Indonesia: Atlantis Press, 2019), accessed January 21, 2024, https://www.atlantis-press.com/article/55911054.

[10] Syamsul Arifin, "Islamic Religious Education and Radicalism in Indonesia: Strategy of de-Radicalization through Strengthening the Living Values Education," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 6, no. 1 (June 1, 2016): 93.

[11] Suparta, "RELIGIOUS MODERATION-BASED CURRICULUM FOR URBAN MUSLIMS: A STUDY IN ISLAMIC UNIVERSITY OF INDONESIA ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOL," *Akademika: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 29, no. 1 (January 2024).

[12] Zaenal Mustakim, Fachri Ali, and Rahmat Kamal, "Empowering Students as Agents of Religious Moderation in Islamic Higher Education Institutions," *Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 7, no. 1 (June 30, 2021): 65–76.

phenomenon of soft radicalism, especially among Muslim students. This current article is dedicated to filling that gap.

Identifying Salafism, Fundamentalism, Radicalism, Terrorism, and Jihadism

Before discussing the phenomenon of soft-radicalism further, we should first understand the terms that are often associated with violent thoughts or actions in the name of religion, and how they are characterized. The author finds at least five terms that are frequently used: Salafist, fundamentalist, radical, terrorist, and jihadist. Salafi, the subject of Salafism itself, refers to an understanding of Islam that seeks to return to the pure and original teachings of Islam as practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and his companions, namely by returning to the Qur'an and Sunnah.[13] The Salafis usually have several characteristics, including emphasizing the importance of following the footsteps of the Salaf in understanding and practicing Islam, tending to reject new interpretations or innovations in religion that are considered incompatible with the understanding of the Salaf, having a tendency to maintain the purity of Islamic teachings without interference from local culture or traditions. People with Salafi understanding also tend to avoid engaging in political-practical activities and focus more on religious activities. They are taught to obey the ruler or government and avoid loyalty to political parties or organizations.[14]

Another school of thought that is close to Salafism is fundamentalism. Fundamentalism in the context of religion refers to a school or school of religious thought that tends to interpret religious texts in a literal, rigid, and non-contextual manner. This term first appeared in the Western world and refers to an understanding of religion that emphasizes the fundamental aspects of religious teachings. [15] People who adhere to this fundamentalism usually have several distinctive characteristics, including being strict, reluctant to compromise, intolerant of differences of opinion, steadfast, and even rejecting changes in religious understanding. In the context of religious doctrine, they tend to show high enthusiasm in applying religious doctrine in a *kaffah* manner and show absolute obedience to the teachings of their religion and beliefs. [16] While fundamentalism focuses more on the strict interpretation of religious texts and the absolute application of teachings, radicalism encourages more extreme actions in the struggle for beliefs, including the possibility of significant social or political change. Radicalism refers to extreme views or actions in championing a particular ideology or belief. In a religious context, radicalism often involves a harsh and intolerant interpretation of other views. Radicalism tends to emphasize drastic social or political change and can encourage extreme action, although it does not always involve violence. [17]

People who embrace radicalism generally show intolerance for different opinions or beliefs. They are often fanatical, justifying their views and blaming others without respecting differences. This attitude tends to be exclusive and closed, where they try to distinguish themselves from the general habit by emphasizing a different identity. In pursuit of their goals, they are also revolutionary, not

[13] Rasuki and Nur Rahmad Yahya Wijaya, "Pergeseran Ideologi Dan Gerakan Islam: Dari Salafi, Fundamentalisme Ke Islamisme," *Kariman: Jurnal Pendidikan Keislaman* 11, no. 1 (June 30, 2023): 59–78.

[14] Krismono Krismono, "SALAFISME DI INDONESIA : IDEOLOGI, POLITIK NEGARA, DAN FRAGMENTASI," *Millah* 16, no. 2 (January 14, 2017): 173–202.

[15] Rasuki and Nur Rahmad Yahya Wijaya, "Pergeseran Ideologi Dan Gerakan Islam."

[16] Ahdar Ahdar, "TINJAUAN KRITIS DAN MENYELURUH TERHADAP FUNDAMENTALISME DAN RADIKALISME ISLAM MASA KINI," *KURIOSITAS: Media Komunikasi Sosial dan Keagamaan* 10, no. 1 (May 24, 2017): 19–36.

[17] Alipah, "Mencegah Gerakan Radikalisme, Fundamentalisme, Terorisme Melalui Kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam" (April 30, 2023), accessed May 6, 2024, https://zenodo.org/record/8008671.

hesitating to use violence to impose their ideology, whether in the social, political, or religious realms. [18]

This radical attitude is often rooted in a sense of injustice due to socio-political and socio-historical phenomena. [19] These groups feel disadvantaged or marginalized, leading to anger directed at the system perceived as detrimental. Strong religious sentiment is also a driving factor, where religious issues easily provoke their emotions. Active involvement in radical groups, such as the Islamic Defenders Front or Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, further reinforces radical attitudes, where they do not accept differences and tend to impose their views on others.

In addition, radical believers often show unpreparedness in the face of social change and modernization. They reject modernism, secularization, and Westernization because they feel their fundamental religious values are threatened. The longing for traditional values and religious orthodoxy is another characteristic that makes them rigid and dogmatic. [20] Their actions are often unsympathetic and unlawful, and they use religion as a justification for their anarchist or violent actions.

In addition to anarchist acts, extreme radicalism often moves towards terrorism. Terrorism, which refers to the use of violence or the threat of violence to achieve specific political, ideological, or religious goals, is one of the manifestations of this radical understanding. People who embrace the notion of terrorism are characterized by the use of violence or the threat of violence to impose their will, be it for political, ideological, or religious purposes, without thinking about the impact on the victims. They try to create social fear to achieve more significant goals, often by ignoring humanitarian norms.[21] Although the perpetrators of terrorism can be fundamentalists or radicals, not all fundamentalists or radicals become terrorists. These terrorists are usually involved in actions that disturb society and often have a hidden political agenda behind their acts of violence.

Meanwhile, in the context of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), radicalism is also apparent through their tendency to use extreme methods in achieving political goals. The group often involves violence and terrorism as part of their strategy. In the context of Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), radicalism is reflected in the group's tendency to use extreme methods to achieve political goals, which often includes the use of violence and terrorism. Terrorism in the case of JI is manifested through actual violent practices, such as the Bali Bombing I attack, which is a clear example of their actions. The intersection of radicalism and terrorism in this group is the use of radical methods, including acts of violence, as a tool to realize their political ambitions, such as establishing an Islamic state. The fundamentalism embraced by JI becomes the ideological foundation for their radicalism and terrorism, making violence a legitimate means of achieving these goals. [22]

Besides terrorists, there is also another term for groups that use religious arguments for acts of violence, including terrorism, namely jihadists. They view jihad as a religious obligation that

[18] Alipah, "Mencegah Gerakan Radikalisme, Fundamentalisme, Terorisme Melalui Kurikulum Pendidikan Agama Islam."

[19] Sun C Ummah, "AKAR RADIKALISME ISLAM DI INDONESIA," *HUMANIKA* 12, no. 1 (September 1, 2012), accessed May 6, 2024, https://journal.uny.ac.id/index.php/humanika/article/view/3657.

[20] Tasman Tasman and Lazuardi A. Valencia, "Radikalisme Islam: Pemikiran Dan Gerakannya Di Indonesia Kontemporer," *Dakwah: Jurnal Kajian Dakwah dan Kemasyarakatan* 27, no. 2 (December 28, 2023): 230–243.

[21] Muhamad Ibtissam Han and Ismi Rahmayanti, "Salafi, Jihadis, Dan Terorisme Keagamaan; Ideologi, Fraksi Dan Interpretasi Keagamaan Jihadis," *Kordinat: Jurnal Komunikasi antar Perguruan Tinggi Agama Islam* 20, no. 1 (May 9, 2021): 1–22.

[22] Muhammad Hasan Syamsudin, "Titik Temu Fundamentalisme, Radikalisme, Dan Terorisme Gerakan Jamaah Islamiyah (JI) (Studi Kasus Bom Bali I)," *Politea* 4, no. 2 (November 25, 2021): 174.

must be carried out through acts of violence to achieve certain political or ideological goals. Jihadists often justify acts of terrorism as part of their jihad, although this is controversial and not recognized by the majority of Muslims. People who subscribe to Jihadist ideology tend to view jihad as a religious obligation that must be carried out through acts of violence to achieve certain political or ideological goals. They often use religious arguments to justify acts of violence, including terrorism, as part of their jihad. The hallmark of Jihadist ideology is a radical and militant view of interpreting religious teachings, in which they regard violence as a legitimate means to achieve their goals. This attitude highlights their readiness to commit violence without compromise, based on the belief that such actions are part of their holy struggle.[23]

Understanding Soft-radicalism

Soft-radicalism is a phenomenon that has received attention in recent years, as it provides unique challenges in understanding and addressing radicalization. Soft-radicalism refers to a non-violent and less extreme form of activism that aims to bring about social and political change. Soft-radicalism can be seen as a form of collective action that emerges under certain social and environmental conditions. Soft-radicalism often arises from motivating factors such as perceptions of injustice, discrimination, and marginalization. These factors create fertile ground for soft radicalism, as individuals and groups seek to challenge existing power structures and advocate for their rights and interests. The rapid development of the media[24] and, at the same time, the younger generation's dependence on the media[25] make this soft radicalism easier to penetrate the minds of the younger generation, which ultimately gives rise to soft terrorism. Soft-terrorism denotes the calculated deployment of social media and digital technologies by extremist organizations to propagate violent imagery, disseminate misinformation, convey propagandistic narratives, and amplify depictions of violence, all with the intent of instigating fear, garnering attention and shaping individuals' psychological states.

Unlike traditional forms of terrorism that rely on direct physical attacks, soft terrorism focuses on spreading fear, anxiety, and uncertainty among the population using methods such as social media posts, propaganda messages, violent videos, pictures, and fake news. By leveraging social media and mass media, terrorist groups aim to create a pervasive sense of insecurity without necessarily resorting to violence. This psychological manipulation can be highly effective, as it taps into the public's emotions and perceptions, often amplifying fear and anxiety even in regions not directly experiencing physical terrorism. Tulgas's study on soft-radicalism among Taiwanese concludes that the use of digital platforms to disseminate violent images and false information can instill fear and disrupt societal stability, even in areas not physically attacked. Furthermore, the combination of hard and soft terrorism tactics can accelerate the achievement of terrorist objectives and leave a lasting impact on public psychology, underscoring the significant role technology plays in modern terrorism strategies.[26]

The objective of soft-terrorism is to influence individuals who are not directly subjected to terrorist incidents by cultivating a pervasive

[23] Han and Rahmayanti, "Salafi, Jihadis, Dan Terorisme Keagamaan; Ideologi, Fraksi Dan Interpretasi Keagamaan Jihadis."

[24] Norman J. Medoff and Barbara K. Kaye, *Now Media: The Evolution of Electronic Communication: Formerly 'Electronic Media: Then, Now, Later,'* 4th ed. (Other titles: Electronic media Description: Fourth edition. | London; New York : Routledge, 2021.: Routledge, 2021), accessed August 16, 2024, https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781000380507.

[25] Breda Luthar and Maruša Pušnik, "Intimate Media and Technological Nature of Sociality," *New Media & Society* 23, no. 5 (May 2021): 1257–1277.

[26] Ahmet Yiğitalp Tulga, "Are Taiwanese Afraid of Terrorism? The Impacts of Hard and Soft Terrorism on Taiwanese," *Global: Jurnal Politik Internasional* 24, no. 1 (July 30, 2022), accessed May 8, 2024, https://scholarhub.ui.ac.id/global/vol24/iss1/4/.

sense of anxiety and trepidation through online content, thus captivating the interest of a global audience. This concept underscores the psychological ramifications and attention-seeking characteristics of terrorist endeavors executed via digital platforms, thereby differentiating it from conventional forms of terrorism that entail direct physical assaults. This is what radical groups like ISIS have done in Turkey, including the extensive utilization of social media platforms, notably Twitter, which serves to engage a broad audience while exhibiting their influence and capabilities. Also, the propagation of harrowing images and videos, including the incineration of two Turkish soldiers in December 2016, aims to capture the attention of the Turkish populace. What is more, digital channels during pivotal events, such as the 2014 invasion of Mosul, are employed to attract global scrutiny through the dissemination of violent rhetoric and misleading information.[27]

In this case, socialization plays an essential role in developing soft radicalism. Individuals who feel marginalized or discriminated against often seek out like-minded others to share their grievances and motivations for taking action. This tightly-knit group provides emotional support and a sense of belonging, strengthening their commitment to soft-radicalism. Through socialization, individuals are socialized into the soft-radicalism movement's beliefs, values, and tactics.[28]

In addition to the utilization of digital platforms for psychological manipulation, it is crucial to distinguish soft violence, which falls short of conventional physical violence. Soft violence, as defined in the study, encompasses actions that do not constitute criminally identifiable physical harm but still serve to imply and reinforce perceived power disparities. This form of violence often includes culturally nuanced, implicit cues and non-kinetic actions by groups like Violent Transnational Social Movements (VTSMs), aimed at undermining social cohesion and asserting dominance without direct physical impact. Thus, while soft terrorism focuses on creating fear and anxiety through digital means, soft violence operates through subtle cultural and social signals to maintain perceived superiority and authority.

Soft violence is closely linked to radicalism, mainly through its use by Violent Transnational Social Movements (VTSMs). These extremist groups employ soft violence to reinforce and perpetuate social structures that prioritize their perceptions, norms, and values over others. VTSMs distinguish themselves from other social movements by their exclusive identities and belief that certain aspects of life are threatened. Their form of soft violence is characterized by aggressive and masculine expressions aimed at those they deem less entitled. This connection illustrates how soft violence serves as a tool for radical groups to assert dominance and maintain their radical ideologies.[29]

Youth, especially Generation Z, are deeply entwined with the dynamics of soft violence due to their proficiency with digital technologies and social media. As digital natives, they are adept at creating and sharing online content, which can inadvertently normalize extremist sentiments if not critically scrutinized. Their role as active content creators means they frequently produce and disseminate various media, including memes and videos, which can contribute to spreading extremist ideologies. Additionally, the prevalence of echo chambers in online spaces exposes youth to the reinforcement of like-

[27] Ahmet Yiğitalp Tulga, "The Effects of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Soft-Terrorism Strategies on Turkish Public Opinion Using Google Data," *Journal of Global and Area Studies(JGA)* 7, no. 4 (December 31, 2023): 193–212.

[28] Angela Costabile et al., "Adolescent Psychological Well-being, Radicalism, and Activism: The Mediating Role of Social Disconnectedness and the Illegitimacy of the Authorities," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 31, no. 1 (March 2021): 25–33.

[29] Candyce Kelshall and Natalie Archutowski, "Concept of Soft Violence in Critical Security Studies," *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 4, no. 2 (November 23, 2021): 103–108.

minded views, potentially compressing extremist sentiments into actionable behaviors. This online engagement can lead to social radicalization, where youth express and solidify their identities within digital communities. [30] Furthermore, their ability to amplify both extremist and inclusive messages through their online presence contributes to the broader societal normalization of certain ideologies. Understanding these interactions is essential for developing effective interventions to address and prevent the spread of extremist views among young people.

Furthermore, the connection between soft violence and non-violent radicalization is evident in how both processes utilize subtle and indirect methods to achieve their goals. Non-violent radicalization involves adopting extreme ideologies and engaging in activism without physical violence, while soft violence employs cultural and social signals to assert dominance and reinforce power dynamics. This overlap illustrates how non-violent radicalized individuals may utilize soft violence tactics, such as implicit cues and subtle propaganda, to promote their radical views and influence societal perceptions. Both forms of radicalization thus contribute to the broader spectrum of extremism, emphasizing the importance of understanding these interactions to address and counteract radical ideologies effectively.

Non-violent radicalization represents a phase in which individuals or groups adopt extreme ideologies and advocate for societal change without resorting to violence. Based on the study "From Non-Violent to Violent Radicalization and Vice Versa: Three Case Studies from Indonesia," [31] non-violent radicalized individuals are characterized by their adherence to radical political or religious beliefs that challenge mainstream values. These individuals often engage in non-violent activism, such as political advocacy, social movements, or ideological dissemination, using rhetoric and propaganda to promote their views and recruit others. Their activities typically aim to achieve significant societal or political changes through non-violent means. These non-violent radicals frequently operate within specific social networks or community organizations that reinforce their extremist ideologies, providing a sense of belonging and validation. They often harbor deep dissatisfaction with existing political systems or societal norms, leading them to seek radical alternatives. Although they do not engage in violent actions themselves, they may rationalize or intellectualize the use of violence under certain conditions, reflecting a broader acceptance of violence as a potential tool for achieving their goals. This nuanced understanding of non-violent radicalization is crucial for recognizing how such ideologies can evolve into violent extremism. The study emphasizes the fluidity between non-violent and violent radicalization, demonstrating how individuals or groups can transition from advocating for change through non-violent means to adopting violent tactics. External pressures, internal reflections, or shifts in social dynamics can influence this transition. Understanding these characteristics and dynamics is essential for developing effective strategies to address radicalization and prevent the escalation from non-violent to violent extremism.

Whether soft-terrorism, soft-violent, non-violent radicalization, all show how terrorism continues to haunt us and must be dealt with seriously and comprehensively. People exposed to soft-terrorism show some identifiable traits through changes in behavior, thought patterns, and social interactions. One of the main signs is an abrupt change in attitudes and beliefs, such as increased social isolation or avoidance of

[30] Candyce Kelshall, "Soft Violence, Social Radicalisation, and Violent Transnational Social Movements (VTSMs)," *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare* 3, no. 3 (March 26, 2021): 146–153.

[31] Nava Nuraniyah and Solahudin, "From Non-Violent to Violent Radicalization and Vice Versa: Three Case Studies from Indonesia," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (January 8, 2024): 1–19.

activities that previously interested them. They may also begin to voice support for extremist views, either directly or implicitly. Their social media activity is often a strong indicator, with engagement in radical content or extremist propaganda, as well as interactions with groups or individuals who support violent ideologies. Changes in the way they speak can also be a signal, especially if they start using rhetoric that promotes hatred, intolerance, or even violence against certain groups.

Another sign to look out for is their involvement with extremist groups or individuals associated with radical ideologies. People affected by soft-terrorism may attend radical events or openly express support for terrorist organizations. They also often show a deep sense of dissatisfaction with social issues, feel alienated, or have grievances that extremist recruiters exploit. A sudden increase in religious or political fervor that does not match previous traits can also be an indication that they are moving towards extremism. In dealing with individuals with these traits, responding empathetically and focusing on prevention and intervention through professional help is critical.

To deal with this phenomenon, a comprehensive approach is required. One crucial step is developing a strategy to counter the spread of soft-terrorism. Countering soft-terrorism requires a comprehensive strategy, starting with developing a counter-narrative to counter extremist ideologies spread through propaganda. This counter-narrative should provide an alternative viewpoint that promotes tolerance, peace, and togetherness while refuting misinformation. It aims to reduce the appeal of extremist messages and show audiences that there are other ways to understand global issues without falling into radicalization. Counter-narratives also need to be effectively disseminated through the same social media and digital platforms used by extremist groups.

In addition, it is important to improve media literacy, especially among youth, so that they can identify and reject propaganda and fake news spread by terrorist groups. Media literacy can provide critical skills in evaluating information sources and encourage people to choose credible information rather than getting caught up in misleading content. Community engagement through open dialogue and strengthening social solidarity are essential to creating resilience against radicalization. By creating inclusive discussion spaces, resolving grievances within the community, and promoting diversity, the potential for radicalization can be reduced.

Psychological support and monitoring of online platforms are also crucial in dealing with soft-terrorism. Many individuals who are exposed to extremist propaganda may experience psychological distress, and they need counseling or therapy to cope with the impact. Monitoring online content and prompt reporting to relevant authorities for the removal of harmful material can also limit the spread of radical ideologies. In addition, international cooperation in sharing information and experiences is urgently needed to tackle the increasingly complex global terrorism network, ensuring that prevention efforts are carried out effectively worldwide. [32]

Muslim Students' Experience of Soft-Radicalism

After understanding in detail what soft-radicalism is and various other terms related to radicalism, as discussed earlier, in this sub-discussion, the author will describe how the experiences of Muslim students are linked to soft-radicalism. The data in this sub-discussion are obtained from interviews and FGDs with the head and representatives of the Muslim Student Activity Unit on two State Islamic campuses, UKPK *(Unit Kegiatan Pengembangan Keilmuan)* KH. Achmad Siddiq State Islamic University

[32] Ahmet Yiğitalp TULGA, "Hard and Soft Terrorism Concepts: The Case of ISIS," *PAKISTAN JOURNAL OF TERRORISM RESEARCH* 3, no. 2 (February 2022).

(UINKHAS) Jember and KORDISKA *(Korps Dakwah Islamiyyah Sunan Kalijaga)* Sunan Kalijaga State Islamic University (UINSUKA) Jogjakarta.



Fig. 1
Informants from students of KORDISKA UINSUKA Jogkarta after FGD



Fig. 2
FGD with students of UKPK UINKHAS Jember

As explained earlier, soft-radicalism is closely related to social media; the first thing that must be revealed here is how Muslim students use social media. The interviews and FGDs revealed that of the 15 people interviewed, all have social media accounts, mainly using Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and a few using Facebook. On average, they use social media for 4-6 hours daily. The themes they usually access on social media are self-improvement, psychology, soccer, UFC sports, funny posts, culinary, lifestyle, and others. Regarding their preference of the preachers on social media, most of them admit that several young preachers are preferred when looking for information or Islamic studies, such as Ustadz Adi Hidayat, Ning Imas, Ust. Hanan Attaki, Ustadzah Oki Setiawan, Ust. Fakhruddin Faiz, Abah Ghofur, and Tuan Guru Bajang Muhammad Zainul Majdi.

Concerning violent content on the homepage when surfing online, the students admitted that, when surfing online, especially on social media, they often found violent or provocative content that suddenly appeared on their homepage. One of them mentioned on YouTube and Instagram, for example, often find religious lectures that question why the Islamic state was not established and call for the establishment of the *Khilafah Islamiyyah*. These lectures are accompanied by the narrative that a country like Indonesia is not implementing Allah's laws, so it is illegitimate and must be changed. Such content often uses harsh intonations and emphasizes opposition to the democratic system.

In addition, on Facebook, around 2016, when the conflict in Syria was heating up, one of them said he often saw texts that explicitly invited people to join the war there. This narrative was accompanied by writings that rejected differences, such as inviting Muslims to abandon the *tahlilan* tradition, which was considered heresy. On YouTube, they also claimed to have seen violent videos affiliated with ISIS, rejecting democracy and visually displaying violence. Such videos are now more common on the Telegram platform, where they sometimes join groups accidentally or without even knowing who added them.

Provocative content also appears on other platforms such as Twitter and TikTok—for example, provocative videos from figures like Yazid Jawwas, who denigrates particular Islamic views. The social media algorithm seems to keep such content appearing even though I never liked or saved it. In addition, they also claimed to have seen posts debating the use of the imamate (turban) concerning Hinduism and debates among ustadz about music. These narratives are often delivered in a loud intonation, although there has been less violent debate recently compared to the previous period.

Views that appear in the form of provocative lectures, invitations to join violent conflicts, and debates that reject differences are part of the increasingly dangerous threat of soft-radicalism, especially for the younger generation. Soft-radicalism is a form of radicalism that is not necessarily manifested in physical violence but

rather through the subtle spread of extremist and intolerant narratives, which can occur through social media and digital content. Young people, who rely heavily on technology and social media, are the most vulnerable to exposure to this content, as platform algorithms often promote such material repeatedly, even if they did not intentionally search for or like the content.

The tendency of these narratives to question the legitimacy of the state and call for the establishment of a caliphate or to reject democracy and diversity has the potential to influence the thinking of young people, shaping their identity. Narratives wrapped in religious language, primarily through loud intonations and emphasis on rigid religious doctrines, can create a narrow worldview, reject pluralism, and reduce the concept of diversity. In this context, soft-radicalism not only serves as a foundation for further potential radicalization but also as a normalization of thought that breeds exclusivity and sectarianism among youth.

If not correctly addressed, soft-radicalism can gradually foster hatred in the minds of young people towards all forms of difference, whether religious, social, or political. They may not directly engage in acts of physical violence, but beliefs that lead to hatred of difference can build the foundation for more profound radicalization. Therefore, society and educational authorities must monitor and provide young people with a critical understanding of the dangers of these ideologies that infiltrate digital content to prevent them from falling into radical thinking.

Muslim Students' Perspectives Toward Soft-Radicalism

Based on focus group discussions (FGDs), Muslim students expressed a critical attitude towards intolerant messages spread in the media. They emphasized the importance of "*saring sebelum sharing*" (eng. filtering before sharing) as a form of moral and social responsibility in digital media. Intolerant messages are considered disturbing because they create tension in a multicultural and diverse society, not all of whom accept or agree with the content of the message. While these messages are not necessarily directly threatening, students recognize the potential for harm when received by those who cannot filter or re-verify the information they receive.

The Students also see intolerant messages as a threat to national unity, especially to the image of Indonesian Islam, which is known to be peaceful and inclusive. Most have no intention of re-distributing these messages and even find them strange and inappropriate. They also criticized the existence of people who deliberately create or disseminate video clips full of intolerant messages. These pieces are dangerous because they can trigger hatred and disrupt well-established social harmony.

From the perspective of soft-radicalism, Muslim students' views on intolerant messages indicate a critical awareness of the threat posed by soft-radicalism. Soft-radicalism operates through the indirect spread of intolerant or extremist ideas, often by infiltrating seemingly neutral or even religious messages. Students recognize that while such messages may not always pose a direct physical threat, they are still dangerous because they can infiltrate the younger generation's collective consciousness, especially those who lack critical or information-filtering skills.

Students' views that intolerant messages can undermine unity and the image of Indonesia's friendly Islam also indicate concerns about the long-term impact of soft-radicalism. These messages do not explicitly call for violence, but through persistent narratives, they can create polarization and spread seeds of hostility. The younger generation, active on social media and digital platforms, are the main targets of these narratives. Soft-radicalism utilizes video clips and viral messages to spread intolerance, which, if not counteracted, can erode the values of inclusivity and diversity that characterize Indonesia, especially among young people who tend to be more vulnerable to these seemingly radical yet "soft" narratives.

Social Media and Soft-radicalism among Muslim Students

The results of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD) show the real experiences of Muslim students in getting messages containing soft-radicalism on various digital platforms. On platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, these messages often appear in the form of religious lectures that question why an Islamic state is not established or why the Indonesian state does not implement Allah's laws, as well as calls to establish the *Khilafah Islamiyyah*. This is a form of soft-radicalism that uses religion as a tool to motivate social and political change subtly, but has the potential to polarize society.

On other platforms such as Facebook, content found in 2016, when the conflict in Syria was at its peak, openly invited people to join extremist groups. Soft-radicalism transitions into a more overt form by directing individuals to further action. Posts that reject plurality, such as calls to abandon *tahlilan* or reject differences in religious practice, reinforce the narrative of disapproval of diversity, which is a key feature of soft-radicalism. In addition, video content on YouTube, which features violence by ISIS groups and rejects democracy, further emphasizes the role of media in the spread of extreme ideologies. [33] Telegram has also become a more focused platform for the distribution of violent videos, [34] with some users feeling that they were included in groups without their knowledge, especially if their accounts were linked to religious content.

This phenomenon also occurs on Twitter and TikTok, where the platforms' algorithms automatically display extreme content without active engagement from users. Provocative videos and rhetoric that rejects democratic principles often appear out of the blue, suggesting that soft-radicalism uses social media algorithms to reach a broad audience without requiring active participation. [35] Violent narratives in 2021, as observed, are more explicit, but by 2023-2024, these discourses diminish, although harsh rhetoric, such as the use of the term heresy, remains.

These points from the FGDs are in line with the concept of soft-radicalism, which promotes social change through means that do not involve direct physical violence but use digital platforms to spread fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Soft-radicalism capitalizes on dissatisfaction with the existing system, triggering feelings of injustice and marginalization, which radical groups then exploit. In this context, digital platforms serve as the primary means of spreading these messages, utilizing social media algorithms to reach individuals without directly engaging them in extremist activity. [36] This reflects how soft-terrorism, which utilizes digital technologies, serves to create psychological fear without direct physical acts of violence.

The involvement of social media in soft-radicalism is clear, where individuals are indirectly socialized into radical ideologies

[33] Toby Hopp, Patrick Ferrucci, and Chris J Vargo, "Why Do People Share Ideologically Extreme, False, and Misleading Content on Social Media? A Self-Report and Trace Data–Based Analysis of Countermedia Content Dissemination on Facebook and Twitter," *Human Communication Research* 46, no. 4 (October 1, 2020): 357–384; Darajat Wibawa, "Media Construction and Radicalism," in *Proceedings of the International Conference on Media and Communication Studies (ICOMACS 2018)* (Presented at the International Conference on Media and Communication Studies(ICOMACS 2018), Bandung, Indonesia: Atlantis Press, 2018), accessed September 8, 2024, http://www.atlantis-press.com/php/paper-details.php?id=25900658.

[34] Samantha Walther and Andrew McCoy, "US Extremism on Telegram: Fueling Disinformation, Conspiracy Theories, and Accelerationism," *PERSPECTIVES ON TERRORISM* 15, no. 2 (April 2021).

[35] Mark Ledwich and Anna Zaitsev, "Algorithmic Extremism: Examining YouTube's Rabbit Hole of Radicalization," *First Monday* (February 26, 2020), accessed September 8, 2024, https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/10419.

[36] Lena Clever et al., "Behind Blue Skies: A Multimodal Automated Content Analysis of Islamic Extremist Propaganda on Instagram," *Social Media + Society* 9, no. 1 (January 2023): 205630512211504.

through seemingly innocuous digital interactions. In addition, provocative videos and hateful content reinforce social and political discontent narratives. In this case, social media algorithms act as catalysts, reinforcing soft-radicalism through constant exposure to similar content. The experiences of the Muslim students in this FGD show how soft-radicalism operates subtly, using seemingly mundane religious and political content that contains radical narratives that have the potential to lead to more profound radicalization.

As such, soft-radicalism is not only limited to textual lectures or appeals but also to the use of violent visuals and videos that influence public perception and emotions. This creates conditions where individuals who feel alienated or disillusioned with the status quo can be more easily exposed to radical ideologies through social media. Therefore, it is important to understand the interaction between social media and soft-radicalism and its impact on the younger generation, particularly in a psychological and social context.

The Urgency of Inclusive Digital Navigation Skills for Muslim Students

Inclusive Digital Navigation Skills refer to the skills young people need to wisely and critically navigate a digital world full of diverse, positive, and potentially damaging information. In this context, young people are taught to recognize how social media algorithms work, which often prioritize extreme or polarized content based on data collected from their online behavior. Therefore, they need to be aware of the potential dangers of exposure to content that leads to radicalization while learning to filter and verify the information received. Identifying biased or manipulative content and understanding the messages' social and political context is crucial to avoid being trapped in narrow or extreme ideologies.

In addition, inclusive digital navigation also includes skills in interacting positively and productively online. Amid rampant hate speech and divisive content, young people must be trained to maintain an inclusive attitude and respect for differences, both in communicating and participating on social media platforms. This means avoiding destructive debates or spreading content that could trigger social polarization. Instead, they should be able to contribute to constructive and positive discussions, choosing to introduce the values of tolerance, respect for diversity, and peace in every interaction. In addition, they need to be educated on the importance of digital ethics, i.e., taking responsibility for what is shared and how it may affect others.

On a broader level, inclusive digital navigation skills also broaden young people's horizons about a more diverse and complex world. By utilizing technology wisely, they can access multiple perspectives that enrich their understanding of social, political, and cultural issues. Through this approach, they learn to avoid exposure to radical content and build empathy and solidarity towards groups with different views or backgrounds. Thus, inclusive digital navigation is not just about preventing harm but also about utilizing digital media to build a more harmonious society, respect diversity, and support each other in global challenges.

Conclusion

The study highlights the pervasive nature of radicalism and its evolving forms, particularly soft-radicalism, which is increasingly prevalent among youth and university students in Indonesia. While traditional radicalism often involves violent and overt actions, soft-radicalism operates subtly, leveraging digital platforms and social media to disseminate extremist ideologies without direct physical violence. This indirect approach poses significant challenges as it can gradually shape perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors, leading to a normalization of intolerance and extremist thinking.

Muslim students, especially at Islamic universities, are frequently exposed to soft-radicalism through social media content, which can range from provocative religious lectures to calls for the establishment of alternative socio-political systems like the caliphate. Despite their critical stance towards such content, the persistent exposure facilitated by social media algorithms emphasizes the need for greater awareness and media literacy among youth. The normalization of these radical narratives poses a long-term threat to societal harmony, inclusivity, and national resilience.

Addressing soft-radicalism requires comprehensive efforts involving counter-narratives, media literacy programs, and open dialogue spaces that promote critical thinking and resilience against extremist ideologies. By understanding how soft-radicalism spreads and influences young minds, stakeholders in education, government, and communities can develop more effective strategies to prevent radicalization and protect the values of tolerance and diversity in Indonesia.

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