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Ideological Shifts and Emerging Radicalism: Understanding Identity Contradictions Among Indonesian Madrasah Aliyah Students in East Java

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between ideological beliefs, perceptions of national ideology, and tendencies toward violence among students at Islamic senior high schools (Madrasah Aliyah) across East Java, Indonesia. The research addresses growing concerns over youth exposure to radical ideologies within educational and digital environments. Using a cross-sectional quantitative design, data were collected through a validated questionnaire administered to 1,167 students selected by stratified random sampling from state and private schools across urban and rural areas. The instrument measured ideological orientation, religious tolerance, and justification of violence. Michel Foucault's theory of knowledge and power provides the analytical framework to understand how ideological discourses from families, educators, religious authorities, and online sources influence students' worldviews. The findings reveal a significant paradox: whereas 87.5 percent of students support Pancasila, the national ideology, and 12.5

percent favor religion-based ideologies such as the *khilafah*. Moreover, 21 percent endorse intolerant views that may lead to violent attitudes. This ideological ambivalence suggests a fragmentation of civic identity shaped by competing sources of influence. The study underscores the urgent need for integrative educational strategies involving parents, teachers, religious leaders, and digital literacy programs to prevent ideological radicalization and reinforce inclusive civic values among youth.

Keywords: Ideological orientations, Religious tolerance, Youth radicalization, Knowledge-power relations, Indonesia

A. Introduction

The global escalation of violent extremism has profoundly altered sociopolitical dynamics by deepening ideological divides, eroding social unity, and placing democratic institutions under significant strain (Hadiz, 2011). Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, countries including the United States, France, Iraq, and Indonesia have experienced heightened instances of violence driven by ideological convictions (Malik et al., 2014; Yeo & Rahmah, 2022). Events such as the 2002 Bali bombings in Indonesia exemplify how radical ideas, often cultivated within educational settings, religious communities, or digital platforms, can spread beyond national contexts and take root in diverse societies (Dodego & Witro, 2020). Thus, these developments emphasize the urgent need to explore how global ideological influences are absorbed by local youth, particularly within educational environments that are often assumed to foster moderation and civic responsibility (Sukarman et al., 2021).

In the Indonesian context, educational institutions serve as pivotal spaces for transmitting ideological values

(El-Soussi, 2025). As the most populous Muslim-majority nation in the world, Indonesia provides a distinctive context for examining how national identity and religious beliefs are shaped through formal education (Nakissa, 2020; Simandjuntak, 2021). Islamic senior high schools, known as *Madrasah Aliyah*, play an essential role in cultivating both civic awareness and religious understanding among students (Hidayat et al., 2020).

While previous research has predominantly concentrated on *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) or institutions identified with radical ideologies (Hassan & Mohamed, 2012; Whittaker, 2022), mainstream Islamic schools in East Java have received comparatively little scholarly attention (Soueid & Merhej, 2024). This lack of focus is particularly concerning given recent evidence that some students in these institutions simultaneously support both *Pancasila* (the foundational philosophical ideology of Indonesia) and the concept of a *khilafah* (Islamic ruler who manages both the political and religious affairs of an Islamic community) (Lewandowski et al., 2022). Such findings point to an ideological tension that calls into question long-standing assumptions regarding the consistency and moderation of beliefs within these educational environments.

This study addresses the critical gap by examining the ideological orientations and attitudes toward violence among students attending Madrasah Aliyah in East Java. It focuses on how students understand national ideology, religious pluralism, and the justification of violence, while also exploring whether seemingly contradictory ideological beliefs coexist within their cognitive frameworks. In addition, the study

investigates the role of various discursive influences, such as family values, school culture, peer interactions, and exposure to digital content, in shaping these perspectives. This analysis is particularly important in the context of East Java, a region with more than 4,000 Madrasah Aliyah according to the 2018 data from the Indonesian Bureau of Statistics (Badan Pusat Statistik, BPS), which constitutes a significant portion of the country's formal Islamic education system.

In order to investigate these issues, the study employed a cross-sectional quantitative research design (Redding, 2023). Data were collected from 1,167 students chosen using a stratified random sampling method. The sample included 843 students from state schools and 324 students from private schools, located in both urban and rural areas of East Java (McGarvey et al., 2016; Tambak & Sukenti, 2023). The research instrument consisted of a structured and validated questionnaire designed to assess students' ideological alignment, tolerance toward religious diversity, and their tendencies to justify acts of violence (Andersen et al., 2025). Demographic variables included gender (Dutta, 2022), socioeconomic background (Szabó et al., 2024), parental education levels (Bøe et al., 2021), and regional distribution (Dahlberg, 2015). The validity and reliability of the instrument were established through expert evaluations and a pilot study (Khanal & Chhetri, 2024). This rigorous methodological approach supports the credibility of the results and enhances the generalizability of the findings across various regional educational settings (Wouters et al., 2025).

Grounded in Michel Foucault's theory of knowledge and power relations (Feder, 2011), this article argues that

students' ideological positions are shaped through multiple and intersecting discursive influences. These include formal instruction at school (Maulani et al., 2022), teachings within the family (Aan, 1990), exposure to digital content (Yurisa et al., 2020), and broader sociopolitical narratives (Laura, 2023). The simultaneous endorsement of democratic pluralism (Kuyper, 2014), as represented by Pancasila, and theocratic ideals such as the khilafah reflects the complex and often conflicting ideological landscape these students must navigate. This study calls for comprehensive educational strategies beyond promoting formal civic values and extending into the informal and digital spaces where ideologies are also formed. Such strategies are essential for equipping students with the critical capacity to resist radical and intolerant belief systems.

B. Factors Contributing to Violent Tendencies Among Madrasah Aliyah Students

Researchers observed the activities of the social religious organizations that the respondents' parents attended. It is important to know the respondents' parents' social and religious organizations to obtain an overview of their profile, since their social and religious organizations can be a variable that influences respondents' religious activity tendencies and violence tendencies. The majority of social and religious organizations represented by the parents of the respondents were Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Of 1,137 respondents, 700 (60%) reported that their parents were affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama. In contrast, 286 respondents (25%) stated that their parents did not belong to any mass

organizations. Additionally, 92 respondents (8%) indicated that their parents joined other unidentified social or religious organizations, while 59 respondents' parents (5%) were from Muhammadiyah.

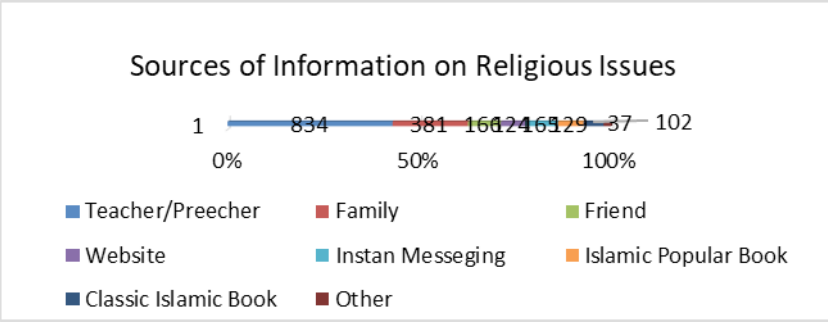


Figure 1. *Sources of reference to solve religious problems among respondents*

Respondents refer to many references apart from the family to solve their religious problems and questions. In Figure 1, respondents stated that "teachers" was the first source of reference in matters of religion, with 834 respondents (71%). Meanwhile, "the family" was second as the source of information on religious matters, with a total of 381 respondents (33%). "Friend" was the respondents' third most common source of information. In this section, the highlight is "classic Islamic book," the seventh with 102 respondents (9%).

C. The Value of Self-Expression in Understanding Religion within a Socio-Political Context

Another result from the survey is respondents' views about the existence of religion or groups other than Islam,

as shown in Figure 2. Notably, the data from Figure 2 shows that the average threat level to Muslims from Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism is classified as non-threatening, with an average score of 662. This result shows that respondents are not intimidated by the presence of five other religions alongside Islam in Indonesia. In other words, respondents are able to live together and blend with other faiths.

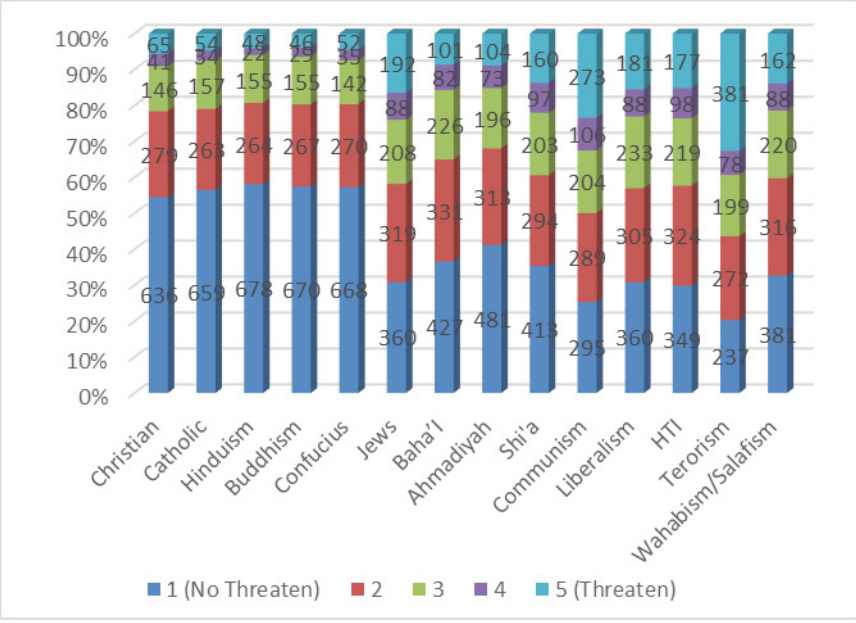


Figure 2. *Perceived Threat Levels of Various Groups Towards Muslims Among Madrasah Students*

Similarly, the threat level to Muslims from Figure 2 shows a positive result that is the majority of respondents assumed that terrorism is a threat to Muslims, with 381 respondents. This result is a good sign since the respondents' awareness of the existence of terrorism will keep them aware that terrorism

is a common enemy and must be fought. Fighting terrorism is not solely the duty of the state or some religious groups, such as NU and Muhammadiyah. However, it is a collaboration between the state, religious groups, and society.

In addition, the responses regarding the ideology of the Indonesian state reveal interesting insights. A total of 131 respondents strongly agree that the khilafah is not an appropriate ideology for Indonesia. Meanwhile, 256 respondents also agree that the khilafah is unsuitable for the country. However, 533 respondents expressed doubts about its inappropriateness. On the other hand, 166 respondents are inclined to support the implementation of the khilafah in Indonesia, and 81 respondents strongly agree with the implementation of the khilafah in Indonesia.

In addition, 512 (44%) out of 1,167 respondents stated that Pancasila is the correct ideology for Indonesia. While nearly 40 percent of respondents affirmed that Pancasila is Indonesia's most appropriate ideological foundation, a significant ideological contradiction emerges. A total of 146 students, representing 13 percent of the sample, expressed a preference for a religion-based ideology as more suitable for the Indonesian state. This divergence points to differing political perspectives and a deeper ideological complexity within the student population. Intersecting sociopolitical forces and layered educational exposures shape these conflicting views.

The coexistence of civic allegiance to Pancasila alongside support for religious governance models indicates that students are navigating a range of ideological messages. These messages stem from formal civic education, spiritual

teachings, family traditions, and digital content. Such ideological ambivalence reveals the limitations of existing pedagogical practices in fostering coherent civic identities. It highlights the need for more inclusive and dialogical educational models that engage with the plurality of discourses influencing youth perspectives and strengthen their capacity to reconcile competing ideological narratives.

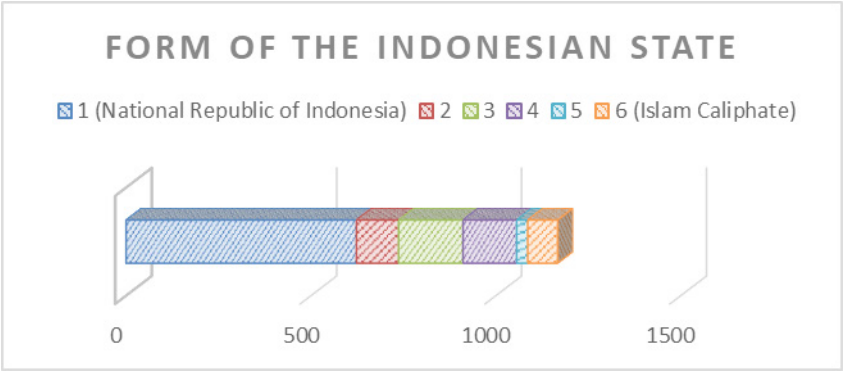


Figure 3. *Preference for State Models: Unitary Republic vs. Islamic Khilafah in Indonesia*

Figure 3 shows that 623 respondents (53%) strongly agree that Indonesia is a unitary state. On the other hand, 81 respondents (7%) were still against the view that the Indonesian state is a unitary state. Furthermore, the 81 respondents (7%) supported the Islamic Caliphate for the Indonesian state. Moreover, the survey about the tendencies of Pancasila as Indonesia's ideology shows that a total of 393 respondents (34%) stated that they "strongly agree" with Pancasila as Indonesia's ideology, and that all Muslims needed to defend Pancasila. Moreover, this result is in accordance

with positive tendencies toward the Indonesian ideology, with 431 (37%) respondents, while 67 respondents (6%) have the opposite view.

However, one of the statements dealing with the tendencies for Indonesian ideology, which is "every political movement to change the Pancasila with another ideology is an act of betrayal toward the country," showed unfavorable results where 492 respondents (42%) are doubtful about the statement. Besides, 215 respondents (18%) disagree with the statement, and 100 respondents (9%) strongly disagree. The last tendency in the survey is to consider Pancasila as an absolute ideology. Most of the respondents gave positive responses about the finalization of Pancasila as the state ideology, with only a few respondents who view Pancasila as a provisional ideology for Indonesia.

Furthermore, the following survey is about the tendencies of social issues such as human rights, gender, and tolerance between religious communities. Regarding the issue of human rights, a total of 494 respondents (42%) assume that human rights are substantially in line with Islamic teachings. Dealing with the issue of gender, 466 respondents (40%) agree that Islam allows women to become public leaders from the lowest level (social community) to the highest level (President). In addition, respondents' support for women's empowerment was manifested in the positive response toward the statement "women have a strategic role in making decisions within the family," with 430 respondents (37%).

The last issue is tolerance between religious communities. A total of 388 respondents (33%) stated that they "strongly agree" with the statement "Islam prohibits

various forms of violence even in the context of enforcing *amar ma'ruf nahi mungkar*. Similarly, 527 respondents (45%) have a positive response toward the issue of inter-religious tolerance, where Islam prohibits disturbing or destroying places of worship of other religions. This positive tolerance tendency is supported by the result of tolerance tendencies between religious communities, where the 381 respondents (33%) have a positive response toward the statement "people have to help members of other religions and provide places of worship for other religions if they do not have one".

Measures for assessing tendencies toward violence are as follows:

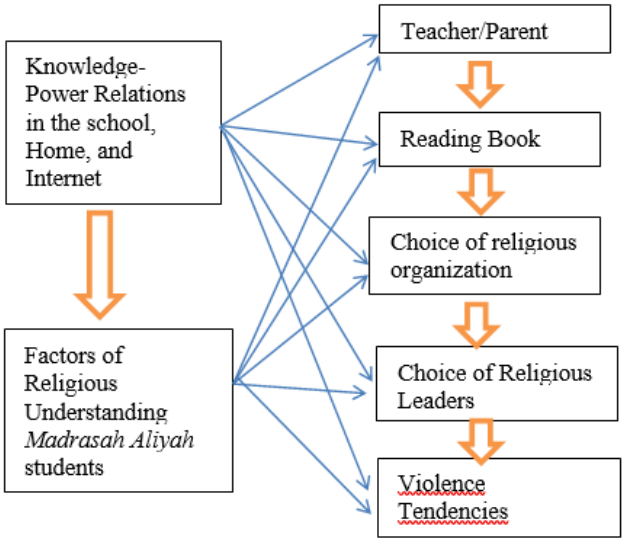


Figure 4. *Pathways Linking Knowledge and Violent Tendencies*

The point is shown visually in Figure 4. The route shown by the solid arrows on the right side of the picture

connects violence tendencies to reading material, religious leader selection, teacher/parent, and reading books. We propose that there could be reciprocal influences, as indicated by the boxes on the left side of the diagram, which could act as a conduit from a political to a cognitive viewpoint. Early surroundings and cognitive abilities are the first potential complicating influences. Consequently, religious thinking and behavior are influenced by cognitive and early-life contexts.

Evidence from this study indicates explicitly that parents' socio-political resources, parental socialization, teachers, books, the internet, and underlying cognitive processes all have an impact on students' relationship between religious understanding and cognitive functioning. Thus, it is likely that the interaction between teacher and parent, reading material, choice of religious organization, choice of religious leader, and violence tendencies are all muddled by unmeasured genetic characteristics related to religious knowledge and early life family circumstances.

Other tendencies are probably unmeasured as well. Specifically, Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between cognitive variables, religious knowledge, and violence choices. It is crucial to consider these elements when determining whether cognitive processes affect religious understanding through their effect on knowledge-power relations.

In summary, students are impacted by certain strategic elements of Islamic mentoring and guidance for every student at school, and develop into true "detectives" who monitor students in their everyday lives at home and in their families. Here, educators can use a daily journal or log that students are required to fill out with information about their daily

activities. By keeping track of every student's activity both inside and outside of the classroom, teachers will be able to teach Islam in a way that can stop violence before it starts.

D. Discussion

This research uncovered a multifaceted and, at times, contradictory landscape of ideological views among students enrolled in Madrasah Aliyah throughout East Java (Zhu & Lin, 2023). While the majority affirmed their commitment to Pancasila as the ideological cornerstone of the Indonesian nation (Maulani et al., 2022), a noteworthy portion of respondents also expressed affinity for religion-oriented political frameworks, such as the khilafah (Vredenburgh, 2024). These results indicate that students, even within Islamic schools traditionally regarded as moderate (Suryana & Hilmi, 2023), negotiate to intersect and sometimes conflicting ideological discourses that reflect broader tensions in their sociopolitical environments (Omidi et al., 2024).

Although support for Pancasila aligned with expectations, the concurrent affirmation of theocratic ideologies was unexpected (Lewandowski et al., 2022; Muqsith et al., 2022). The emergence of such contrasting positions calls into question the presumed ideological consistency among students attending institutions affiliated with mainstream religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah (Garner, 2017). This divergence points to a deepening ideological ambiguity that complicates prevailing narratives about moderate Islamic education's presumed stability and ideological safety.

The data reveal a notable pattern in which students internalize a plurality of ideological frameworks that often conflict with one another (Maulani et al., 2022). These frameworks range from narratives grounded in civic nationalism to those shaped by Islamic exclusivism (Babuna, 2004), as well as hybrid interpretations that draw elements from both (Voltmer et al., 2021). This emerging trend underscores how students are increasingly shaped by diverse and sometimes competing ideological influences, resulting in complex and, at times, contradictory worldviews.

The significance of this trend points to a broader pattern of ideological fragmentation among today's youth. It indicates that identity construction extends beyond traditional spaces such as schools and families, and is now deeply influenced by digital media, peer interactions, and informal religious teachings. The simultaneous presence of both nationalist and Islamist orientations within individual students reflects an ongoing process of ideological negotiation as they attempt to reconcile competing norms and value systems.

In relation to earlier studies, these findings align with existing scholarship highlighting the dynamic nature of youth religious identity and their susceptibility to radical influences in digital spaces (Nakissa, 2020; Whittaker, 2022). However, this study offers a distinct contribution by revealing that ideological inconsistencies are not limited to students in marginal or overtly radical settings. Instead, such contradictions are also present among students in educational environments typically regarded as ideologically stable, thereby challenging prevailing assumptions about the protective boundaries of mainstream religious institutions.

This ideological inconsistency mirrors broader societal transformations in Indonesia, where ongoing debates surrounding nationalism, religion, and democratic values reshape public discourse. The apparent disconnect between students' religious backgrounds and political orientations may signify a generational transition, shaped by the weakening of conventional authority structures and the rapid expansion of ideologically diverse content across digital platforms. In this context, the study sheds light on a broader social phenomenon in which young people actively construct new ideological identities within a complex and contested public landscape.

These emerging patterns may foreshadow a gradual erosion of civic cohesion if not meaningfully addressed. The simultaneous adherence to both nationalist principles and theocratic ideologies suggests a growing entrenchment of ideological ambiguity among youth. Without the development of cohesive and inclusive civic narratives, this duality may solidify, potentially undermining national initiatives aimed at preserving democratic norms and fostering interreligious harmony.

The findings of this study underscore the necessity of adopting more comprehensive and dialogical approaches to education. Rather than relying solely on traditional, didactic methods, civic and religious instruction should incorporate critical engagement that encourages students to examine and reconcile competing ideological beliefs. This endeavor requires collaborative efforts involving educators, religious authorities, families, and digital content creators to develop pedagogical frameworks that not only promote inclusive civic identity but also enhance students' capacity to resist ideological distortion and polarization.

This study gives rise to several important questions that merit deeper exploration. Which forms of digital media have the most significant impact on shaping students' ideological perspectives? In what ways do peer relationships and social dynamics influence, mediate, or reinforce these views? What instructional approaches are most effective in helping students navigate complex and sometimes conflicting ideological frameworks within educational contexts? These questions point to the need for sustained, interdisciplinary research that can offer more nuanced insights into the evolving processes of ideological development among youth.

In summary, the ideological tensions uncovered in this study must be recognized as a central concern within the broader landscape of religious and civic education in Indonesia today. These complexities are not peripheral but integral to understanding how young people engage with questions of identity, belief, and nationhood. Effectively addressing these challenges demands a deliberate synthesis of theoretical reflection and pragmatic educational approaches that equip students to participate in civic life with critical awareness, empathy, and a commitment to pluralism.

E. Conclusion

Symptoms of violence among Madrasah Aliyah students in East Java, Indonesia, are not in a worrying condition, as well as the respondents' threatening-alert view about the existence of other religions or groups towards the existence of Islam in Indonesia (Hidayat et al., 2020). Based on the survey (Surveys, 2021), Catholic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian Christianity are not threatening Islam according to respondents' views.

Thus, most respondents do not feel intimidated or are still comfortable living with other members of religious beliefs.

In addition, the result reveals that 512 out of 1,167 respondents identified Pancasila as the right ideology for Indonesia. On the other hand, a paradox was found with 146 respondents stating that religion-based ideology is appropriate for Indonesia. These results indicate that ideological seeds are against Pancasila as the state ideology.

Moreover, the data on the tendencies of religious figures shows the unexpected result from the researchers' prediction. Oki Setiana Dewi is the most popular religious figure among Madrasah Aliyah students. The second is KH. Ma'ruf Amin and Ustadz Abdul Shomad. This survey result on figure popularity is paradoxical since most respondents are students from the Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah organizations.

Additionally, another data is about the respondents' tendencies toward the issue of tolerance in several cases. Dealing with the ideology of Indonesia, a total of 131 respondents "strongly agree" that the khilafah was not an appropriate ideology for Indonesia, then 256 respondents "agree" while 533 respondents are "doubtful". On the other hand, 166 respondents tend to agree and support the implementation of the khilafah in Indonesia, and 81 respondents are "strongly agree" with the implementation of the khilafah.

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