

National Islam vs. Transnational Islam: The War of Interpretation and Its Impact in Indonesia

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Abstract

Indonesia as the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, faces a growing ideological contest between National Islam a locally rooted, moderate, and inclusive form of Islam and Transnational Islam, which promotes a more conservative and globalized religious orientation. This study explores the dynamics of this ideological struggle and its implications for Indonesia's socio-political stability and national security. Using a qualitative descriptive approach with library research methods, the paper analyzes the ideological differences, conflict patterns, and state as well as civil society interventions in managing tensions between these two streams. The findings show that Transnational Islam, represented by movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizbut Tahrir, and Salafi groups, often challenges Indonesia's foundational ideology of Pancasila and promotes exclusivism that threatens social cohesion. Meanwhile, National Islam embodied by Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah emphasizes moderation, cultural adaptation, and democracy, acting as a stabilizing force. The ideological clash manifests not only in theological debates but also in education, politics, and public discourse, sometimes escalating into violence and terrorism. Applying Social Identity Theory, Social Conflict Theory, and Coser's Functional Theory of Conflict, this study concludes that religious identity, power struggles, and group

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dynamics collectively shape the conflict landscape. Effective conflict intervention requires the synergy of state policies, moderate religious movements, and community-based dialogue to promote religious moderation and maintain national unity.

Keywords: National Islam, Transnational Islam, ideological conflict, religious moderation, Indonesia, social identity, national security

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world, faces complex dynamics in the development of Islam. One of the most striking dynamics is the ideological battle between two major currents in Islam: National Islam and Transnational Islam. National Islam is a form of Islam that has grown organically in Indonesia, blending with local culture and national values, and emphasizing moderation, tolerance, and nationalism (Azra, 2006). In contrast, Transnational Islam refers to Islamic movements connected to global networks such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabism, which bring a more conservative and textual interpretation of Islamic teachings (Fealy & White, 2004). The differences between the two are not only theological but also have a direct impact on political orientation, approaches to diversity, and the social role of Muslims in Indonesia.

Previous studies have generally focused on the historical and doctrinal aspects of each of these schools of thought. However, there is still a gap in studies that specifically analyze the real impact of this ideological struggle on the emergence of horizontal conflicts in society. There have not been many studies linking these religious ideological differences to increased socio-political tensions at the grassroots level, especially in the context of the spread of propaganda through social media and transnational da'wah (Fealy & White, 2004). In addition, there is still a lack of approaches that examine conflict intervention strategies, both by state and civil society actors, in responding to these dynamics.

This study aims to explore the fundamental differences between National Islam and Transnational Islam, as well as to examine how these two schools of thought influence Indonesia's political and social landscape, particularly in the context of increasing horizontal conflict. This study also aims to identify and analyze the strategic roles that state and civil society actors can play in mitigating, managing, and preventing religious conflicts through community-based conflict intervention approaches.

This issue has become increasingly urgent given the growing influence of transnational



Islamic groups that often challenge the country's fundamental values, such as Pancasila and diversity, and promote exclusive narratives that can undermine social cohesion (Mujani & Liddle, 2009). On the other hand, organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, as representatives of National Islam, seek to maintain a moderate and inclusive Indonesian Islamic identity that is compatible with democratic principles (Hefner, 2000). This tension is not only discursive in nature, but also has the potential to trigger friction between community groups, even to the point of religious-based violence.

Thus, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the ideological struggle between National Islam and Transnational Islam, as well as to evaluate how conflict intervention strategies can be implemented to maintain social harmony and the integrity of the Indonesian nation.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach because the issues in this study are holistic, complex, and meaningful, making it impossible to capture them using quantitative methods in such a social situation. According to Creswell (1994), "Qualitative research is a research method that emphasizes the search for meaning, understanding, concepts, characteristics, symptoms, symbols, and descriptions of a phenomenon; it is focused and multi-method, natural and holistic; it prioritizes quality, uses several methods, and is presented narratively." "On the other hand, it can be simply said that the purpose of qualitative research is to find answers to a phenomenon or question through the systematic application of scientific procedures using a qualitative approach" (Yusuf. 2016: 329).

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a library research method. This approach was chosen because it allows the author to examine ideological discourse in depth and understand the historical, social, and political context surrounding the struggle between National Islam and Transnational Islam in Indonesia. Through library research, this study examines academic literature, journal articles, research reports, and official documents from relevant religious organizations and state institutions.

This method is considered relevant because the issues discussed are conceptual in nature and require analysis of available secondary data. In addition, this approach is effective in explaining the relationship between religious ideology and socio-political dynamics without having to collect primary field data. Thus, the literature review method allows the author to map ideas, compare various arguments, and develop a sharp conceptual synthesis of horizontal conflicts



based on religious ideology.

The literature review also provides space for critical analysis of emerging narratives, including the influence of the media, transnational actors, and the state's response to these ideological challenges. The choice of this method is based on the view that qualitative studies have the power to explore the meaning behind social phenomena and gain a deep understanding of the dynamics of conflicts based on identity and belief (Lexy J. Moleong: 2017).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Dynamics of National Islam vs. Transnational Islam in Indonesia from the Perspective of Conflict Intervention

1) Background of the Conflict

The dynamics between national Islam and transnational Islam in Indonesia reflect ideological differences, da'wah strategies, and political orientations. National Islam, represented by organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, emphasizes local values, moderation, and cultural integration. Meanwhile, transnational Islam carries an exclusive global agenda, inspired by movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Hizbut Tahrir, and Salafi (Zainuddin, 2023).

2) Conflict Dynamics

a) National Islam: Organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah position themselves as proponents of moderate and nationalist Islam. They counter transnational movements by strengthening the discourse of Islam Nusantara and Islam Berkemajuan, which emphasize inclusivity (Irfan, 2020).

b) Transnational Islam: These groups tend to promote exclusivism and even extremism, which is seen as a challenge to social stability and national ideology, as they bring alternative political discourses such as the caliphate that contradict Pancasila (Zainuddin, 2023).

A number of conflicts between national Islam and transnational Islam in Indonesia reveal complex ideological, political, and social struggles. One prime example is the government's dissolution of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) due to its efforts to establish a caliphate, which is considered contrary to Pancasila and the principles of national Islam that uphold the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (Suryana, 2021).

Conflict also arises through the infiltration of transnational groups into mosques and assets belonging to NU and Muhammadiyah, causing internal friction within the Muslim community (Zaeni, A., 2023). Differences in approaches to da'wah further clarify the distance between the



two. The Salafi and Wahhabi movements, for example, reject the local values and culture of Islam Nusantara embraced by national Islam, and oppose the moderate and tolerant practices upheld in Indonesia (Rofiq, 2022). In addition, foreign funding and ideological support for transnational groups has raised concerns about national sovereignty (Suryana, 2021). These groups are also involved in violence and terrorism, which damages the image of Islam in the public eye and brings them into direct confrontation with state authorities (Yulianti, E., 2022).

In the world of education, transnational Islam is more aggressive in controlling educational institutions and religious organizations, while national Islam faces resource constraints (Zaeni, A., 2023). In the political sphere, the rejection of the Pancasila principles and the democratic system by transnational groups contrasts with national Islam's support for the state system, creating policy and ideological tensions (Zaeni, A., 2023).

These phenomena reflect that the conflict between these two currents of Islam is not only ideological, but also touches on the interrelated dimensions of social, political, economic, and security. Therefore, synergy between the state and national Islamic organizations is key to managing this conflict constructively. The phenomenon of transnational Islam in Indonesia shows the complex interconnection between global and local dynamics, which help shape the religious, social, and political life of Muslims in the country. This movement tends to advocate for the implementation of Islamic law as the basis of national law and to spread a conservative and puritanical understanding of religion. As a result, there has been a shift in social norms, including in terms of the appearance and lifestyle of Muslim communities (Hidayah, H. et al., 2024).

In addition, transnational Islamic movements strengthen the identity of Indonesian Muslims through cross-border networks that spread ideology and moral support. These efforts create global solidarity while encouraging social and political transformation based on Islamic ideology (Hidayah, H. et al., 2024). However, the influence of this movement can also cause friction, mainly because some groups reject the legitimacy of the nation state and instead promote the idea of a caliphate as an alternative political order. This kind of attitude triggers horizontal conflicts and opens up opportunities for involvement in international terrorism networks, which ultimately threaten national security (Putri, 2023).

3) Conflict Intervention

- **State and Authorities:** The Indonesian government has responded through policies of religious moderation and crackdowns on radical organizations, such as the dissolution of the Khilafatul Muslimin group. Security forces and religious institutions such as the



Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) are also involved in prevention and enforcement (Zainuddin, 2023).

- Religious Organizations: NU and Muhammadiyah strengthened moderate preaching and renewed Islamic narratives that were contextual to the Indonesian reality as a cultural strategy to face ideological challenges (Nasir, M., & Khusairi, A., 2024).
- Structural and Cultural Approaches: Interventions are carried out not only repressively but also educationally, such as religious literacy, interfaith dialogue, and strengthening local da'wah networks (Syafuruddin, A., 2022).

4) Impact of Conflict Intervention

Policies and interventions by the state and national Islamic organizations have proven effective in curbing the activities of transnational extremist groups, although challenges remain due to the adoption of new strategies. Religious moderation has now become a key instrument in maintaining social stability and preventing religious conflicts (Zainuddin, 2023).

Terrorism as a Reflection of Ideological Conflict

Various incidents of terrorism in Indonesia are a clear reflection of the impact of ideological conflict and the influence of Islamic transnationalism. Acts of terrorism have occurred since 1981 and have developed into various forms of attacks, such as the use of homemade bombs in major cities and attacks on security forces and state officials (Hasibuan, 2023).

Indonesia's involvement in global conflicts, particularly the Syrian conflict, has also influenced the domestic terrorism landscape. The year 2014 saw a decline in terrorist acts as many Indonesian fighters chose to wage jihad in Syria. However, restrictions on access to conflict areas prevented them from leaving the country and instead encouraged terrorists to carry out their actions domestically, causing a spike in cases in the following years (Suryani, 2018).

Transnational terrorist networks such as ISIS and local groups that adopt similar ideologies contribute to spreading violence and creating fear that disrupts the stability of the country (Hasibuan, 2023). In short, conflicts rooted in transnational Islamic movements in Indonesia are not limited to religious and cultural aspects, but also touch on the political and security spheres. Ideologies that reject the existence of nation states and promote the establishment of a caliphate are triggers for social tension and acts of terrorism. Terrorist incidents that have occurred over the past few decades show a strong link between global and local dynamics in shaping patterns of ideology based violence in Indonesia.



Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner)

The conflict between nationalist and transnationalist Islamic groups in Indonesia can be explained through the social identity approach. According to this theory, individuals form their identities based on their affiliation with certain social groups. In this case, national Islamic groups such as NU and Muhammadiyah, as well as transnational Islamic groups such as Hizbut Tahrir, Salafi, and Wahhabi, have different and strong collective identities, characterized by distinctive values, norms, and emotions.

This theory also highlights the tendency to divide society into in-groups and out-groups. This encourages internal solidarity and a more positive assessment of one's own group, as well as a negative view of other groups. In this context, national Islam promotes inclusiveness and moderation, while transnational Islam tends to promote exclusivism and a cross-border agenda. This competition for identity encourages both sides to strengthen their influence in various sectors, such as da'wah, education, and politics.

Social Conflict Theory

The social conflict perspective emphasizes that conflict arises from the struggle for power and resources within the structure of society. In the dynamic between national Islam and transnational Islam, conflict is not only a matter of ideology, but also relates to social, political, and economic influences, including control over strategic institutions such as mosques, schools, and funding networks.

Dominant groups in the social structure tend to maintain their position by suppressing groups that are considered a threat. This can be seen in the government's actions against organizations deemed extreme, as well as its support for national Islamic groups that are seen as capable of maintaining stability. The impact of this conflict also includes social changes, both in norms and in state policies towards religious groups.

Lewis A. Coser's Theory of Conflict

Coser views conflict as not always destructive, but rather as something that can play a positive role in strengthening the internal cohesion of a group and affirming the boundaries of collective identity. In the context of the debate between national Islam and transnational Islam, the conflict that occurred actually encouraged each side to strengthen their narratives and ideological positions. For example, pressure from transnational groups triggered a response from NU and Muhammadiyah by reaffirming the concepts of Islam Nusantara and Islam Berkemajuan.



In addition, efforts to reduce conflict are carried out through various mediation mechanisms, such as government intervention, dialogue between religious organizations, and the promotion of religious moderation. Conflict can also be realistic based on the competition for resources and non-realistic, rooted in ideological differences. Both contribute to the social dynamics of Muslim communities in Indonesia.

SYNTHESIS CONCLUSION

- Social Identity Theory emphasizes the importance of group identity in shaping conflict and solidarity, which encourages discrimination and competition between groups.
- Social Conflict Theory underscores that the struggle for power and resources is the main cause of conflict, with the state playing a role in maintaining dominance through repression of those considered disruptive.
- Coser's Conflict Theory assesses that conflict has social functions, such as strengthening internal solidarity, encouraging social innovation, and clarifying group identity boundaries.

These three theories complement each other in explaining the complexity of the conflict between national Islam and transnational Islam in Indonesia, which includes issues of identity, the struggle for power, and the internal and external dynamics of groups, with state intervention and the active role of religious organizations as part of efforts to maintain national integration and stability.

CONCLUSION

Transnational Islamic movements in Indonesia are a cross-border dynamic that has a significant impact on social, political, and religious aspects. These movements bring ideologies that differ from local or national Islam, often being exclusive and rejecting concepts of the nation state such as Pancasila, with the ultimate goal of establishing a caliphate system. The influence of this movement is evident in various sectors such as education, politics, and missionary activities, and in a number of cases has been linked to acts of violence or terrorism that can disrupt national stability. Factors such as migration, advances in information technology, financial support from abroad, and the tide of globalization have contributed to the spread and influence of this movement. In addition to creating a more global and socially and politically active Muslim identity, this movement also causes tension with deeply rooted local and national values. In response, the state, together with moderate Islamic organizations, has taken various measures, such as promoting religious moderation, holding dialogues, and enforcing the law against extremist



groups. Deradicalization policies and the dissolution of organizations deemed radical are part of efforts to maintain national unity and social stability. Overall, the transnational Islamic movement in Indonesia is a complex phenomenon that influences domestic religious and political dynamics, and requires a collaborative approach from various elements to manage potential conflicts and strengthen social harmony.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Further research is recommended to explore in greater depth the interaction between national and transnational Islamic groups, particularly their influence on prejudice and intolerance. It is also important to evaluate government policies and the role of moderate Islamic organizations in curbing extremism. In addition, the role of media and technology in spreading transnational ideologies and their impact on socio-political stability need to be examined. Comparative studies between countries in Southeast Asia can enrich our understanding of the variations in local influences and responses. Research also needs to examine the consequences of anti-nation ideology and develop identity-based dialogue models to promote tolerance and sustainable conflict resolution.

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