# INDONESIA'S MODERATE MUSLIM WEBSITES AND THEIR FIGHT AGAINST ONLINE ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

A'an Suryana

# TRENDS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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# FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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# Indonesia's Moderate Muslim Websites and Their Fight against Online Islamic Extremism

By A'an Suryana

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- It is worrying that, in many cases in Indonesia, exposure to the Internet, especially social media, increases knowledge seekers' religious radicalism. This exposure has not only resulted in increased radicalism but also compelled some individuals to turn to violence in the name of Islam.
- Moderate online media institutions have not been effective in counteracting the online dissemination of extremist religious content. The content disseminated by radical websites is still being popularly consumed, albeit those moderate Muslim websites have put in considerable effort to counteract radical narratives.
- This report argues that this ineffectiveness is due to structural and cultural challenges. The structural challenges include limited funding and sensitivity towards the policy of umbrella organizations. Cultural challenges include passiveness in corporate culture, alongside the "ivory tower" traditions among journalists which leaves them out of touch with Muslim communities.
- The government of Indonesia can assist moderate Muslim media websites in fighting radical narratives, for example, through better funding to them.

# Indonesia's Moderate Muslim Websites & Their Fight against Online Islamic Extremism

By A'an Suryana[1]

## INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian Anti-Terrorism Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, or BNPT) argues that Islamist terrorists had previously focused on "hard power", such as bombings of Western-related targets, or suicide bombings, to attain their objectives. But in recent years, due to state repression and dwindling public support, terrorists have abandoned this strategy, and now resort instead to "soft power".[2] Soft power here refers to the use of non-violent means to achieve one's interests. Terrorists now use the Internet, including social media, or join community organizations which they utilize later on, to gain support for their cause. Be that as it may, the Internet has become a strategic tool not only for terrorists but for

[2] Penelitian dan Pengembangan Media Indonesia (Litbang Media Indonesia), "BNPT, Jelang Pergantian Kepala dan Tantangan Terorisme di Masa Depan", *Media Indonesia.com*, 1 April 2023, https://epaper.mediaindonesia.com/detail/bnpt-jelang-pergantian-kepala-dan-tantangan-terorisme-di-masa-depan (accessed 18 August 2023).

radical Muslims as well, who use it to disseminate their intolerant ideas of Islam. While terrorists use and advocate violence, radical Muslims promote non-violent religious extremism.

Between January and December 2022, BNPT identified some 600 social media accounts and websites that promoted religious radicalism.[3] In that period, these websites and social media accounts posted more than 900 pieces with radical content, including expressions of intolerance and *takfiri* (the act of labelling others as apostates). The agency also found almost the same number of websites and social media accounts in the previous year.

Our research examines the role of moderate Muslim media websites in battling against Islamic online extremism. The *NU Online*, *Islami.co*, and *IBTimes.id* are affiliated with the two largest Muslim organizations in Indonesia (Nadhlatul Ulama [NU] and Muhammadiyah). These are among the most popular moderate Muslim media websites in Indonesia. This article looks at the websites' effectiveness in battling online religious extremism. It also examines the challenges they face in dealing with religious extremism and how they have weathered those challenges. We argue that their efforts have not been very effective. This is due to structural and cultural problems impeding the websites' operations. Two major challenges faced are limited funding for the outlets, as well as these outlets' failure to connect with the urban young.

Many Indonesians, especially youth and students, seek knowledge, including learning about Islam, from the Internet, and many do so from radical social media accounts and websites. A national survey jointly conducted by Pusat Pengkajian Islam dan Masyarakat (PPIM) UIN Syarif Hidayatullah and UNDP Indonesia in 2017 found that most university and school students who participated in the survey (50.89 per cent of

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[3] Bachtiar Rojab, "BNPT Temukan 600 Akun Medsos Bermuatan Radikal, Facebook Terbanyak", *Sindonews.com*, 28 December 2022, https://nasional. sindonews.com/read/981473/14/bnpt-temukan-600-akun-medsos-bermuatan-radikal-facebook-terbanyak-1672218769 (accessed 19 August 2023).

1,859 respondents) studied Islam through social media (Saputra 2018, p. 31).[4] The rest of the respondents learned about Islam through religious books (48.57 per cent) and television (33.73 per cent), or religious events such as informal study groups like *majelis taklim* (17.11 per cent).

It is worrying that, in many cases, exposure to the Internet and social media, increases individuals' religious radicalism. According to the aforementioned survey, many students who had access to the Internet tend to have radical Islamic outlooks. The survey found that of the 84.94 per cent of the 1,859 total respondents (i.e., 1,579 students) who had access to the Internet, more than half with access to the Internet (59.5 per cent of the 1,579 students) and who turned to social media to study Islam, had either radical or very radical Islamist outlooks. The survey found that students with radical and very radical perspectives adopted these after exposure to sermons, religious postings, or speeches by "social media preachers" (Saputra 2018, p. 33). Social media preachers are Muslim preachers who disseminate their version of Islam through those channels. Not all their religious teachings are radical, and the content can include promoting honesty, humanity and other such positive values. However, some promote discourses that are extreme by Indonesian standards, for example, their exclusivist stance on relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, and the public role of Islam in the Indonesian state, among others. This stance, including their rejection of the state principles of Pancasila, has led to them being labelled as radical preachers.

Such exposure has not only increased religious radicalism but has also compelled some individuals to turn to violence in the name of Islam. A good number of people became involved in terrorism after being exposed to extremist religious websites and social media accounts. For example, Agus Anton Figian and Ahmad Taufiq became involved in separate bombing plots in Surabaya and Jakarta after they were, respectively, exposed to radical texts on *Arrahmah.com* and radical religious sermons that appeared on social media and websites as downloadable MP3

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[4] Respondents were university and school students nationwide.

files (Maulana 2018, p. 45). To be sure, Muhammad Alfian Nurzi and Asyahnaz travelled to Syria to join ISIS after frequent communications with ISIS supporters through social media (Maulana 2018, p. 45).

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND RADICAL WEBSITES

Chat groups on Telegram and WhatsApp are often used not only to indoctrinate but also to call for members to perpetrate acts of terrorism. This occurred for example, following an incident at a prison holding centre on the outskirts of Jakarta which killed five police officers and a terrorist in May 2018. During the riot, terrorist inmates shared videos and pictures on Telegram while participating in the incident, asking their colleagues in pro-ISIS chat groups to follow in their footsteps by taking police officers hostage before killing them. This appeal resulted in two women (one aged 18, the other 21) attacking police officers with scissors outside the prison where the riot occurred, not long after the incident (Soufan Centre 2021, p. 23).

BNPT has collated compelling evidence of the significant role social media plays in increasing religious radicalism and even terrorist acts. The Chief of the National Police's Anti-Terrorism Squad (Densus 88), Marthinus Hukom, argues that social media spurs religious radicalism by exposing people to religious radicalism more than ever before.[5] During the glory days of international terror network organizations such as Al Qaeda and Jamaah Islamiyah (1980–2000), only about 300 Indonesians were attracted to join these organizations. But in the three to five years following 2010, with the rise of ISIS, this number skyrocketed to more than 1,000 people, with most travelling to Syria to support ISIS in their fight.

Previous scholarly articles have discussed the influence and effect of social media. These include PPIM and UNDP's extensive survey on the

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[5] *CNN Indonesia*, "Densus 88: Seribu WNI Gabung ISIS Akibat Pengaruh Medsos", 24 August 2023, https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20230824155003-12-990067/densus-88-seribu-wni-gabung-isis-akibat-pengaruh-medsos (accessed 25 August 2023).

impact of social media on the religious thinking of school and university students (Syafruddin and Ropi 2018). Also included are articles that discuss social media use by radical and conservative preachers, such as Nor Latifah and Romario, which found that social media, especially Instagram, is a strategic communication medium for Muslim preachers which helps boost their popularity among the young (Latifah & Romario, 2019, p. 36). Two of the most prolific users of social media for religious dissemination are Felix Siauw and Hanan Attaki. In May, Hanan Attaki publicly promised to abandon his conservative and radical views of Islam and pledge his allegiance to NU, which promotes moderate values of Islam.[6] When preaching about Islam, they often turn to Instagram, posting short but appealing photographs and videos. My study also found that, when preaching Islam on social media, Felix Siauw focuses more on social and political issues, while Hanan Attaki tends to discuss the daily lives of young people, including topics such as love. In a comparative study between Indonesia and the Republic of the Philippines, Tenorio et al. (2020) found among other things that Indonesians are more susceptible than their Filipino counterparts to absorbing religious teachings conveyed through the Internet. In case studies comparing Indonesian preacher Abdul Somad and Filipino Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, the authors found that, through social media, the two figures were prolific in attracting people's attention and influencing them; however, Indonesians were found to be more vulnerable to religious preachers (ab) using political issues, including Abdul Somad, while Filipinos were less vulnerable because the country's political system separates church and state.

In response to the result of the survey, scholars began highlighting the narratives of moderate Muslim institutions or organizations. These warn against the negative effects of radical and conservative preaching being

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[6] Muhammad Husni Tamami, "Profil Ustadz Hanan Attaki, Dai Muda yang Putuskan Baiat NU dan Jadi Nahdliyin", *Liputan6.com*, 12 May 2023, https://www.liputan6.com/islami/read/5284870/profil-ustadz-hanan-attaki-dai-muda-yang-putuskan-baiat-nu-dan-jadi-nahdliyin (accessed 19 September 2023).

disseminated through social media. Adi Wibowo (2019, p. 340) discussed efforts by the An-Nawawi Islamic Boarding School in Purworejo, Central Java, to fight religious radicalism spreading, by using the school's social media accounts (Twitter, YouTube and Instagram) to disseminate a tolerant version of Islam. Athik Hidayatul Ummah (2020, pp. 54–55) discussed efforts by Internet activists based in Islamic boarding schools across Indonesia to promote a tolerant and progressive version of Islam. To boost the efforts, the activists established a virtual communication forum called Arus Informasi Santri Nusantara (AIS Nusantara) in 2017, which provides a place for members to exchange information and learn key skills such as search engine optimization (SEO).

Other scholars focus on the role of social media in mediating social and religious relationships between preachers and their constituents; and among Muslim activists and youths. Martin Slama, for example, argues that Muslim preachers' economy "is currently transformed by these online exchanges. This has resulted in preacher-follower relationships being characterized by dialogic constructions of Islamic authority" (Slama 2017, p. 94). Eva Nisa (2018, p. 92) argued that Instagram has been an increasingly popular medium for Muslim female activists to perform *dakwah* (preaching) and "to emphasize and remind others of the ideal Islamic life and reach ultimate happiness".

While previous academic articles focused on the role social media plays in the dissemination of radical as well as moderate narratives of Islam, this article discusses civil society's fight against online non-violent extremism, in particular extremist content posted on radical websites.

Radical websites, according to BNPT, are websites that often publish articles encouraging readers to produce rapid social change through religious violence.[7] Other criteria include the publication of articles labelling people as infidels, expression of support for ISIS, and the

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[7] Aghnia Adzkia and Sandy Indra, "Kriteria Situs Islam Radikal Versi BNPT", *CNN Indonesia*, 1 April 2015, https://www.cnnindonesia.com/teknologi/20150401093434-185-43429/kriteria-situs-islam-radikal-versi-bnpt (accessed 25 August 2023).

promotion of a narrow definition of jihad. Many people take to acts of terrorism because they believe it to be part of their effort to defend or attain the glory of Islam in the name of Allah. They believe in waging war in the way of God (jihad). However, many Muslim scholars define jihad in a much broader sense. Muslims doing good for other human beings or the enhancement of themselves can also be part of jihad. Such good acts include helping victims of natural disasters, holding anti-corruption drives, or studying hard to attain good grades.

## THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MODERATE WEBSITES

One of the aims behind the establishment of moderate media websites has been to tackle religious radicalism online. In 2018, *IBTimes.id* was established following concern from Muhammadiyah youth activists that the organization lacked media outlets to cater to the young. At the time, Muhammadiyah already had its *Suara Muhammadiyah* magazine, which had been serving its followers since 1915. In 2007, the magazine went online; with the online version remaining similar to the magazine in terms of editorial policy and readership, and with most readers being Muhammadiyah followers. Learning from this situation, young Muhammadiyah activists felt a need to establish a platform that reaches non-Muhammadiyah followers. They wanted a media outlet that was "more open … Muhammadiyah with the taste of Indonesia … an online media that promotes moderate Islam".[8] In contrast to the *Suara Muhammadiyah* magazine, *IBTimes.com* has been open to partnership with other institutions, including NU. *IBTimes.com* activists often hold discussions with activists from other moderate media websites in NU's network, such as *Alif.id* and *Islami.co* on how to promote counter-narratives against religious radicalism.[9] Even *IBTimes.com* often

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[8] Zoom interview with Muarif, one of the founders of IBTimes.id, on 5 April 2023.

[9] Ibid.

received and published articles written by NU activists. The phrase "taste of Indonesia" refers to the Indonesian version of Islam, which is generally seen as more friendly and flexible, in contrast to the stricter Middle Eastern form of Islam.

NU Online, the biggest moderate Muslim website in Indonesia, was established in 2003, and based on discussions at the 1999 NU Congress held at Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School, East Java (Sarjoko 2020, p. 108). NU leaders saw the need to establish a website to disseminate information about NU policies and activities, as well as general information about Islamic tenets and practices acceptable to NU followers. At the very least, the online media was intended to circulate NU policies and provide clarifications about NU, its ideas, and its programmes.[10] However, NU also explicitly promotes "intra-religious" and "inter-religious" harmony and principles (Maulana 2018, p. 10). The website aimed at "tackling radical online contents circulated by religiously radical websites between 2009 and 2010 [about five or six years after the establishment of *NU Online*], following the mushrooming of radical content in websites and social media in those years".[11] Radical content came firstly from ultra-conservative Salafi groups; secondly, from religious extremists who promote the use of violence; and, thirdly, from groups that champion the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, the ultra-conservative group from Egypt.

In 2013, *Islami.co* was established to promote peace and tolerance, especially among people of different faiths. It was founded in response to the mass emergence of websites and social media accounts promoting hatred between people from different religious backgrounds (Nurman 2019, p. 181). Consequently, this website also serves as an alternative point of reference for Muslim youths wanting to know more about Islam (Ummah 2020, p. 246). The website targets Muslim youths living in

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[10] In-person interview with Savic Ali, the founder of *NU Online* and the co-founder of *Islami.co*, on 12 April 2023.

[11] Ibid.

urban areas; interestingly, most of the staff members are graduates of Islamic boarding schools, many of which are located in rural areas.

Savic Ali, the founder of *NU Online* and co-founder of *Islami.co*, argues that by 2020, moderate Muslim online media had begun to triumph over radical Islamic media in shaping the hearts and minds of Indonesians.[12] The viewership of moderate websites began to surpass that of radical ones. Meanwhile on YouTube, moderate Muslim preachers such as Ahmad Bahauddin Nursalim (Gus Baha) and Quraish Shihab had begun to appear more often on the media platform, disseminating a moderate version of Islam. Today, in 2023, despite the strong fight put up by the moderate Muslim media, a substantial number of radical websites are still performing well. As seen from Table 1, ultra-conservative Salafi websites (highlighted in white) dominate the top ten most-visited websites in Indonesia in the "faith and beliefs" category so far in 2023. While other websites saw a significant fall in visitorship between February and July 2023, visits to Salafi websites (in particular, *hsi.id*) rose to 13.5 million in July 2023 up from 11.8 million in February. Similarly, more people visited another Salafi website (*Rumaysho.com*) (total visitors in July were 3.2 million, which was a sharp increase in total visits compared to February of the same year, which was 2.7 million). In addition, radical websites that often publish social and political stories, such as *Portal-islam.id* and *Eramuslim.com*, are widely visited. Only one moderate website ranks among the top ten (*nu.or.id*). This reveals that moderate Muslim media websites are still struggling to effectively tackle radical content online, and radical content on racial websites is still being popularly consumed.

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[12] Aptiani Nur Jannah, "Savic Ali: Media Intoleran Mulai Kalah", PPIM UIN Jakarta, 7 August 2020, https://ppim.uinjkt.ac.id/2020/08/07/savic-ali-media-intoleran-mulai-kalah/ (accessed 28 August 2023).

**Table 1: Most Popular Websites in "Faith and Belief" Category
in Indonesia, 2023**

| Website | Extreme/ Moderate | Sample of Ideological Characteristics |
|---|---|---|
| *hsi.id* | Extreme | Promotes exclusivism in Islam, for example, by refusing to attend non-Muslim weddings.[a] |
| *Portal-islam.id* | Extreme | Supporting the implementation of Islamic Sharia.[b] |
| *Nu.or.id* | Moderate | Anti-religious radicalism; promotes tolerance. |
| *Tafsirweb.com* | Encyclopaedia | Nil |
| *Litequran.net* | Encyclopaedia | Nil |
| *Muslim.or.id* | Extreme | Promotes exclusivism in Islam, for example, by refusing to say Christmas greetings.[c] |
| *Rumaysho.com* | Extreme | Promotes exclusivism in Islam, for example, by refusing to say Christmas greetings.[d] |
| *Eramuslim.com* | Extreme | Intolerant, anti-Semitic stance, against non-Muslim leaders (Maulana 2018, p. 43); supporting the establishment of the Islamic State (Mujibuddin and Riza 2021, p. 338). |
| *Almanhaj.or.id* | Extreme | Promotes exclusivism in Islam, for example, refusing to say Christmas greetings.[e] |
| *Hidayatullah.com* | Extreme | Supports the establishment of the Islamic State (Mujibuddin and Riza 2021, pp. 340–41). |
| *Bincangsyariah.co* | Moderate | Against the implementation of the Islamic laws (Mujibuddin and Riza 2021, p. 345). |

| Compiled 10 July 2023 | | Compiled 8 February 2023 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ranking in Category | Total Visits | Ranking in Category | Total Visits |
| 1 | 13.5 million | 1 | 11.8 million |
| 2 | 7.7 million | 2 | 8.1 million |
| 3 | 5.2 million | 3 | 4 million |
| 6 | 2.5 million | 4 | 4.2 million |
| 7 | 2.3 million | 5 | 3.5 million |
| 9 | 2.1 million | 6 | 2.6 million |
| 4 | 3.2 million | 7 | 2.7 million |
| 16 | 922,300 | 12 | 1.3 million |
| 19 | 1 million | 16 | 1.2 million |
| 38 | 492,900 | 31 | 520,300 |
| 59 | 399,300 | 34 | 556,600 |

**Table 1 — cont'd**

| Website | Extreme/ Moderate | Sample of Ideological Characteristics |
|---|---|---|
| *Dalamislam.com* | Moderate | Promotes religious tolerance. |
| *Islami.co* | Moderate | Supports Pancasila, against the implementation of Islamic laws (Mujibuddin and Riza 2021, pp. 336–37). |
| *Dutaislam.com* | Moderate | Promotes religious tolerance. |
| *Ibtimes.id* | Moderate | Promotes religious tolerance; against the implementation of Islamic laws (Mujibuddin and Riza 2021, p. 331). |
| *Alif.id* | Moderate | Promotes religious tolerance |
| *Islampos.com* | Extreme | Promotes exclusivism in Islam, for example, refusing to say Christmas greetings.[f] |
| *Nahimungkar.org* | Extreme | Supports the Islamic caliphate (Mujibuddin and Riza 2021, p. 331). |
| *Voa-islam.com* | Extreme | Supporting violent jihad (Maulana 2018, p. 43); supporting the Islamic Caliphate (Mujibuddin and Riza 2021, p. 331). |
| *Dakwatuna.com* | Extreme | Supports the Islamic State.[g] |
| *Suaraislam.id* | Extreme | Supports the Islamic State.[h] |
| *Arrahmah.id* | Extreme | Intolerant, anti-Semitism stance, against non-Muslim leaders (Maulana 2018, p. 43). |

*Notes:*
Rows highlighted in white are ultra-conservative Salafi websites;
■ are radical political websites;
■ are moderate websites; and
■ are encyclopaedia websites.

a. Narratives can be found, among others, in the following YouTube post: Abdullah Roy, "Bolehkah Datang Ke Pernikahan Non-Muslim?", n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdpbtG9Ftmo (accessed on 19 September 2023).

| Compiled 10 July 2023 | | Compiled 8 February 2023 | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ranking in Category | Total Visits | Ranking in Category | Total Visits |
| 51 | 372,700 | 35 | 498,900 |
| 54 | 267,200 | 46 | 38,500 |
| 56 | 272,500 | 53 | 318,500 |
| 115 | 127,400 | 58 | 139,600 |
| 126 | 13,200 | 115 | 166,800 |
| 127 | 734,900 | 166 | 549,900 |
| 1,612 | 3,500 | 182 | 119,600 |
| 281 | 47,900 | 192 | 118,900 |
| 442 | 61,100 | 258 | 54,900 |
| 177 | 119,800 | 333 | 71,900 |
| | | 892 | 34,700 |

b. Narratives can be found, among others, in the following article: *Portal-Islam. id*, "Survei: 64% Muslim Indonesia Setuju Syariat Islam Jadi Hukum Negara", 14 September 2023, https://www.portal-islam.id/2023/09/survei-64-muslim-indonesia-setuju.html (accessed 19 September 2023).

c. Narratives can be found, among others, in the following article: *Muslim. or.id*, "Menyoal Kembali Arti Toleransi Dalam Momentum Perayaan Natal", n.d., https://muslim.or.id/23963-menyoal-kembali-arti-toleransi-dalam-momentum-perayaan-natal.html (accessed 19 September 2023).

d. Narratives can be found, among others, in the following article: Muhammad Abdul Tuasikal, "Apakah Islam Mengenal Toleransi Antarumat Beragama?", *Rumaysho.com*, 26 December 2020, https://rumaysho.com/26034-apakah-islam-mengenal-toleransi-antarumat-beragama.html (accessed 19 September 2023).

e. Narratives can be found, among others, in the following article: Syaikh Muhammad bin Shâlih al-Utsamîn, "Mengucapkan Selamat Hari Raya (Natal, Tahun Baru) Kepada Non Muslim", *Almanhaj.or.id*, n.d., https://almanhaj. or.id/2406-mengucapkan-selamat-hari-raya-kepada-non-muslim.html (accessed 19 September 2023).

f. The narratives appear on its website: https://www.islampos.com/ page/2/?s=selamat+natal. One of the articles outrightly explains why expressing Christmas greetings to Christians is banned in Islam. See Eneng Susanti, "Kenapa Ucapkan Selamat Hari Raya kepada Nonmuslim Itu Terlarang dalam Islam?", *Islampos.com*, 25 December 2018, https://www. islampos.com/kenapa-ucapkan-selamat-hari-raya-kepada-nonmuslim-itu-terlarang-dalam-islam-122604/ (accessed 19 September 2023).

g. Narratives supporting an Islamic State can be found, among others, in the following article: Indra Lasmana Tarigan, "Islam dan Negara", *Dakwatuna. com*, 1 March 2017, https://www.dakwatuna.com/2017/03/01/85713/islam-dan-negara/#axzz8DjpBszxm (accessed 19 September 2023).

h. Narratives that support the establishment of an Islamic State can be found, among others, in the following article: Nuim Hidayat, "Mengapa Cita-Cita Negara Islami Harus Dihancurkan?", *Suaraislam.id*, 18 August 2021, https://suaraislam.id/mengapa-cita-cita-negara-islami-harus-dihancurkan-2/ (accessed on 19 September 2023).

*Source:* www.similarweb.com

# CHALLENGES IN FIGHTING ONLINE RADICALISM

Moderate Muslim websites have not been effective in tackling radical online content in Indonesia. This is due to several challenges, which I categorize as either structural or cultural. Structural challenges stem from the structure of institutions or the way the institutions work, while cultural challenges refer to individual or group habits that inhibit progress. The structural challenges include limited funding and sensitivity towards the policy of umbrella organizations. Cultural challenges include passiveness in corporate culture, alongside the "ivory tower" traditions among journalists which leave them out of touch with Muslim communities.

## Structural Challenges

### Limited Funding

*IBTimes.id*, *NU Online*, and *Islami.co* are plagued by funding problems. None of these three websites are backed by big businesses, so they started with a modest investment. *IBTimes.id* did obtain initial investment from private donors (Muhammadiyah activists or people who come from Muhammadiyah backgrounds). However, the website is not officially part of Muhammadiyah, so it cannot access Muhammadiyah funding.[13] Meanwhile, *NU Online*, NU's official online media platform, obtained funding from the organization, but the funding was insufficient, covering only 30 per cent of the website's operations. After Yahya Cholil Staquf was elected chairman of NU in December 2021, *NU Online*'s funding was increased to cover 70 per cent of total operations, but on the condition that the website becomes self-reliant after one year, starting in early 2023.[14] The management of the websites complained that the funding,

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[13] Zoom interview with Muarif, one of the founders of *IBTimes.id*, on 5 April 2023.

[14] In-person interview with Ivan Aulia Ahsan, *NU Online* chief editor, 24 April 2023.

and any additional money obtained from other sources, is barely enough to cover day-to-day operations.

Lack of funding hampers outlets' capacity to boost business performance. For example, due to the lack of funding, the websites fail to acquire the best talent and purchase the necessary technological equipment that would give them a competitive edge over their competitors. *NU Online* cannot hire talented search engine optimization (SEO) experts because it cannot compete with the salaries offered by well-funded start-ups such as Tokopedia and Bukalapak.[15]

The websites have made efforts to weather the challenges posed by the lack of funding. *Islami.co* has partnered with non-government organizations that also wish to promote moderate views of Islam, such as human rights organizations like the Maarif Institute and the Wahid Institute. Although these organizations run anti-intolerance programmes, they lack expertise in countering the narratives of intolerance pushed by radical groups. *Islami.co* is filling this gap.[16] The website has expertise in producing articles that spread moderate religion; in return, the human rights organizations provide funds for the production of articles. This partnership steadily generates income for *Islami.co*, and the website has since expanded to work with other organizations such as Search for Common Ground and the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID). Nevertheless, the revenue barely covers *Islami.co*'s operation expenses, so the platform allows its staff "to work at other institutions so that they can meet their personal [financial] needs".[17]

*IBTimes.id* also relies on partnership funding. It has developed partnerships with the Maarif Institute, the Ministry of Religious Affairs, and several private universities under the supervision of Muhammadiyah. The website also receives funding from advertising placement, mostly from institutions under the Muhammadiyah network. Despite this, as

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[15] Ibid.

[16] In-person interview with Savic Ali, co-founder of *Islami.co*, 12 April 2023.

[17] Ibid.

with *Islami.co*, *IBtimes.id*'s income is only enough to cover operations. All ten staff work part-time and receive regular fees only when *IBTimes* works on partnership programmes with donors. This has badly affected the performance of staff. Muarif acknowledges that to improve quality, IBTimes "needs a special, steady stream of funding, so that the website is run professionally".[18] The absence of full-time employees impedes operations and reduces quality. According to Muarif, there needs to be one or two people working full-time, and they "must have special treatment in terms of the welfare and the facilities that they get … many companies go bankrupt because there are no 'goal keepers' [care-takers] in the companies".[19]

In contrast to *Islami.co* and *IBTimes.id*, *NU Online* has more resources. It has forty people on its payroll, including twelve journalists. At the time of writing, NU funding covered 70 per cent of the website's operational expenses, with the rest covered by partnerships and commercial advertising. To secure its budget, the website plans to maximise revenue from commercial advertising,[20] including recruiting account executive officers to boost advertising income.

## Sensitivity Towards the Policy of Umbrella Organizations

As it is part of NU, *NU Online* must follow NU policies that come from the NU congress, the national meeting or other meetings attended by the NU national board of executives. In other words, the contents of *NU Online* must conform to NU policies made at those meetings.[21] At

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[18] Zoom interview with Muarif, one of the founders of *IBTimes.id*, on 5 April 2023.

[19] Ibid.

[20] In-person interview with Ivan Aulia Ahsan, *NU Online* chief editor, 24 April 2023.

[21] Alhafiz Kurniawan, "Gus Im dan NU Online (Bagian 1)", *NU Online*, 18 August 2020, https://www.nu.or.id/fragmen/gus-im-dan-nu-online-bagian-1-P8oHj (accessed 19 September 2023).

times, *NU Online* must support NU policies, although they might not be publicly popular. This can reduce the website's credibility. In contrast, many radical websites are run by a small number of people who do not represent any big Muslim organizations, and so are relatively free from the influence of such organizations.[22] These radical websites are more independent in disseminating their ideas and in reaching out to people of different Islamic streams, ultimately becoming more popular among non-NU members and sympathizers, especially among urban youths.

## Cultural Challenges

*A Lack of Corporate Culture*

The three moderate websites (*NU Online*, *Islami.co* and *IBTimes. id*) were established by social activists, hence they have no corporate culture. They are not driven by profit but by their social vision to perform *dakwah* so that society at large will benefit. This lack of corporate culture is manifested in the absence of some functions that are usually present in modern firms or companies. For example, none of the three websites employ account executive officers, whose role is to generate revenue from advertising. These officers work to develop a database of potential clients and establish and maintain relationships with clients and know their interests. Ivan, the chief editor of *NU Online*, understands the importance of this function in generating income for the website, so, in April 2023, he began to recruit account executive officers.[23] *NU Online* already has three sales and marketing staff, but these perform traditional sales and marketing functions, such as promoting the website on social media and selling advertising space to clients, but none of them perform account executive functions. Savic Ali, the co-founder of *Islami.co*, also

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[22] Ahmad Zaenudin, "Kompetisi di Antara Berbagai Situsweb Islam", Tirto.id, 15 February 2018, https://tirto.id/kompetisi-di-antara-berbagai-situsweb-islam-cEHi (accessed 1 September 2023).

[23] In-person interview with Ivan Aulia Ahsan, *NU Online* chief editor, 24 April 2023.

acknowledges that the website lacks attention to commercial endeavours. The website has "no team of people who have experience in sales and marketing, including account executive functions".[24] Unlike major mass media outlets such as *Tempo* magazine, *Jakarta Post* or *Media Indonesia*, the three websites have no division that plans, organizes and evaluates training programmes for journalists and other staff. Training at NU Online relies on a mentoring system implemented by senior journalists, and although there is some training for editors, it is an incidental programme.[25]

## *Journalists' Intellectual Habits*

The journalists of moderate Muslim media websites are university graduates. Many, in particular those working with *Islami.co*, come from Islamic boarding schools and rural areas.[26] They like to discuss advanced and sophisticated religious topics, such as the roles of religion and the state. Thus, the content of moderate websites tends to be explanatory and lengthy (Dwicahyo 2017) and ignores discussions on people's daily religious practices.

This "ivory tower" tradition is detrimental to the growth of moderate Muslim websites. Readers are busy, educated people who long for religious guidance that can help them practise Islam in their daily lives. Many choose not to read moderate Muslim media websites because the content is lengthy and does not meet their interests. The content is also out of touch with Indonesia's young people, especially millennials, who make up the majority of Indonesia's Internet users, and young urban Muslims. Such readers then choose to read Salafi websites instead, which offer content that readers see as more relevant to their interests, such as guides on how to perform ablution well or guides for young Muslims of

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[24] In-person interview with Savic Ali, co-founder of *Islami.co*, 12 April 2023.

[25] In-person interview with Ivan Aulia Ahsan, *NU Online* chief editor, 24 April 2023.

[26] In-person interview with Savic Ali, co-founder of *Islami.co*, 12 April 2023.

opposite sexes to be in halal relationships. Also, although Salafi websites often discuss religious texts without context, they discuss them in short, simple and direct sentences, making them more suitable for the Internet (Dwicahyo 2017). As a result, this type of content is more popular among young urban Muslims, and in turn, boosts the popularity of Salafi ultra-conservative websites.

## THE ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT

The Ministry of Religious Affairs has previously provided financial support for moderate Muslim media websites, mostly through partnerships. However, the support has been irregular, primarily because the government already has other initiatives in place, for example, the promotion of religious diversity and digital literacy. But moderate Muslim media websites want the government to do more, for example, forge established, exclusive, and regular partnerships so that the websites can have steady flows of financial income. Islami.co and NU Online state that they "have never received government aid in the making of counter-radicalism narrative contents",[27] although from time to time, the websites have received financial aid from the government. For example, supported by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and other partners such as UNICEF, in June 2023, *Islami.co* organized[28] Islamifest 2023 in Jakarta "to celebrate religious diversity and to promote the beauty of Indonesia Islamic culture".[29] This event presented, among others, religious figures, musicians, artists and stand-up comedians to promote religious diversity and Indonesia's Islamic culture in line with their expertise. This was the first such event organized by *Islami.co*, and on its website (https://

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Malik Ibnu Zaman, "Apresiasi Buku Islami Fest 2023, Gus Yaqut: Perlindungan Anak Sangat Penting", *NU Online*, 11 June 2023, https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/apresiasi-buku-islami-fest-2023-gus-yaqut-perlindungan-anak-sangat-penting-1Z206 (accessed 2 September 2023).

[29] Islamifest 2023, "Satu Dunia Berjuta Cerita", 10 June 2023, https://festival.islami.co/#about (accessed 2 September 2023).

festival.islami.co/#about), it claims that it is an "annual meeting space", but it remains to be seen whether it becomes an annual event. Meanwhile, for IBtimes.id, the Ministry of Religious Affairs has previously provided financial support through a partnership programme, but this has now been concluded.[30] The website has recently received another offer from the Ministry to help publish a draft of a book on counter-narratives to Islamic radicalism, but IBTimes.id is still evaluating whether the partnership is feasible.[31] To sum up, the government appears not interested in establishing an institutionalized and regular partnership with moderate Muslim media websites.

State-owned enterprises (SOEs) could also provide financial assistance to moderate Muslim media websites. SOEs are widely considered the locomotive of the Indonesian economy. Backed by the state's financial capital, the enterprises dominate strategic sectors of the economy, including telecommunication, banking, defence and mining. Their assets and profits are gigantic, with Indonesian SOEs having assets in 2022 of IDR9,867 trillion (US$644.5 billion).[32] To put that into perspective, the assets were much larger than Belgium's gross domestic product, which amounted to US$578.6 billion that same year.[33] Its profit was IDR303.7 trillion (US$19 billion), which is some 11.5 per cent of total state revenue for the same year.[34] Given these figures, SOEs hold

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[30] Zoom interview with Muarif, one of the founders of *IBTimes.id*, on 5 April 2023.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Erlangga Djumena, "Akan Setor Rp 80,2 Triliun, Erick Thohir: Tahun Ini Kita Akan Berikan Dividen Terbesar Sepanjang Sejarah BUMN", *Kompas*, 2 May 2023, https://money.kompas.com/read/2023/05/02/070514426/akan-setor-rp-802-triliun-erick-thohir-tahun-ini-kita-akan-berikan-dividen (accessed 3 September 2023).

[33] World Bank, "GDP – Belgium", n.d., https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=BE (accessed on 13 September 2023).

[34] Kementerian Keuangan, "Menkeu: Kinerja Penerimaan Negara Luar Biasa Dua Tahun Berturut-turut", 4 January 2023, https://www.kemenkeu.go.id/informasi-publik/publikasi/berita-utama/Kinerja-Penerimaan-Negara-Luar-Biasa (accessed 3 September 2023).

strong potential to become financial backers of Indonesia's moderate Muslim media websites.

Unfortunately, it appears SOEs are so far uninterested in advertising on Indonesia's moderate Muslim media websites. Among the three websites discussed in this article, only NU Online occasionally receives advertising placements from SOEs. NU Online plans to persuade more SOEs to place advertising on its website,[35] recognizing that SOEs are clients with huge potential. Other moderate Muslim media websites do not have such plans; they are still struggling with manpower issues. For example, *Islami.co* lacks business development capacity and has no strong and experienced sales and marketing team,[36] while at *IBTimes.id*, none of its staff work full-time at the outlet.[37]

In July 2023, the Ministry of Communication and Information proposed a draft regulation to the President. It proposed, among others, that digital platforms or aggregators such as Google or Facebook be required to pay compensation to certified Indonesian media for carrying the latter's content on their digital platforms. The compensation could take "the form paid licensing, revenue-sharing or other types of partnerships agreed upon by the two parties … Tech platforms must strike a deal with local media outlets before using their content."[38] If this opportunity materializes, the compensation could serve as additional income for the websites.

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[35] In-person interview with Ivan Aulia Ahsan, *NU Online* chief editor, 24 April 2023.

[36] In-person interview with Savic Ali, co-founder of *Islami.co*, 12 April 2023.

[37] Zoom interview with Muarif, one of the founders of *IBTimes.id*, on 5 April 2023.

[38] Aditya Hadi, "RI set to require Google, Meta to prioritize verified news outlets", *Jakarta Post*, 26 July 2023, https://www.thejakartapost.com/paper/2023/07/26/new-rule-to-require-google-meta-to-prioritize-verified-news-outlets.html. (accessed 10 September 2023).

# CONCLUSION

This research shows that Indonesia's moderate Muslim online media institutions have not been effective in tackling digital religious extremist content. Many Indonesians continue to consume radical content disseminated by radical websites, despite the efforts of moderate Muslim media websites to counter these narratives. This research argues that this ineffectiveness is due to both structural and cultural challenges. The structural challenges include limited funding and sensitivity towards the policy of websites' umbrella organizations, while the cultural challenges include a lack of corporate culture and journalists' "ivory tower" traditions.

The government of Indonesia can play an important role in slowing the dissemination of radical narratives by radical websites. It needs to ensure that regular funding is channelled to the moderate outlets to sustain their operations and to encourage state-owned enterprises to provide funding for moderate Muslim media websites, including through corporate social responsibility programmes. Elements of civil society, such as philanthropists, foreign and domestic donors, and social foundations, also need to contribute. The role of media institutions in disseminating values of religious moderation and tolerance is crucial. Indonesia's moderate media institutions provide important counter-narratives against the spread of radical content; these counter-narratives serve as a bulwark against the internalization of intolerance and hate speech among Muslim communities in Indonesia.

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