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Islamic devotion in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand as a deterrent against religious extremism

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This research explores the concept of religious universalism and its potential impact on expressions of Islamic devotion within Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The study aims to investigate how Islamic practices and beliefs can serve as a deterrent against the proliferation of religious extremism. By examining various dimensions of Islamic religiosity in these countries, this research seeks to uncover the ways in which a broad and inclusive interpretation of religion can contribute to countering the influence of radical ideologies. Through an analysis of religious rituals, educational frameworks, and cross-faith engagements, this study offers insights into the capacity of religious universalism to mitigate the advancement of religious extremism across diverse cultural and social contexts.

Contribution: This research enhances our understanding of how universality of religion can serve as a deterrent against religious extremism by examining its manifestations within the contexts of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. The findings offer practical insights and recommendations that can inform policies and initiatives aimed at fostering tolerance, inclusivity, and harmony within diverse religious societies.

Keywords: extremist ideologies; interfaith interactions; Islamic religiosity; Universality of Religion; religious practices.

Introduction

Although the West produced the term *radicalism*, the symptoms and behaviour of violence can be found in the traditions and history of the Islamic *Ummah*. The phenomenon of radicalism in Islam is believed to be a product or creation of the 20th century in the Islamic world, especially in the Middle East, as a result of an identity crisis that led to reactions and resistance against the West, which spread colonialism and imperialism to the Islamic world. The division of the Islamic world into various countries, nations, and modernisation projects launched by the new government with a Western-leaning resulted in Moslems feeling the erosion of the religious and moral bonds that they had so far adhered to (Dekmejian 2015:25–36). This has led to the emergence of a radical movement within Islam that calls for a return to pure Islamic teachings to deal with the chaos of life. Not only that, this movement is fighting against a regime that is considered secular and deviates from pure religious teachings.

The Great Indonesian Dictionary (Depdiknas 2021:23) defines radicalism as an ideology or school that wants a change harshly or drastically. Historian Kartodirdjo defines it as a social movement. Khalil distinguishes between *radicalism* and *violent radicalism*. As an understanding, it is general, but when this understanding is reduced to action, Khalil refers to the actions of Osama bin Laden during the Twin Towers bombings in New York on 09 September 2001 (Khalil 2018:33–61). Radicalism threatens the security and peace of social life, even a threat to the survival of a nation. Experience in some countries revealed that radicalism could lead to conflicts horizontally and vertically. Radicalism is understood in various ways depending on the person or group that defines it or the perspective used.

Throughout their histories, the Southeast Asia people, especially Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and others, have been known as people who have a tradition of politeness and gentleness. It is

proven that when religions and even traders from various parts of the world entered this region, they could enter safely without significant violence.

Besides that, in Southeast Asian societies, including Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, there is a rich cultural heritage that places a strong emphasis on politeness, respect, and gentleness. This emphasis can be observed in various aspects of daily life, communication, and social interactions. While the cultures of these countries are diverse and unique, some commonalities can provide evidence of their traditions of politeness and gentleness: (1) Respectful address and language: In many Southeast Asian languages, there are formal and polite ways of addressing others, depending on their age, status, and familiarity. The use of honorifics and respectful language is a clear indication of the emphasis on showing respect and politeness. (2) Greetings and gestures: Traditional greetings and gestures often involve showing deference and respect. For example, the Thai greeting known as the 'wai' involves pressing the palms together in a prayer-like gesture, accompanied by a slight bow, reflecting respect for the other person. (3) Hospitality: Southeast Asian cultures are known for their warm hospitality towards guests. Offering food, drinks, and a welcoming environment to visitors is a reflection of their gentleness and respect for others.

Nevertheless, the region has experienced the opposite impression in the last two decades. This area is perceived as a part of the world where radicalism grows and develops, even as a hotbed of radicalism, following the conditions in the Middle East, which were previously included in the category of developing areas of radicalism, especially in the perception of the Western world (Muhajarah 2022). It becomes even more interesting because the region with a large population of Moslems cannot be separated from the Arab, as a region with an Islamic growth centre. Many Southeast Asian Muslim scholars and intellectuals studied in the Arab and later became Muslim scholars and intellectuals in the Southeast Asian region.

Radicalism does not only appear but also is preceded by intellectual encouragement and studies (Muhajarah 2022). Radicalism, which initially developed in the world of politics, in the 20th century has developed in the world of religion; thus, the understanding and actions of radicalism are frequently driven by understandings and thoughts.

Based on the aforementioned description of the background, the authors considered the study of the religious expression of Indonesian, Malaysian, and Thai Muslims to ward off religious radicalism as essential to study and develop in this article. The selection of three countries, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand, as representatives of the Southeast Asian region, was based on three considerations: Firstly, Indonesia has the largest population and a Muslim majority; Secondly, Malaysia represents a country with a majority Muslim population with the most significant number of Islamic universities after Indonesia; Thirdly, Thailand is a representative of the Muslim minority but has the most Islamic universities compared with

other Muslim minority regions in Southeast Asia. Besides that, in terms of the pattern of understanding and practice of Islam, it can be said that the Indonesian Muslim community is a Muslim religious society but has a high pluralist awareness, therefore it tends to be very open and democratic. Meanwhile, Malaysia's Muslim community tends to be traditionalist but inclusive (open) and harmonious with a pluralist population while still showing its position as a Muslim-majority country. The Thai Muslim community seems Islamic but has a more closed tendency (exclusive) because of its minority position.

This research method employs more of *library research* with a qualitative comparative descriptive method by combining the results of interviews with several community leaders, religious leaders, and students from Malaysia and Thailand who are currently studying at the Tarbiyah Faculty of UIN Walisongo Semarang.

Ethical considerations
This article followed all ethical standards for carrying out a research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Results and discussion
Expressions of Muslim religiosity in Indonesia in warding off religious radicalism
In the reality of daily religious life, radicalism is shown as movements that attempt to completely overhaul the existing social and political order by using violence based on religious reasons or *jargon* (Hasbiyallah 2016:43). In general, radicalism can be interpreted as an understanding and/or behaviour using violence in responding to differences, solving problems or achieving goals. An intensive and comprehensive study is needed to clarify boundaries; therefore, they are used as a joint reference in discussing radicalism.

The reality of radicalism is quite worrying and needs to be watched. The emergence of various acts of violence motivated by various causes indicates that radicalism is still flourishing. Acts of violence by a group of people against another group and vigilante acts by a person, or anarchist actions in response to differences in society and in expressing opinions, are facts that are still visible in current society. A survey result presented that the potential for community radicalism showed a number that needs to be watched out for, namely 58.0 in the range of 0–100 (BNPT 2017:23). This figure indicates that the level of radicalism potential is in the medium potential category. The radical potential is reflected in three dimensions, namely the potential for radical understanding at 63.44 (*Strong Potential*), the potential for radical attitudes at 60.25 (*Moderate Potential*), and potential for radical action at 48.98 (*Moderate Potential*).

The government's concern about radicalism is logical, considering that radicalism is potentially to be an act of terrorism (Muhajarah 2016). This statement is reinforced by the research results by the *Center for Strategic Studies and International Studies* (CSIS) that the network between

Indonesian people and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was discovered through the role of Indonesian citizens who were deportees from Syria, that is, those who:

> Attempted to enter Syria to join the caliphate but failed to do so as they were caught and returned to Indonesia in bordering countries (primarily Turkey). The number estimated by the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Ministry of International Affairs, and the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) consists of approximately 500 individuals, 72% of which are women and children. Although these people are not directly affiliated with ISIS, the lack of thorough supervision by the government towards them leaves the possibility of their contact with ISIS or ISIS-affiliated groups in Indonesia wide open. It has been noted by several NGOs tasked with keeping watch over it. (Fitriani et al. 2018:34)

In addition, the current case related to the alleged involvement of Indonesian citizens who wish to go to conflict countries also occurred in Singapore. As quoted from Tempo, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia had communicated with the competent authorities in Singapore regarding the detention of three female migrant workers in that country on suspicion of committing acts of radicalism. Previously, the Director of Indonesian Citizen Protection and Legal Assistance at the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Judha Nugraha, confirmed that the Indonesian Embassy in Singapore had received information from the Internal Security Division (ISD) of the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs about the arrest of four Indonesian migrant workers with the initials RH, TM, AA, and SS. The four Indonesian workers (TKI) were arrested on suspicion of involvement in radicalism activities, including sending a sum of money to support radical activities.[1]

As an effort to ward off hostile radicalism within the government, the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud), with 10 ministries and state institutions jointly synergised and signed a Joint Decree (SKB) on Handling Radicalism in the Framework of Strengthening Nationalism in the Civil Servant (ASN), in Jakarta, on Tuesday, (12 November 2019). Head of the Development and Awards Section, Ministry of Education and Culture's Human Resources (HR) Bureau, Agam Bayu Suryanto, says the Ministry of Education and Culture, with 10 Ministries or Institutions, jointly formed a synergy to deal with radicalism among ASN by establishing a Task Force. Agam said:

> There are three main duties for this Task Force: *firstly* is to receive complaints; *secondly* is to follow up on complaints; and thirdly is to provide recommendations for handling to staffing supervisors or authorized officials. (Kementerian Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan 2019:1)

To support the duties of this task force, a particular complaints portal was built with.[2] Through this portal, anyone can report violations committed by ASN related to radicalism. Eleven points can be employed for complaining against an ASN, including the distribution of text, images, audio, and video

related to hate speech, both against Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, and related to SARA (ethnicity, religion, race, and inter-group relations) issues.

In our opinion, efforts to ward off negative radicalism require a comprehensive and coordinated approach that involves multiple stakeholders. It's important to address both the ideological aspects of extremism and the socioeconomic factors that contribute to its appeal. In addition, fostering inclusive governance, addressing grievances, and promoting social cohesion play a vital role in preventing radicalisation and creating resilient communities.

Several fundamental reasons drive the growth of radicalism within the body of Muslims, thus its existence is highly complicated to fade away. Among the factors or reasons referred to are: firstly, groups with interests outside of Islam benefit from the presence of radical Islam. In this case, there is a possibility that this radical Islam was deliberately designed by other parties who reap the benefits. Secondly, there are unresolved social, political, and economic problems in the region of Muslim countries. Thirdly, the characteristics are transnational (Jainuri 2018:50; Mufid 2022).

The given description is only a sketch of the notions that represent a recent idea, are considered *radical,* and have strong historical roots in the context of religious politics in Indonesia. Therefore, caution is needed in analysing radicalism. Wise legal mechanisms are required in the process of minimising radicalism. Hence, if criminalisation is carried out without discrimination, it will sometimes bring new social violence (Ibrahim 2017:23). In this case, it needs to be understood that radicalism includes two meanings: firstly, as an ideology that does not compromise on the direction of development, change, and the concept of progress; therefore, they are considered as the direction of the radical right. Meanwhile, secondly, a non-compromising ideology based on historical values that resist change is called a radical left. Hence, these two models are then known as the term *extreme right* or *extreme left*, which is the opposite of moderate.

In line with the aforesaid statement, Muhammad Ali, an Indonesian religious observer defines moderate Islam as 'those who do not share the hard-line visions and actions' (Ali 2017:83). Thus, according to him, it can be said that moderate Islam is associated with Islamic groups that emphasise normal behaviour (*tawassut*) in understanding and implementing the religious teachings they strive for; being friendly and appreciating the diversity of opinions, prioritising the path of peace and dialogue in carrying out its mission. This style represents the *mainstream* of Indonesian Islam; although efforts to moderate Islam are still seeking an ideal form. As a form of response to various terror cases that often occur, the two largest religious organisations in Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), and Muhammadiyah, have sparked ideas about the importance of the idea of moderate Islam. As a concrete step to realising moderate Islam, for example, the two largest organisations initiated *the*

Jakarta International Islamic Conference, which representatives of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries attended. This conference, with the theme 'Da'wah Strategy Towards Ummatan Wasathon in Facing Radicalism', was held at the JCC Building on 13–15 October 2003 (Badruttaman 2017:329). This conference later inspired the establishment of the Center for Moderate Moslem (CMM) under the coordination of Muhammadiyah and NU. This institution then fights for 'Islam the Middle Way' for Indonesian Islam as a synthesis of the two extreme poles; between radical Islamic groups and the Liberal Islamic Network (JIL).

A spirit of optimism accompanies this CMM to provide Indonesia with a peaceful and polite Islamic style. This hope was conveyed directly by the late Abdurrahman Wahid, for example, the emergence of CMM received a warm welcome from the Indonesian Muslim community because this country is 'the country of moderate Moslems' (Wahid 2016:60). In carrying out this idea of Islamic moderation, the Ministry of Religious Affairs is the official governing body that is at the forefront of fighting for this type of Islam in Indonesia.

Expression of Muslim religiosity in Malaysia in warding off religious radicalism

The primary role holder in the deradicalisation programme in Malaysia is the Malaysian police or Royal Malaysian Police (RMP). The RMP carries out a process before entering the deradicalisation stage in prison. The process is arrest and detention, which are explained in detail (Aslam 2018:221) as follows: firstly, the RMP monitors incidents or tragedies committed by radical extremist groups. Secondly, collect all information about the perpetrator of the incident, and thirdly, arrest and raid the perpetrators. After being arrested, the RMP immediately takes the detainees for interrogation. After obtaining the desired information, the detainee is tried under the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* (POTA) (Aslam 2018:222). The POTA is a law in Malaysia that regulates the prevention and arrest of suspected terrorists or members of radical extremist groups who commit crimes that violate the law (POTA, Article 1).

The POTA has authorities written in Article 4 on *Detention and Restriction Orders*. These authorities (POTA, Article 4) are:

• Carrying out a series of processes to register the suspect's identity before being detained in prison
• Having the power to order RMP to commit detention without prior approval from the judge
• Having the power to extend the suspect's detention period and orders to suspend detention
• Having the authority to increase the detention period for the suspect
• Having the power to terminate the detention period of the suspect.

With the POTA, the RMP can directly indict how long the suspect will get a prison term and immediately put him in prison without waiting for a criminal verdict. Suspects who become convicts (*terror convicts*) enter the next deradicalisation policy stage. This deradicalisation is applied in prison. The RMP hands over the deradicalisation programme to the Malaysian Islamic Development Department (JAKIM) in prison.

The JAKIM is a government department in Malaysia that manages issues related to the Islamic religion, be it management related to halal food and drinks, preaching, to rectifying ideologies and deviant views in the Muslim community there (Aslam 2018:221). The JAKIM has a role in this deradicalisation to provide religious counselling to convicts and detect their misunderstandings about Islam. The Ministry of Religious Affairs is assisting JAKIM in finding Ustaz and clerics so they can be invited to cooperate in deradicalisation policies. These scholars and Ustaz work on clarifying aspects of ideology and understanding of *convicts*. Most *convicts* have a wrong perspective in understanding the teachings of Islam (Ali 2017:108).

In carrying out deradicalisation policies, Malaysia focusses on rehabilitation and religious development. Religious development in fighting radicalism is critical because it can touch the foundation of the problem related to the problem of radical ideology owned by radical extremist groups. At the end of the programme, radical ideology based on Salafi-Wahabism will be replaced by Islamic teachings following the Qur'an and Hadith.

There are four stages in the rehabilitation programme given to *convicts* (*terror convicts*), including:

• Counsellors from JAKIM and RMP relinquish negative ideology and change convicts' accurate perception of Islam.
• Counsellors invite the discussion of terrorist *convicts*. Each counsellor must challenge detainees to defend their ideology with questions given by counsellors. Counsellors must be able to provide intelligent answers based on a deep understanding of Islam.
• All ideological concepts adhered to by terrorist *convicts* who deviate are replaced by learning the correct interpretation of the Hadith and Qur'an.
• Starting a new chapter by teaching the more comprehensive Islamic religion in tandem with the advancement of the times (Interview with Students from Malaysia at the Tarbiyah Faculty of UIN Walisongo Semarang, 17 May 2022).

The Malaysian government has a deradicalisation module to help rehabilitate *convicts* and rebuild their personalities. This module emphasises teaching about holistic personality, self-reflection, social skills, minimising crime, religion, spirituality, the meaning of religious teachings, security, and psychology (Aslam 2018:96)

After handing over the deradicalisation process in prison to JAKIM, RMP has another role in dealing with the problem of terrorism and radicalism, namely establishing a Counter

Messaging Center (CMC). The CMC aims to fight the spread of digital information from radicals and block access to their content in cyberspace (Interview with the Chairperson of the Semarang City MUI, 12 July 2022).

The CMC works by monitoring sites and radical content that is reported to the RMP. Suppose it is proven that the content and the site are spreading distorted information about Islamic teachings and radical ideology. In that case, CMC will follow up with the RMP for further investigation (Hamid 2019).

In overcoming the issues of terrorism and radicalism, Indonesia and Malaysia both have deradicalisation policies. The deradicalisation policy in Malaysia is carried out by the RMP in collaboration with JAKIM, while in Indonesia, this policy is handled by the National Counter Terrorist Agency (BNPT). As a common feature, deradicalisation policies in Indonesia and Malaysia are assisted by the Ministry of Religion. The role of the Ministry of Religion in Malaysia is to assist JAKIM in finding counsellors who have work backgrounds as Ustaz and religious scholars. These counsellors will later be tasked with counselling on religious teachings to convicts in their rehabilitation programme. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Religious Affairs in Indonesia has a role in helping moderate religious teachings and participating actively in synergising the deradicalisation programme that the BNPT has planned for convicts. Therefore, this deradicalisation gets positive and successful final results. Even though there are slight differences in roles and implementation, cooperation with the Ministry of Religious Affairs has always benefitted JAKIM and BNPT. This cooperation also helps them to carry out deradicalisation policies as their responsibility.

Expression of Muslim religiosity in Thailand in warding off radicalism

The Thai Government's efforts to counteract radicalism include registering school identities and providing a curriculum discussed with related institutions (Monasteries, Christian Schools, Islamic Boarding Schools, or Islamic Schools) to provide an overview of appropriate education. In Thailand, there is no *Khilafah*-based religious radicalism or hard-line religious views from outside influences (Nurdin 2016). Even the separatist movement in Southern Thailand is not related to radical Islamic groups but is more local. Muslims in Thailand, especially those in the South, have no problem living in a majority country and accepting themselves as a minority. The issue of minorities and majorities is not a problem in Thailand because as long as the constitution guarantees their freedom of worship, there is no problem. The Thai people and government know that inter-community problems are not on religious issues but from local perspectives. The government's efforts in religious education are more to maintain Thailand's stability (Saputra 2019).

The expression of Muslim religiosity in Thailand in counteracting religious radicalism, for example, in Southern Thailand, especially in Yala City, with the Tablighi Jama'ah movement turning out to be so strong and lively. The Tablighi Jama'ah movement has entered villages in three provinces in the Southern region. The Tablighi Jama'ah movement, which is so phenomenal in eradicating radicalism and terrorism in Southern Thailand, employs *da'wah* with various models, such as the *maqomi* model. Firstly, *maqomi* model involves leaving the house and moving (*jaulah*) to preach in one's village, or a neighbouring village.

Secondly, the *Intiqoli* model. *Intiqoli* means preaching outside the village, with a minimum period of 40 days. The *Intiqoli da'wah* model is a *da'wah* model outside the village, out of town, out of the region, or in other countries. Thus, 'intiqoli' means *khuruj* or *jihad fi sabilillah* to carry out *da'wah* outside the village where he lives.

Thirdly, the model of *ta'lim wa ta'lum*. The *ta'lim* model is a model of spiritual development developed by the Tablighi Jama'ah movement throughout the world instead of *khuruj fi sabillah* activities.

Conclusion

The Indonesian government has made various deradicalisation efforts to minimise the spread of radicalism. However, heretofore, it has not shown adequate effectiveness.

In overcoming the issues of terrorism and radicalism, Indonesia and Malaysia have deradicalisation policies. The deradicalisation policy in Malaysia is carried out by the RMP in collaboration with JAKIM. In contrast, in Indonesia, this policy is handled by the BNPT.

Thai people have dominant religious adherents and strong power because the country's population is predominantly Buddhist. The Thai Government's efforts to counteract radicalism include registering school identities and providing a curriculum discussed with related institutions (Monasteries, Christian Schools, Islamic Boarding Schools, or Islamic Schools) to provide an overview of appropriate education.

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Competing interests

Authors' contributions

M.E.S., K.M., S.S.S., R.B.E., and A.P., contributed to collection of data, data documenting and analysis, and manuscript preparation. All authors have critically reviewed and approved the final draft and are responsible for the content and similarity index of the manuscript.

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Data availability

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