

UNDERSTANDING
THE PHENOMENON
OF ONLINE
RELIGIOUS
RADICALISM
IN INDONESIA

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On June 30th 2017, two Indonesian policemen were stabbed in a mosque by a man accusing them as the enemies of God. The perpetrator was then believed to be 'radicalized' after reading radical posts spread on websites and messenger applications.ⁱ



Summary

Religious radicalism has been a threat for many nations including Indonesia—like it or not—especially the ones that claim to run on behalf of Islam. In the age of the internet, radicalism is extended mainly on websites and social



media as these are mostly the media with minimum protection to spread ideas and to lure individuals vigorously seeking

for bigger causes to be a part of. Departing from logical correlations between terrorism and radicalism, this writing aims at exploring the nature of online radicalism – ranging from what it is to how it spreads – as well as the ways in which it can be contended.

Online Radicalism in Indonesia: At A Glance

Muslim radicals went underground during Indonesia's New Order regime, as it found difficult to confront the militaristic government. The movement emerged again after Soeharto fell in 1998. Some movements chose to translate their religious views into violence (such as the Bali bombings), and some chose the nonviolent actions (Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), for example).ⁱⁱⁱ A research argued that this post-Soeharto Islamist radicalism's root can be traced as far as the early stage of Indonesian history, in particular with the two relatively 'indigenous' Muslim political movements: the Darul Islam movement and the Masyumi party.^{iv} Those were the embryos of today's radicalism blooming in Indonesia—of course with additional influences from ongoing local and international dynamics.

As digital technology becomes an inseparable part of the lives of the world-biggest Muslim population nation, the radicals have a new method of spreading their ideas and presumably advancing their goals. They utilize the internet as a tool and to some extent, battlefield. Using a combination of traditional websites, mainstream social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) and other online services, radicals broadcast their views, provoke negative sentiment toward enemies, incite people to violence, glorify martyrs, create virtual communities with like-minded individuals, provide religious or legal justifications for proposed actions, and communicate with and groom new recruits.^v

In January 2017, not for the first time, Indonesian government shut down multiple websites alleged with radicalism or even terrorism. It was reported that the Communications and Information Ministry had also permitted the National Police, the National Counterterrorism Agency (BNPT) and the National Intelligence Agency (BIN) to block websites or social media accounts containing radical or terrorism-related content.^{vi} Recently, Indonesian government also made its decision on HTI. Although the organization proclaimed to be nonviolent, HTI activities (among them is online movement via websites and social media accounts such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook) were indicated as contradictory with the state ideology and the Constitution, so it is to be dissolved through the judicial process.^{vii} These cases portray how radicalism exists – and has been noticed by the government – in Indonesian cyber-sphere, along with other 'worrying' Indonesian netizens' habits like pointless Instagram-story updates and



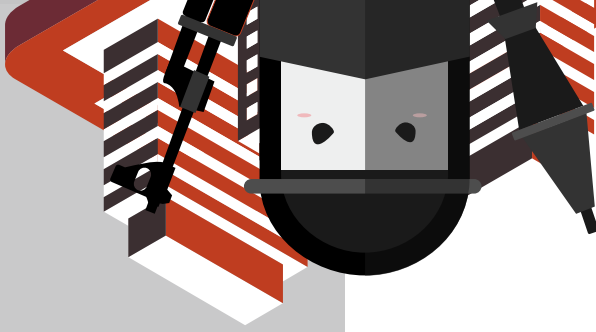
gossip accounts.

What are They?

From then on, we will talk more about radicalism and terrorism. For guidance, let's have a brief understanding about what 'radicalism' and 'terrorism' are by looking at the definitions. Beck proposes a definition of 'radicalism' as *"contention that is outside the common routines of politics present within a society, oriented towards substantial change in social, cultural, economic, and/or political structures, and undertaken by any actor using extra-institutional means."*^{viii} Meanwhile, Hoffman proposed a definition of terrorism that is a *"violence—or equally important, the threat of violence—used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of a political aim."*^{ix} It is easier to understand terrorism as a byproduct of radicalism. It is the worst and real form of radicalism when it is manifested into actions. Terrorism has resistance (challenging status quo politically) as common ground, sometimes also same ideology/political beliefs, yet their actions are violent. Hence, all terrorists, by definition, are radicals. Yet, all radicals do not end up as terrorists. In fact, only a few radicals venture into terrorism, and some radicals may tolerate or support violent act committed by terrorists. At the same time, it is clear that most terrorists start their individual journey towards extremist violence by firstly becoming radicalized militants.^x

Religious radicalism has purposes. Islamic State (IS)—along with other movements pledging allegiance with it—wishes to achieve a caliphate: a political entity governed by-so called-'Islamic' laws and leader, and they are willing to kill and die for that to come true. HTI also wishes for a caliphate, but a different and they want neither killing nor dying for it. Whatever it is, there is always political aspect inside religious radicals' goals and one seemingly necessary condition for the application of 'radicalism' is its 'fundamentality.'^{xi} Political radicalism is recognizable both as a mode of action and as a mode of thought. Political radicalism as a mode of action can be defined as the attempt to achieve fundamental change concerning fundamental socio-political norms, practices, relations, and institutions.^{xii} In short, they want today's life we live in to fit their visions.





The Rationality behind Terrorism Acts and Why It Matters to Understand Radicalism

We could learn the logic from terrorists that to some extent may apply in an observation towards Indonesian – and maybe global – radicalism. Terrorists, surprisingly, behave rationally in selecting their targets. It does not necessarily mean that scientists can predict terrorists' minds and clarify the existence of sophisticated calculation about which target they would pick next, but their decision in choosing which object to blow can be rationally determined. Terrorists tend to substitute less protected targets after protection has been increased at other targets. For example, the tightening of security measures at government embassies and government buildings provoked terrorists to turn to aircraft hijacking. When airports installed metal detectors, terrorists selected civilian targets that were less protected.^{xiii}

This article argues that radicals' maneuver is pretty much similar. They behave using the same logic: choosing a target that is a less guarded. Before the age of the internet, religious radicalism spread through the face-to-face meeting to indoctrinate ideologies, recruit members and establish organizations out of it. That was the time when social institutions were not as advanced as today. The horror of terrorism had not been widely pictured by media and the idea to avoid it was not mainstream yet in schools, per se. It does not mean that people were clueless, but for sure, society had fewer sources to confirm and compare ideas, making constant exposure towards radicalism could be the only truth that mattered.

The point is, it seemed understandable that people, a few decades ago, were less protected than today so that they became vulnerable 'targets' for radicalism. *The question now is, if the internet is the sea of abundant information and moderate ideas, how does radicalism manage to persist and spread? And, what is the role of the internet in fostering radicalism?*

The Internet and the Sense of Belonging

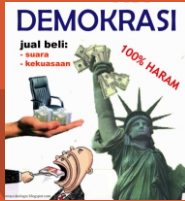
This writing offers an alternative explanation to the question of why, in the age of the internet, people could be tempted by radical thoughts in the virtual world. The answer could lay on the fact that those radicals (if not all, at least a significant amount of them) were 'defeated' people; individuals who were alienated by their surroundings. For them, the narratives delivered by the radical groups through the internet answers their anxiety, providing a sanctuary where they can be welcomed and accepted.^{xiv} That is something 'moderate ideas' barely offers. The radicals were not always economically marginal—although they could be. But what truly makes them join the club also involves a mix of social, political, and religious factors. On the other hand, internet—in terms of political activism—has been something that is a godsend for the radicals; providing an effective way for groups to promote, what some observers call a 'global dialectic,' a situation in which awakening, awareness, activism, and radicalism can be stimulated at a local level and then mobilized into a wider process of dissent and protest.^{xv} By the internet, setting an agenda, recruiting supporters, orchestrating events, or any operation they desire, are easier to do now more than ever. And boom, radical ideas are now everywhere.

Let's focus on the social aspect this time. The sense of belonging to a community is expensive. People will be lured to a community which gives them respect, power, and a bigger chance to contribute. On the other hand, the modern approach tends to see social movements, including radical/extremist movements, as the main vehicle for marginal and excluded people to gain access to and influence within an established political system.^{xvi} This approach was verified with research on IS combatants and defectors trying to figure out why they join IS. A series of interview concludes that among nine categories of reasons why some people joined IS are: *status seekers* (those who intent on improving 'their social standing', driven primarily by money and a certain recognition by others around them); *identity seekers* (those who feel isolated or alienated from their initial unfamiliar/unintelligible environment and seek to identify with another group); *revenge seekers* (those who consider themselves part of a group that is being repressed by the West or someone else); and *justice seekers* (those who respond to what they perceive as injustice).^{xvii} This result indicates that sense of belonging in a group is essential for human beings and radicalism uses it to drag vulnerable people. Radical ideas are successfully

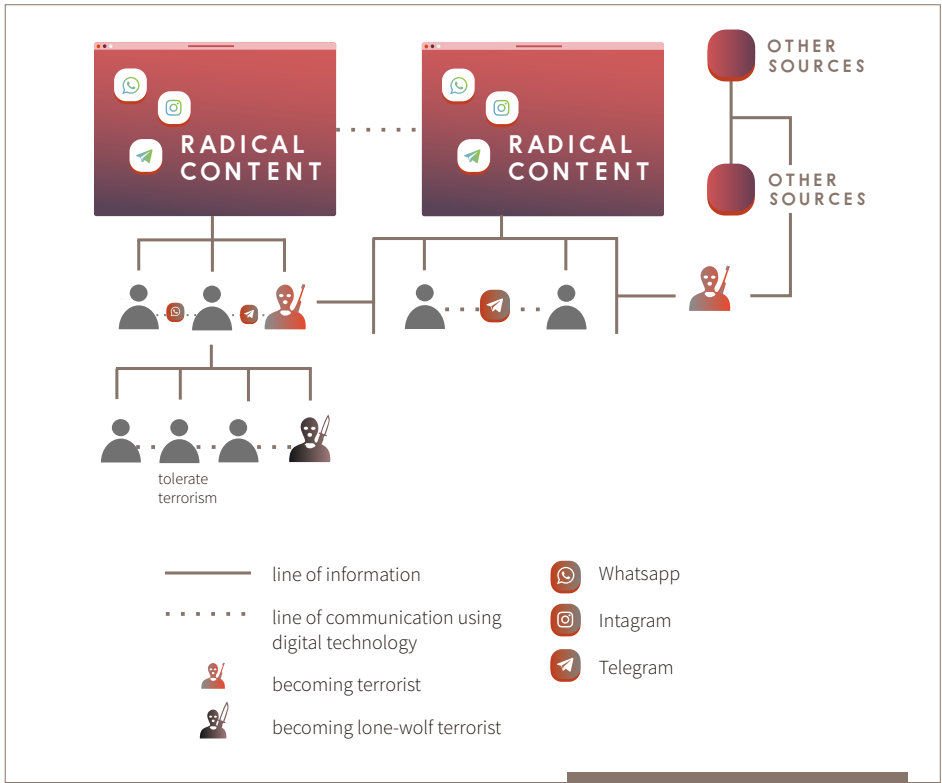
elaborating the cause of the injustice in their lives; that the poverty they suffer in is because the government doesn't follow God's law; that they have been living among the wrong community; or bringing the issues of solidarity about overseas fellow believers who are oppressed by the infidels. Then they urge to join a group who strives to change that.

Conventionally, radical indoctrination must be done in (a series of) physical meeting(s). Or, let's assume the radical ideas spread through a pamphlet. A tempted individual must seek the group then sit on the same table for a follow up (often in covert). It takes time, much effort, and somehow significant risk. 21st century came and *voila*, internet revolution! Those procedures can now be shortened. In this context, the crucial role of internet is bypassing actual interactions, and then making shortcuts to become a member of 'the greater community.' By clicks and seconds, ideas worth thousands of followers quickly and safely snatch viewers' attention. Each step of becoming a radical can be determined by how many articles a person read or videos watched. Several examples of the radical contents spread on the internet can be seen below.





Regarding the number of followers, the multiplying effect could be tremendous. Radicalism spread in Southeast Asia for example, in countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia which have a Muslim majority and closely-linked languages, radical propaganda in social media done in one's language can be understandable by another, broadening the reach and making social media propaganda the most significant mean of recruitment.^{xviii} Around the world, on average, 3.5 terrorism related incidents occur daily. Global expert agrees that the increase of this number has a lot to do with the success of militant groups in using social media to recruit new fighters.^{xix} The previous study conducted by the University of Haifa correspondingly concluded that 90 percent of organized terrorism on the internet is being carried out through social media, which allows terrorist organizations to be active in recruiting new fighters without geographical restrictions.^{xx} Not to mention that the internet has created a new battlefield for radicals. Both violent and nonviolent radicals still maintain their traditional battlegrounds, such as vital objects to explode or roads to march on. But it opens another option. Sympathizers can contribute to the movement by retweeting, reposting, or making their contents which are in line with the spirit of the movement. Defending a stance on a specific issue through online articles or launching cyber-attack can also be possible since instruction of hacking manuals was reported to be found in some Indonesian radical websites.^{xxi} Congratulations, the 'warriors' are now nurtured and operate digitally. A visualized flow of how the whole online radicalism works and spreads can be seen below.



The Weak Spots

Bringing the logic of how terrorists pick targets to how online radicalism spreads is not (perhaps yet) scientifically justifiable because radicalism is not always terrorism—even though they share many similarities. This writing argues that one of the things they have in common is a patterned movement in picking targets—that they tend to hit weak spots in a system. In this sense, the logic of terrorist operation may represent radical movement in cyber space because they have a common goal of challenging status quo. They operate for a same/similar cause and root at the very same ground. Let's bring up an analogy: a cup of coffee may evolve into a cup of cappuccino by pouring some milk into it. Both taste different since one has additional feature compared to another, yet they serve the same purpose of making us awake all night long since both contain caffeine. The Coffee is the radicalism, the milk is the violence, and the cappuccino is the terrorism. The

which tend to strike the 'weak spots' among society.

Under this assumption, we can perceive that these online warriors (netizens) are the weak spots of the society, so is the internet. Excluded from moderate society and inconvenient with the current situation, these people are seeking safe haven. The Internet could be a place where individuals encounter radical ideology, their safe haven.^{xxii}

The Internet, an unlimited virtual sphere with limited official control that connects people a thousand miles away in an instant, also definitely allows people to be exposed by radicalism. Even if the government (and social media companies) hunt down radical contents and sometimes arrest the men behind the desk, it is still relatively easy for radical netizens to make new accounts/identities and get back in action. This less guarded digital sphere then becomes the virtual rendezvous for potential individuals and radical groups. Radical ideas promoted by radical groups in various websites, blogs, or social media accounts invite interested people to join the cause. These individuals are finally able to discover factions that may channel their aggressive desire.

One of the things that might just cross your mind is that the 9/11 and the netizens are two completely different things. 9/11 is a real, tangible, literally a vital object, and resulted in many casualties. Meanwhile, netizens are candidates, subjects instead of objects, and killing no one yet. Yes, this discussion seconds such understanding, but that's not the reason the two are brought here and compared. The reason is that launching propaganda on the internet and blowing up a building might cause one same outcome: *to shock current ruling system they are against for the sake of destabilization to achieve the fundamental change* we talked about previously. Creating more cyber mass help them to make the destabilization more decentralized: to start turbulence from the bottom, watering the seeds of radicalism from one account to another, and causing online debate or attack that doesn't always need to affecting national stability but annealing presence from the simplest virtual public sphere. In the worst case, these cyber followers could be actors who act in real life, whether violently or non-violently. Creating more cyber mass helps them to make the destabilization more decentralized: to start turbulence from the bottom, watering the seeds of radicalism from one account to another, and causing online debate or attack that doesn't always need to affecting national stability but annealing presence from the simplest virtual public sphere. In the worst case, these cyber followers could be actors who act in real life, whether violently or non-violently. Veteran members of

IS are using a social-networking website to answer mundane questions from aspiring potentials, who want answers on such prosaic issues like what to wear, how cold it gets in IS 'territory', or whether they have to buy their weapons; all for the sake of inviting recruits that join them on the field.^{xxiii} Non-violent religious radicals such as HTI also often make online publications to inform its followers and sympathizers that their upcoming virtual and real events which are ranging from discussions, parades, demonstrations/protests, to International Caliphate Conference.^{xxiv}

Reflection on Indonesia, Concerns to Address

To be clear, political radicalism as a mode of action can take non-revolutionary and non-violent form. That being said, political radicalism as a mode of action can also take revolutionary and violent shape; it can involve acts of terrorism, for instance.^{xxv} In other countries, anti-colonialism was an important source of extremism/radicalism in the twentieth century. Even Nelson Mandela, head of the group “Spirit of the Nation” in his early days, planned and participated in violent activities, although the group did not cause any deaths. However, radical movement is not necessarily violent. The classic example of a non-violent radical is Gandhi, who invented the idea of non-violence as a force with his concept of *satyagraha*.^{xxvi}

Website and social media are the anchors of Indonesian online radicalism. There are not many types of research with the specific topic of online radicalism in Indonesia, which makes understanding upon this matter left some holes and questions, especially when it comes to the recent issue development. Nevertheless, some inspiring research at this topic might help. Research on Indonesian radical websites found that Indonesian radical websites possess their characteristics: *first*, Indonesian radical websites are very concerned about matters outside Indonesia, such as Middle-Eastern conflicts and Muslim-oppressed minority in various countries. *Secondly*, even though the websites operate relatively independent of one another, there is a supportive relationship among the radical websites since many sites are inter-related in the sense that they frequently redistribute and circulate the same materials. Such symbiosis was also found in Indonesian and foreign radical websites. *Third*, Indonesian radical websites contain propaganda, conspiracy theories, or simply the negative portrayals of the West and other perceived enemies. *Fourth*, some of the websites are making themselves billboards for

online advertisement to collect fund for web maintenance. *Fifth*, some websites had bomb manuals, violent instructions, hacking method, or other offensive guidance for the viewers to follow.

A glimpse of observation on Indonesian radicalism in social media also suggests equivalent indication that radicalism is developing vastly. The ideas often embedded in dedicated personal and non-personal accounts, populating online discussions with nonsensical extreme values, sometimes endorsing hatred and featuring hoaxes to deceive illiterate netizens. Provocations and constructions of common enemies are also new trends in social media, putting vulnerable netizens in a state of the urge to confront, in the name of God.

Responding online radicalism is neither an easy nor a quick work. Indonesian government does an outstanding job in hunting down online threads as earlier mentioned in this article. However, a more comprehensive approach is needed. Cooperation among stake holders in society with government coordination/supervision is crucial to handle the situation. Government as the only legitimate actor in Indonesia to manage security and stability is an enough reason to run the leadership in such measure. Nevertheless, neglecting the role of non-government actors could lead to catastrophe since government alone may never have adequate resources to oversee the whole nation, on the ground and in the virtual world. Since many people are dragged into radicalism because of their desire upon social acknowledgment, there has to be a way for the government along with civil-society to include them in the society to accommodate and control their 'needs.' In the practical level, indeed, the government is less likely to have a significant role in creating such way. Instead, family, school, neighborhood, religious institutions (which fortunately are supposed to be under the supervision of Ministry of Religion), and other formal and non-formal citizen-based social units/groups (which, again, are fortunately abundant in Indonesian society) also play important roles. However, the government remains as the central actor to ensure all efforts come into play. All parties must put an eye on this matter and make radicalism a common concern. Excluding and treating affected individuals harshly will only worsen their alienation. Thus, integration in the community for them is strongly advised.

Since the internet is prone to the influence of radicalism, it must be well guarded by all responsible parties. Surveillance in Indonesia should expand its operation, not only

suspend accounts or websites but also hunt down provocative contents that are not always attached to a specific account but circulating widely and wildly throughout the web. Those materials might contain and/or advertise radical values which could be harmful to the safety of the society, at both the digital and the real world.

Lastly, this article would like to affirm that assuming all online radicals would launch terror attacks in the real world is a jumping-to-conclusion bias because an online activist is not a necessarily a real world activist and vice versa. Nonetheless, we have to admit that a terrorizing act as a manifestation of radicalism in an extreme case can be done by an organized attack or just a lone-wolf with a knife, stabbing people they think deserve to die.

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