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Guarding Indonesia's Moderate Islamic Public Sphere? Nahdlatul Ulama's Intolerant Resistance to Salafi-Wahhabi Institutional Expansion

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Abstract

The rapid institutional expansion of Salafi-Wahhabi groups in Indonesia, challenging the dominance of moderate traditionalist Islam, is important to study because it raises critical questions about tolerance, pluralism, and the quality of democracy in the world's largest Muslim-majority country. Previous research has insufficiently explored the local politics of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in managing deliberative public space and the paradox of intolerance within a moderate majority. This study reveals how local NU actors in Jember negotiate resistance to Salafi-Wahhabi preaching and institutional expansion, particularly the Imam Syafi'i Islamic Dirasat College (STDI) in Jember and its affiliated schools. This research employs a qualitative approach involving participant observation and in-depth interviews with NU Jember leaders, cadres, and activists in 2019–2020. Data were analyzed inductively by Habermas's public sphere theory and the concept of Civil Islam. The findings reveal a double paradox: NU's intolerance of *takfir* and *tabdi'* practices helps limit exclusivist ideology and protect a moderate public sphere, but its rejection of Salafi educational institutions—which sometimes escalates into confrontation—undermines civil pluralism and contributes to the deconsolidation of local democracy. Future research should adopt a mixed-methods approach to compare regional dynamics and develop inclusive policy frameworks for managing religious public spaces in Muslim-majority democracies.

Keywords: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Salafi-Wahhabi, Civil Islam, religious moderation, public sphere.

Introduction

In recent years, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has mounted increasingly assertive opposition to the presence of Wahhabi-Salafi fundamentalist Islamic groups in Indonesia. NU has called on the government to disband Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), rejected the da'wah activism of popular preacher Felix Siauw (an HTI affiliate), supported the hashtag campaign #tenggelamkanPKS that portrays the Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS) as an organization that insults NU ulama, and promoted the establishment of Aswaja Centers, Islam Nusantara initiatives, *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) themed television, radio, magazines, and other media outlets, along with deradicalization programs led by the Nahdliyin community. These initiatives represent only some of the diverse forms of resistance that NU has directed against the Wahhabi-Salafi movement. Although varied in approach, NU members generally adopt a stance of resistance toward Wahhabi-Salafi groups, which they regard as a serious threat to the moderate,

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tolerant, and inclusive character of Indonesian Islam. They argue that the religious activism of these groups is not limited to the purification and Arabization of Indonesian Islam but also seeks ultimately to transform Indonesia into an Islamic state (Hilmy, 2010; Woodward, 2017).

The question of mainstream Islam's—including NU's—resistance toward Wahhabi-Salafi fundamentalist minority groups is by no means new (Zuhdi, 2011; Nurdin, 2013; Solehuddin, 2013; Muthohirin, 2015). A substantial body of scholarship has examined this issue, primarily through theological and political lenses. These studies typically identify religious (theological) and religio-political dimensions as the central, rather than peripheral, drivers of conflict between the Sunni Islamic majority and fundamentalist Muslim minorities. Exclusivism, a textualist, rigid, and literalist religious worldview on one side, and the Islamization of the public sphere on the other, constitute key theological-political factors fueling tensions between the two camps (Hilmy, 2015).

By contrast, the politics of managing deliberative public space—specifically, mainstream Islam's (NU's) resistant attitude toward the Wahhabi-Salafi fundamentalist minority (Bruinessen, 2004)—has received far less scholarly attention. Existing analyzes remain limited and require further development. This study addresses this gap by examining the resistance mounted by local NU organizations against Wahhabi-Salafi groups that seek to reshape Indonesia's Islamic public sphere in Jember, East Java. It argues that the Islamic public sphere functions as an arena of ideological-political contestation among diverse Islamic actors, including traditionalist Islam and Wahhabi-Salafi fundamentalism (Ansor, 2016).

Within resistance theory, acts of resistance are usually closely linked to a subordinate group's perception of threat from a dominant group. In the case of NU's resistance to Salafi-Wahhabi expansion, however, the dominant group (NU) is the one resisting the subaltern group. This study contends that the intensification of NU's resistance stems from the mainstream organization's growing sense of threat posed by the rapid development of Wahhabi-Salafi groups, which jeopardizes NU's religious authority and its longstanding dominance over the religious public sphere (Shidqi, 2012).

Previous scholarship on NU's resistance to Salafi-Wahhabi expansion—particularly in the contexts of religious public-space management, the paradox of moderation, and majority-minority ideological contestation—can be grouped into three main streams: (1) NU's responses to Wahhabism/Salafism at both national and local levels; (2) intra-Muslim conflicts in East Java related to Salafi institutional expansion; and (3) theoretical critiques of the contradictions between pluralism and intolerance within moderate organizations such as NU.

Shidqi (2012), for instance, shows that NU's resistance to Wahhabi expansion has contributed to deradicalization efforts in Islamic education by reinforcing *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah* studies and NU identity in Yogyakarta. These findings parallel the Jember case, where NU has actively opposed institutions such as Imam Syafi'i Islamic Dirasat College (STDI) Jember. Chaplin's 2018 study in Citizenship Studies on Wahdah Islam-

iyah as a form of Salafi civil activism highlights how NU frames Salafism as an intolerant transnational Islam that is incompatible with Southeast Asia's maritime cultural traditions—thus supporting this article's argument concerning the perceived threats of purification and Arabization to local Islamic public space. Hasan (2008), in Laskar Jihad and his subsequent works, similarly documents the post-New Order expansion of Salafism through Islamic and Arabic College of Indonesia (LIPIA) networks, Middle Eastern alumni, and da'wah media, which in turn provoked resistance from traditionalist groups such as NU—a dynamic clearly evident in the expansion of STDI in Jember.

More specifically, this study examines the resistance of the mainstream Islamic organization NU toward the Wahhabi-Salafi fundamentalist minority in relation to the competition for control over the Islamic public sphere in Jember. As a representative of moderate Islam, NU's resistance to groups long associated with puritan, orthodox, and even intolerant religious doctrines and activism may, in certain respects, exert a constructive influence on the management of a moderate, tolerant, and pluralistic Islamic public space (Habermas, 2011; Hasan, 2009). Nevertheless, it is essential to subject this resistance to further scrutiny: does it genuinely reinforce the principles of moderation and pluralism that NU has long championed, or does it instead undermine them?

Literature Review

Because of greater openness and democratization, intensified contestation over the Islamic public sphere—particularly among Muslim civil society groups—has become an unavoidable reality. Numerous Islamic civil society organizations have grown more assertive in promoting their respective religious ideologies and doctrines. Each group seeks to actualize itself by influencing and, in some cases, reshaping the configuration of the Islamic public sphere. In the debates surrounding the draft Law on the National Education System (which was eventually enacted) and the Joint Ministerial Decree on the Establishment of Houses of Worship, for example, religious groups on both sides actively engaged in producing discourse and practical action, including demonstrations. These cases clearly illustrate the competition for access to and control over the public sphere, especially between majority and minority religious actors (Retnaningsih et al., 2007).

In public sphere theory, the concept refers to an arena of interaction where discourses, ideologies, and various social forces compete to influence public policy. The term is inseparable from Jürgen Habermas, who consistently argued in his writings that the public sphere serves as a mechanism for identifying societal problems that require resolution at the executive or legislative levels. Through contestation in the public sphere, governments and legislatures are ideally able to discern the solutions that society desires (Habermas, 2011).

In advanced democracies such as those in Europe and the United States, many societal issues are left to the public itself to resolve, with government and the legislature acting merely as facilitators. For instance, when a city plans to build a shopping mall

and sparks controversy, the government may facilitate a public vote to determine levels of support or opposition. It is in such settings that the public sphere truly functions. According to Habermas, the public sphere operates effectively only when it meets at least three conditions: first, civility; second, adherence to the rule of law (since democracy rests on the rule of law); and third, non-violence, to prevent the public sphere from descending into anarchy (Habermas, 2011).

In this study, civil society is understood in a relatively flexible sense as an organized social unit that is open to all, operating on the principles of voluntariness and autonomy. What is the relationship between civil society and the public sphere? Civil society is the core of the public sphere and democracy, serving as the arena where diverse social interests are negotiated. It is often argued that a vibrant civil society is essential to democracy. Robert Putnam even maintains that democracy cannot thrive without "bowling clubs," as these exemplify civil society in the American context; membership in such clubs does not require one to be Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or anything else (Retnaningsih et al., 2007). From a liberal perspective, civil society embodies liberal democracy: it cannot be considered true civil society unless it upholds liberal values such as respect for pluralism, tolerance, and rejection of state intervention. In contrast, neo-Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci argue that civil society must remain neutral with regard to any ideology. In practice, however, no civil society is entirely free from ideological influence, and the purported commitment to pluralism and tolerance inevitably involves processes of construction and reproduction that do not fully align with the ideal (Casanova, 2001).

When civil society is defined as an open, autonomous space filled by voluntary members, any organization can qualify as part of it—including gangs, mafias, or criminal groups. Scholars, therefore, distinguish two types of civil society. The first is an ethical civil society characterized by adherence to law, tolerance, respect for human rights, and an anti-violent ethos; this form functions as a vital engine for democratic public spheres. The second type does not correlate positively with democratization. Religious fundamentalist groups, for instance, must be tolerated within a democratic system, yet they cannot be regarded as contributing positively to democracy (Retnaningsih et al., 2007).

Scholars such as José Casanova, Robert N. Bellah, Philip E. Hammond, Ronald F. Thiemann, D. Herbert, Robert W. Hefner, and others have offered perspectives on the relationship between religion and the public sphere. They emphasize the positive contribution that religion (including Islam)—once predicted to decline with modernization—can make to the construction of democratic public spheres (Al Qurtuby, 2013). The Reformasi movement provides a concrete example: progressive and liberal Muslim civil society actors played a pivotal role not only in toppling Suharto's authoritarian regime but also in driving broader socio-political democratization.

Nevertheless, the growing role of religion in the public sphere does not automatically correlate with democratic maturation. In cases such as NU's resistance to the Salafi minority within Indonesia's Muslim public sphere, critical evaluation is required. To

a certain extent, NU's resistant stance toward Wahhabi-Salafi fundamentalist minorities does not fully align with the development of a tolerant, pluralistic, and democratic Islamic public sphere. Depuritanization or defundamentalization efforts by NU frequently exceed the norms of pluralism and democratization. As Abdurrahman Wahid observed, Islamic teachings guarantee five basic human rights: (1) physical safety of citizens from unlawful acts; (2) freedom of religious belief without coercion; (3) safety of family and descendants; (4) security of property and private ownership; and (5) security of profession (Wahid, 2007).

Jürgen Habermas remains the central figure who introduced the concept and theory of the public sphere into studies of society, politics, communication, and religion. His theoretical frameworks have inspired numerous scholars across the social sciences, such as M. Hoexter (2002), Gail Lee Bernstein et al. (2005), M.A. Sani (2009), Silvio Ferrari and Sabrina Pastorelli (2012), J.R. Bowen (2004), D. Reetz (2006), and many others. These studies broadly address the public sphere in relation to social, political, and religious issues. However, they have not yet provided a specific and comprehensive analysis of the resistance mounted by the Nahdliyin (NU) majority against the Wahhabi-Salafi fundamentalist minority in controlling the Islamic public sphere in Jember. As the majority group, NU remains powerful and dominant in managing the Islamic public sphere. Yet the rapid expansion of Wahhabi-Salafi groups—both ideologically and spatially—poses a challenge. Backed by substantial financial resources reportedly originating from the Middle East, these minority fundamentalist actors have been able to enlarge their presence by purchasing land from local residents. .

Method

This study used a qualitative approach with empirical field data. This method was chosen to uncover structured meanings in the mindsets of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) actors in Jember, rather than just their observable actions (Ahimsa-Putra, 2007). Using a grounded qualitative strategy, the research provides rich data on the Nahdliyin majority's resistance to the Salafi fundamentalist minority. These field data strengthen, redefine, and challenge concepts about majority–minority relations and democratization in Indonesia's Islamic public sphere.

Data sources were selected through purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of participants directly involved in the resistance dynamics under study, including key informants from the Syuriah and Tanfidziyah boards of PCNU Jember, pesantren leaders, Aswaja Center activists, PMII cadres, and representatives from the Salafi-Wahhabi community. Data collection employed participant observation to capture information about Nahdliyin research subjects, their activities, and the Jember setting. In-depth interviews and observation were the main techniques for eliciting subjects' understandings of their actions, and were supplemented by documentary and library research that drew on relevant literature and official documents.

Data analysis followed an inductive process: data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing (Wahab, 2000). The resulting interpretations were shaped

by the researcher's perspective, conceptual framework, attitude, and field role. Through thematic coding, patterns of resistance and threat perception were identified, and these findings were then interpreted with reference to Habermas's (2011) theory of the public sphere and the broader concept of Civil Islam. Throughout the analysis, the researcher's positionality and its influence were considered (Ahimsa-Putra, 2007).

Results and Discussion

NU's Resistance against the Wahabi-Salafi

NU Jember has consistently opposed Wahhabi-Salafi doctrines, asserting that this doctrine fundamentally contradicts NU's traditional Islamic practices. Wahhabi ideology, influential in Saudi Arabia and introduced by Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–1787), seeks a strict return to the Qur'an and Hadith while rejecting rituals such as visiting graves, *selamatan*, and *talkin* (whispering the *shahada* to the deceased before burial), among other traditional practices (Anam, 1999). The spread of Wahhabi-Salafi thought as a puritanical movement deeply challenged Indonesia's Islamic landscape in the twentieth century, prompting modernist organizations like Muhammadiyah to purify Islamic traditional practices it deemed *takhayyul, bid'ah*, and *churafat* (superstition, innovation, and heresy), regarding them as contradictory to the Qur'an and Hadith. NU's resistance was rooted in the defense of local custom and faith traditions (Mulkhan, 2010).

As modernist organizations gained traction, the expansion of reformist religious movements in Indonesia posed existential threats to traditionalist Muslims' established rituals and cultural authority. Traditionalists like NU viewed the reformers' push as a challenge to centuries-old traditions rooted in the Wali Songo. In response, they acted vigorously, sparking a prolonged ideological struggle against groups such as Muhammadiyah (Brown, 2019). In this evolving context, the spread of Wahhabi-Salafi ideology in Indonesia accelerated after the New Order era. This period brought evolving terminology and identities. The terms 'Wahhabi' or 'Wahhabism' were coined by outsiders. Adherents themselves prefer "al-Muwahhidun" or 'Ahl al-Tawhid,' reflecting their exclusive emphasis on tawhid as the foundation of Islam. Muhammad ibn Abdul Wahhab ibn Sulaiman al-Tamimi, born in 1115 H/1703 CE in Uyainah, Najd region of the Arabian Peninsula, initiated the movement (Esposito, 2001; Najib, 2009; Algar, 2011). Although labeled Wahhabi, they claim to follow Ibn Taymiyyah and also identify as Salafi. Theologically, there is no fundamental difference between Wahhabi and Salafi; the two terms are like two sides of the same coin. In the Arabian Peninsula, they are often called Wahhabiyyah Hanabilah. When exported beyond Saudi Arabia—especially after Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Albani, a leading hadith scholar, joined them—they adopted the name Salafi. Many refer to them as Salafi-Wahhabi (Zahrah, n.d.).

During these changes, Wahhabi-Salafi groups in Indonesia expanded rapidly. They received support from influential alumni and modern media outlets, especially after LIPIA alumni of Arab descent returned from universities in the Middle East. Figures

such as Ja'far Umar Thalib, Yazid Abdul Qadir Jawwaz, and Yusuf Usman Baisa have been active in both mosque- and campus-based study circles. They also disseminate their ideas through print media, such as the magazine *As-Sunnah,* first published in 1994. *As-Sunnah* promoted Wahhabi teachings and Saudi religious authorities' official fatwas. Topics included beards, television, radio, and similar matters. In addition, they conduct da'wah through mass and electronic media (radio, magazines, bulletins, and television) as well as social media platforms (YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). The number of followers, likes, and subscribers for Salafi-Wahhabi preachers is substantial, especially among millennial and urban middle-class Muslims (Hasan, 2008).

Following these changes, Wahhabi-Salafi institutions in Jember were established by Indonesian Salafi-Wahhabi intellectuals who had studied in Yemen and Madinah. The first group, led by Lukman Ba'abduh, established a pesantren as their da'wah center. A second, related but distinct group created a formal higher education institution, STDI Imam Syafi'i (2024). According to one ustadz, this idea originated in informal discussions among Indonesian students at the Islamic University of Madinah. One afternoon in 2005, several Indonesian students gathered at Masjid Nabawi and discussed their plan to establish an Islamic educational institution in Indonesia to continue their teaching after graduation (Arifin and Habibi, personal communication, September 5, 2019).

The accelerating institutional advance of Wahhabi-Salafi groups like STDI is compeling NU to defend its religious and social influence in Jembe, turning the contest for religious authority into the primary local tension. As a result of these efforts, over time, the Salafi-Wahhabi STDI group has expanded its reach by expanding into new residential areas, developing educational facilities, and intensifying da'wah activities, marking a significant phase in the local religious landscape. Its success cannot be separated from its substantial financial resources, reportedly supported by donors from the Middle East. What was once a limited and enclosed educational area has now grown significantly. Much of the surrounding land has been purchased by STDI at relatively high prices. Moreover, the group has begun establishing formal schools from kindergarten (TK) and elementary (SD) levels, and more recently, a junior high school (SMP), whose status is still contested by NU. Should STDI's institutional expansion continue at this rapid pace, Wahhabi-Salafi ideology could potentially displace NU's dominant religious influence in the region (one of NU Jember's Syuriah board, personal communication, June 14, 2019).

For NU, STDI's expansion represents a direct and urgent challenge to NU's religious identity, not just ordinary rivalry. Salafi-Wahhabi da'wah activities are seen as antagonistic attacks on traditionalist practices—potentially encouraging community members to abandon, denounce, or label their own heritage as heretical. It is this expansion by STDI that has coincided with heightened tensions involving traditionalist Muslims. NU actors argue that the da'wah and educational activities of STDI are perceived to label traditionalist practices as deviant and heretical (*tabdi'*). Testimonies cited by NU members describe children who attend STDI schools subsequently disowning or declaring their

parents to be infidels (*takfir*). According to NU leaders and officials in Jember, they are viewed as posing a threat to the Muslim community and to traditionalist religious rituals. In one statement, a *kiai* (cleric) and senior PCNU Jember (NU branch organization in Jember Regency) official remarked in NU Jember's Focus Group Discussion (October 31, 2019): It is not a problem if Wahhabi-Salafi groups engage in da'wah (spreading their teachings), as long as they do not declare traditional practices heretical, cause apostasy, or accuse others of disbelief—especially the religious practices of NU.

Apart from ideological concerns, NU's resistance relates to perceived non-ideological threats from Wahhabi-Salafi groups. Opposition from pesantren and NU circles to new pesantren and STDI, including incidents of physical clashes, challenges traditionalists' religious authority. Efforts to open an SMP are being resisted due to concerns about losing the traditional Muslim mass base. The new group's significant and legitimate financial capital, used to purchase land at premium prices, heightens these concerns (one of NU Jember's Tanfidziyah board, personal communication, September 11, 2019).

Table 1. ***NU's Resistance to the Wahabi-Salafi Movement in Jember***

No	Main Point	Findings	Description	Sources
1	Intolerant Resistance	It is not a problem if Wahhabi-Salafi groups engage in da'wah... as long as they do not declare traditional practices heretical, cause apostasy, or accuse others of disbelief.	NU actors reject Salafi da'wah and institutional growth (pesantren, STDI SMP) when perceived as involving *takfir/ tabdi'* against NU rituals (e.g., ziarah kubur, tahlilan).	FGD PCNU Jember (Oct 31, 2019); Kiai/Syuriah board member
2	Threat to Religious Authority & Mass Base	Should STDI's institutional expansion continue at this rapid pace, Wahhabi-Salafi ideology could potentially displace NU's dominant religious influence + aggressive land purchase at high prices.	Salafi institutions (STDI Imam Syafi'i and affiliated schools) threaten kiai authority and NU's traditional mass base through financial strength and rapid spatial expansion.	Syuriah board PCNU Jember (Jun 14, 2019); Tanfidziyah board (Sep 11, 2019)
3	*Takfir* and *Tabdi'* Practices	Children attending STDI schools disown or declare their own parents to be infidels (*takfir*).	Salafi da'wah accused of labeling NU traditional practices as *bid'ah* or shirk, leading to family division and apostasy concerns among local communities.	NU leaders & community testimonies (multiple interviews, 2019)
4	Non-Monolithic Voices within NU	No one has the right to prohibit any organization from existing... unless it contradicts the 1945 Constitution; NU must create checks and balances.	Minority internal perspective (Syuriah/Tanfidziyah & PMII cadres) advocates tolerance, constitutional rights, and self-reflection rather than outright rejection.	Senior Syuriah/ Tanfidziyah board (Aug 15, 2019); PMII Jember discussion (Aug 25, 2019)
5	Aswaja Reinterpretation	Reinterpretation of Aswaja as a methodology (*manhaj*) capable of addressing contemporary social problems such as pluralism, corruption, and multiculturalism.	Calls for contextualizing Aswaja values through pesantren, media, and cultural activities to engage youth and counter Salafi influence.	Ahmad Taufik (Nov 10, 2019); Barmawi, Aswaja Center activist (Sep 12, 2019)

These dynamics recall traditionalist resistance to the reform movement launched by modernists (Muhammadiyah) during the organization's early years. Greg Fealy notes that polarization between NU and Muhammadiyah stemmed from theological, social, and economic factors. The question of religious authority (*kiai*) became sensitive as modernists expanded their influence. Modernist organizations spread rapidly into East and Central Java, threatening the economic base of pesantren by successfully recruiting wealthy merchants and landowners who once supported *kiai* and *pesantren*. Traditionalists perceived the combination of religious and material challenges as a real threat to the Islamic leadership position in the community (Fealy, 1998).

Given these challenges, NU's responses to Wahhabi-Salafi groups reflect two main approaches. In general, NU organs tend to be intolerant towards these fundamentalist groups due to the perceived ideological challenge. They argue that groups holding different religious views, such as Wahhabi-Salafi, should not be positioned as "the other" to be avoided, ostracized, hated, or even opposed through violence. They understand that diversity within Muslim society is a natural inevitability, or in Qur'anic terms, *Sunnatullah* (the order of nature), which cannot be denied. In contrast, others hold different views, advocating tolerance and legal solutions and emphasizing that religious and organisational pluralism is protected by the Indonesian Constitution—unless organisations violate national law. This pragmatic perspective is voiced by some senior NU leaders (Syuriah and Tanfidziyah, the boards of NU Jember), who stress the rule of law and warn against vigilante action (personal communication, August 15, 2019).

They further contend that the principles of moderation derived from Aswaja teachings—*tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawasuth* (moderation), *tawazun* (balance), and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil)—should ideally serve as the foundation for NU Jember in managing a pluralistic Islamic public sphere. One of the important conclusions resulting from an informal discussion with cadres of the Indonesian Islamic Student Movement (PMII) Jember, an NU cadre organization, on August 25, 2019, was that NU Jember must create checks and balances in public life so that neither a dominant majority nor a radical minority emerges. In other words, no single dominant force—whether from radical Islam or elsewhere—should be allowed to arise unchecked in Jember society.

At the same time, the growing presence and expansive activities of fundamentalist Islamic groups should prompt NU Jember to engage in critical self-reflection regarding its own religious movements. NU Jember needs to take serious steps to redefine, revitalize, and contextualize its religious doctrines to better align with the needs of its community, especially the younger generation, who are familiar with social media. This reinterpretation of Aswaja's teachings must be accompanied by the production of more contextual discourse and its internalization among nahdliyin, the broader Muslim community, and adherents of other faiths in the Jember region. Here, reinterpretation and contextualization position Aswaja not merely as a school of thought (*madzhab*) to be believed or accepted, but also as a methodology (*manhaj*) capable of addressing con-

temporary social problems such as corruption, pluralism, multiculturalism, poverty, nationalism, ethnicity, and other social issues (Ahmad Taufik, personal communication, November 10, 2019).

Efforts to ground (internalize and transform) this moderate Islamic worldview, drawn from Aswaja values, are carried out through various cultural media, including pesantren, madrasah, and NU educational institutions from primary to higher education levels, as well as through arts and cultural media. Local media that form part of NU's heritage—such as *pengajian, yasinan, tahlilan, diba'an, muslimatan, bahtsul masa'il,* and other traditional forums—are also utilized to re-internalize the principles of Islamic moderation (Barmawi, Aswaja Center PCNU Jember activist, personal communication, September 12, 2019).

One important point to emphasize is that the reinterpretation and internalization of Aswaja-based Islamic moderation are always situated within the broader contexts of the Muslim community (*ummah*), Indonesian national identity, and universal humanity. For NU Jember, these national and humanistic contexts serve as the binding forces for all groups, regardless of ideological, ethnic, cultural, or political differences. Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution, as the foundational philosophy of the state, are final and must be upheld by all components of the nation. Moreover, in building a pluralistic and multicultural social order, the humanistic and national contexts must be placed at the forefront, based on the understanding that Islam's presence on earth is not only for Muslims but as a mercy for all creation *(rahmatan lil 'alamin)* (several youth intellectuals from NU Jember, informal discussion, September 12, 2019).

Maarif (20002) argues for prioritizing the humanistic dimension in transforming the mission of moderate Islam towards a more humane civilization, with the following arguments: (1) Islam's mission is none other than to be "a mercy for all creation" (*rahmatan lil 'alamin*). By making humanity the primary entry point, Muslim intellectuals are encouraged to think globally: all human beings, whoever they are, are fundamentally friends. Any conflict must be resolved within a framework of justice and civility; (2) from this humanistic position, the next step is the national context, as we all live and breathe within the territory of the Indonesian nation-state. Muslim intellectuals and the ummah as a whole must not confine themselves to narrow communal corridors; (3) human beings were not created in a single socio-cultural format but in diverse communities, each with its own characteristics. This diversity represents that God, the Creator, rejects uniformity, for uniformity impoverishes perspective and rigidifies social interaction; (4) in formulating national identity—where NU is destined to be one of the two main wings of Indonesian Islam—NU cadres must possess a vision and intellectual reach that extends beyond the confines of NU and Muhammadiyah circles. They are integral parts of three spheres of interaction: humanity, nationhood, and the ummah. All of this requires a bold and radical change in mindset and attitude.

NU's Resistance and the Paradox of Moderating the Islamic Public Sphere?

NU's resistance to fundamentalist Islamic groups highlights a central paradox: while NU is widely recognized for its moderation and pluralism (Arifianto, 2017), its defensive strategies against perceived radical threats raise questions about its consistency with these principles in the Islamic public sphere. For example, critics note shortcomings in NU's engagement, leading to accusations of pseudo-pluralism and uncertainty around its pluralist image (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). Indonesianist critics specifically cite NU's ambiguous defense of civil rights for groups like Shi'a, Ahmadiyah, and LGBT communities. Furthermore, NU has taken ultra-nationalist actions against radical minorities like HTI, sometimes employing similar radical methods. The government's dissolution of HTI is closely linked to pressure from moderate Islamic organizations, especially NU. Beyond HTI, NU draws criticism for using state power to remove Wahhabi/Salafi-PKS elements from public institutions—government, school, and university. These actions have intensified since the 212 Defending Islam rallies, which put both the state and moderate Islamic groups on the defensive (Hadiz, 2016).

In Jember, NU's resistance to the Wahhabi-Salafi STDI school highlights a central paradox: while NU seeks to counter perceived intolerance, its opposition may, in turn, compromise its pluralist identity. NU justifies this stance by citing Wahhabi-Salafi exclusivism, raising the risk of blurring its pluralist commitments (Rahmat, 2005). The conflict appears rooted in unresolved ideological differences. NU's actions respond to Wahhabi-Salafi groups' reported exclusivity and intolerance, which NU actors describe as directed toward NU teachings. This view is reinforced by reports of intolerant and radical tendencies among certain Wahhabi-Salafi groups.

However, it is regrettable that NU—as the majority—sometimes acts like an intolerant minority. Consequently, many critics say NU's heightened sense of threat still makes it behave as a minority or inferior majority (Toha, 2020); this, in turn, complicates social relations between Muslim groups. On both sides, especially among the majority NU, there is an increasingly divided view. Ultimately, the perspective of 'us' vs 'the other' leads many to focus more on differences than on common ground (Ali, 2003).

If NU and minority groups persist in these attitudes, mutual learning, understanding, respect, and genuine acceptance of other truths will remain limited. As a result, pluralism's principles can be misunderstood. Here, pluralism is more than simple tolerance in the Islamic public sphere. Tolerance implies indifference, while pluralism requires actively understanding, respecting, and accepting other truths, along with readiness to cooperate in diversity (Ali, 2003). Instead of fostering brotherhood, many NU members now regard fundamentalist groups as adversaries to be monitored or suppressed to prevent their infiltration in Jember (Abdul Wahab Ahmad, Bahtsul Masail PCNU Jember board, personal communication, August 5, 2019).

This conditional inclusiveness in NU Jember means the group is open only to fundamentalist groups that respect NU's creed and practices. Wahhabi-Salafi groups

often challenge these (Ahmad Taufik, Tanfidziyah board, personal communication, November 10, 2019). Similarly, NU does not oppose Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) in Jember or in Indonesia, provided HTI accepts Indonesia's unity and Pancasila. NU's support for coexistence and cooperation depends on the security of Aswaja An-Nahdliyah's creed and national identity. The focus remains on religious and national brotherhood (Pujiono, Tanfidziyah board, personal communication, November 7, 2019).

Despite stated conditions for inclusivity, tensions stem from theological, social, economic, and political sources. NU's anti-pluralist actions reflect these factors. NU struggles to grant fundamentalist groups full freedom to expand. In Puguer, for example, NU intervened when Habib Ali's pesantren grew rapidly. STDI's financial support also facilitated its growth, leading NU to try to limit its influence.

If NU, as the majority, keeps this resistant attitude, tensions and conflicts will increase and shape Muslim religious life. NU's stance toward Wahhabi-Salafi minorities moves it away from its long-standing moderate, tolerant, and pluralist character. This creates a double paradox within NU: it remains a moderate Islamic group meant to anchor pluralism and democracy (Menchik, 2015).

The decline in pluralistic, democratic religious governance in Jember's Islamic public sphere stems not only from intolerance by radical Islamic groups but also from intolerance among pluralist actors (NU) (Mietzner, 2018). The key question for NU is how it—a 'self'—should engage 'the other,' such as Wahhabi-Salafi and HTI. Will these others be seen as enemies, partners, neighbors, friends, or theological counterparts? If NU Jember stays committed to diversity, seeking solutions and common ground, then critics who claim NU is drifting toward intolerance and anti-pluralism will be proven wrong.

Table 2. ***Moderating the Islamic Public Sphere***

No	Key Findings	Contributing Factors	Theoretical Implications	Analytical Discussion
1	NU Jember generally adopts an intolerant stance toward Salafi-Wahhabi da'wah and institutional expansion, particularly rejecting the establishment of pesantren, the STDI Imam Syafi'i junior high school (SMP), and activities involving *takfir* and *tabdi'* against traditional NU rituals.	- Theological: Salafi-Wahhabi purification, Arabization, and labeling of NU practices as bid'ah or shirk. - Socio-economic: Threat to kiai authority and NU mass base due to aggressive land acquisition and student recruitment with substantial Middle Eastern funding.	Contributes to safeguarding a moderate Islamic public sphere by limiting exclusivist ideologies, yet damages NU's reputation as a tolerant organization.	Reflects an inferior complex among the dominant group, leading to excessive resistance. Parallels historical NU-Muhammadiyah tensions driven by both theological and material factors (Fealy, 1998). Constrains exclusivist ideologies but erodes civic pluralism in the Islamic public sphere (Habermas, 2011)

No	Key Findings	Contributing Factors	Theoretical Implications	Analytical Discussion
2	NU's resistance is paradoxical: it protects moderate Islam on one hand, but undermines pluralism and the deliberative public sphere on the other.	- Ideological: Perceived threat to Islam Nusantara and Pancasila ideology. - Structural: Rapid expansion of STDI supported by foreign funding.	Challenges of civic pluralism and the ideal of a deliberative public sphere (Habermas, 2011); Contributes to democratic deconsolidation and illiberal tendencies locally and nationally (Mietzner, 2018).	Highlights the paradox of moderation (Arifianto, 2017); a moderate organization employs intolerant methods against intolerance, reinforcing critiques of NU's pseudo-pluralism (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020).
3	Internal calls for self-reflection—NU's attitude is not monolithic; a minority internal voice advocates tolerance, self-reflection, and reinterpretation of Aswaja.	- Internal: Recognition of Sunnatullah (diversity) and constitutional rights. - Generational: Need to address youth and social media challenges.	Offers potential for more authentic revitalization of NU moderation and the establishment of checks and balances among Islamic groups.	Demonstrates the substantive potential of Civil Islam (Hefner, 2000). NU should shift from reactive resistance to proactive reinterpretation of Aswaja to address contemporary issues.
4	Contribution to conservative turn. NU's resistance contributes to the conservative turn in Indonesian Islam and the decline of democratic quality through restrictions on religious freedom within the Islamic public sphere.	- Combination of theological, material, and political factors in the post-Reformasi era, amplified by the 212 rallies. - Regional comparison: More accommodative approach in neighboring Bondowoso.	Decline in civil liberties at the local level (Jember); shift in NU's image from "smile Islam" to a more conservative orientation (Bruinessen, 2004).	Supports the thesis of fighting illiberalism with illiberalism (Mietzner, 2018). Authentic moderation requires self-critical reflection rather than mere opposition to fundamentalist groups (Menchik, 2019).

NU Jember's resistance to Wahhabi-Salafi fundamentalist groups crystallizes the central paradox: NU's reputation for moderation and tolerance is undermined by actions that complicate both local and national democratic consolidation. Scholars suggest that Indonesia's post-New Order democracy faces not consolidation but a drift toward illiberal democracy (Mietzner, 2018; Warburton, 2020). This context magnifies the main argument: NU's ambiguous stance on pluralism shapes the trajectory of Indonesian democracy.

Over 20 years of reformasi, Indonesia's democracy has fluctuated. After real progress in the early 2000s, democracy stalled under Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (2004–2014). Since 2014, the Jokowi era, expected progress has not occurred. Instead, democratic quality has declined. Scholars see weak civil liberties as a main sign of this decline (Mietzner, 2018; Menchik, 2019). Data on religious violence in post-New Order Indonesia illustrate this. The Jakarta Post reported 470 cases from 1967 to 1998 and 700

from 1998 to 2010. Setara Institute recorded 144 cases in 2011 and 264 in 2012 (Dijk & Kaptein, 2016). Komnas HAM reported 74 incidents in 2014, 78 in 2015, and nearly 100 in 2016 (Komnas HAM, January 16, 2017).

Compared with Egypt, Turkey, Nigeria, Senegal, and Pakistan, which have returned to authoritarian rule, Indonesia still stands as a relatively successful democracy. It also fares better than Southeast Asian neighbours such as Thailand and the Philippines, which have returned to authoritarianism. Singapore, meanwhile, has a dual authoritarian system. Despite major problems such as corruption, weak law enforcement, sectarianism, and inequality, Indonesia still holds direct elections as a crucial part of democracy (Menchik, 2019).

However, compared to earlier reformasi years, Indonesia's democracy has regressed. Many scholars cite radical Islamic groups' intolerance as a main cause, but moderate Islamic groups are also implicated. Critics argue that while some moderate organizations support pluralism and democracy, others do not. Menchik notes that values in moderate Islamic groups can align with democracy or authoritarianism. Cases of minority persecution—including Ahmadiyah, Shi'a, and Ahok (the Chinese-Christian former Jakarta governor)—involve both Sunni radicals and moderate NU and Muhammadiyah members. These cases show the compatibility between moderate Islam and authoritarian tendencies (Menchik, 2019).

Similar patterns are evident in regions such as Jember. Moderate Islamic actors (NU Jember) have also committed intolerant acts against minority groups like Wahhabi-Salafi. This behavior contradicts the tolerance, moderation, and pluralism that NU claims to uphold (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). NU Jember, through its madhhab affiliation, views itself as the most tolerant and pluralistic in managing diversity, often citing the freedom of non-Muslim groups in Jember as evidence. However, when confronted with internal Muslim differences—such as with Wahhabi-Salafi—NU Jember contends these teachings are dangerous and may mislead the predominantly moderate Sunni Muslim community.

This reality has contributed to a decline in democratic quality at the local level in Jember. NU's resistance to the Wahhabi-Salafi minority has diminished civil liberties, especially freedom of belief and religion, within the Islamic public sphere. In contrast, religious democratization in Jember lags behind neighboring Bondowoso, where minority groups like Shi'a and Wahhabi-Salafi have grown and thrived, enjoying space to coexist under a Sunni Muslim majority. Although tensions arise, they generally end peacefully. The majority and government authorities typically take a more accommodative, inclusive stance (Amal, 2020).

Conclusion

This resistance produces a dual outcome: on one hand, NU's intolerance toward exclusivist Salafi practices paradoxically helps safeguard a moderate Islamic public

sphere by limiting the spread of puritan and Arabizing ideologies. On the other hand, NU's rejection of Salafi institutional expansion—sometimes escalating into physical confrontations and administrative obstruction—undermines civic pluralism and the principles of deliberative public space.

The research contributes to debates on Civil Islam and religious moderation by revealing how a self-proclaimed moderate majority organization can both protect and undermine the public sphere it claims to guard. By grounding Habermas's public sphere theory and Hefner's Civil Islam framework in an ethnographic study of intra-Muslim contestation in Jember, the study demonstrates how local dynamics reflect and reinforce national trends in democratic deconsolidation and the conservative turn in Indonesian Islam. It also shows that intolerance from the dominant group can serve both as a defence of moderation and as a source of illiberal practices, enriching the literature on majority-minority dynamics.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. It is confined to a single locality (Jember), uses only qualitative ethnographic methods, and may reflect the researcher's insider positionality within the nahdliyin community. Future research should address these weaknesses. Researchers should conduct comparative studies across multiple regions (such as Bondowoso or other East Java districts), employ mixed-methods approaches (e.g., quantitative surveys and social media analysis), and explore policy interventions to promote genuine checks and balances in Indonesia's Islamic public sphere. Such studies would strengthen both theoretical and practical understandings of how moderate organizations can navigate pluralism without resorting to intolerant resistance.

Author Contribution Statement

Author contributions to this article: Mawardi Abdullah served as the initiator and drafter. Ahmad Fajar Shodiq contributed as data validator and results analyst. Both contributed to data collection and critical revision of the article. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of this work.

Statement of Interest

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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