

## THE ROLE OF ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN BUILDING RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN THE ERA OF SOCIAL POLARIZATION AND DIGITAL POLITICS

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### Abstrak

Pesatnya ekspansi teknologi digital dan media sosial telah secara signifikan mengubah komunikasi, interaksi sosial, dan dinamika politik di Indonesia. Namun, perkembangan ini juga telah mengintensifkan polarisasi sosial dan politik, seringkali disertai dengan ujaran kebencian, hoaks, dan politisasi agama. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis peran pendidikan Islam dalam mempromosikan moderasi *beragama* sebagai respon terhadap tantangan polarisasi digital. Menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis kualitatif, penelitian dilakukan di lembaga pendidikan Islam terpilih, termasuk madrasah, pesantren, dan universitas Islam, dengan purposive sampling aktor kunci seperti pendidik, mahasiswa, dan pemangku kepentingan masyarakat. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen, dan dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles & Huberman dengan triangulasi untuk validitas. Temuan tersebut mengungkapkan bahwa pendidikan Islam memainkan peran strategis dalam memperkuat moderasi beragama melalui empat praktik utama: (1) integrasi kurikulum nilai-nilai toleransi, perdamaian, dan kewarganegaraan; (2) program literasi digital untuk melawan misinformasi dan propaganda ideologis; (3) kegiatan ekstrakurikuler yang mendorong dialog antaragama dan solidaritas sosial; dan (4) peran teladan pendidik (guru, kyai, dan dosen) dalam mewujudkan nilai-nilai *wasathiyah*. Studi tersebut menyimpulkan bahwa pendidikan Islam tidak hanya merupakan sarana transmisi pengetahuan agama tetapi juga agen penting kohesi sosial dan stabilitas nasional di era digital.

**Kata kunci:** Pendidikan Islam, moderasi beragama, polarisasi digital, pesantren

### Abstract

The rapid expansion of digital technology and social media has significantly changed communication, social interaction, and political dynamics in Indonesia. However, these developments have also intensified social and political polarization, often accompanied by hate speech, hoaxes, and politicization of religion. This study aims to analyze the role of Islamic education in promoting religious moderation as a response to the challenges of digital polarization. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research was conducted in selected Islamic educational institutions, including madrasahs, Islamic boarding schools, and Islamic universities, with purposive sampling of key actors such as educators, students, and community stakeholders. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participatory observations, and document analysis, and analyzed using Miles & Huberman's interactive model with triangulation for validity. The findings reveal that Islamic education plays a strategic role in strengthening religious moderation through four main practices: (1) curriculum integration of the values of tolerance, peace, and citizenship; (2) digital literacy programs to counter misinformation and ideological propaganda; (3) extracurricular activities that encourage interfaith dialogue and social solidarity; and (4) the role of exemplary educators (teachers, kyai, and lecturers) in realizing *wasathiyah values*. The study concludes that Islamic education is not only a means of transmitting religious knowledge but also an important agent of social cohesion and national stability in the digital age.

**Keywords:** Islamic education, religious moderation, digital polarization, pesantren

## Introduction

In the last two decades, the development of digital technology and social media has brought major changes in communication patterns, social interactions, and political dynamics in various parts of the world, including Indonesia. The presence of digital space has facilitated access to information, accelerated the flow of knowledge, and expanded the space for community participation. However, these developments also present serious challenges, especially in the form of increasingly sharp social and political polarization. This polarization is often accompanied by the emergence of hate speech, the spread of hoaxes, and ideological propaganda that can threaten social cohesion and undermine religious harmony.

In the context of a pluralistic Indonesia, both religiously, culturally, and politically, social polarization not only has an impact on relations between citizens, but also threatens harmony between religious communities.[1] This phenomenon is even more worrying when religious issues are politicized in the digital space for the sake of power. Religious narratives that should contain the values of compassion, tolerance, and peace are often used as a tool for political legitimacy, even triggering horizontal conflicts. This is where the importance of religious moderation lies as a paradigm that is able to bridge differences, prevent extremism, and strengthen national values.

Religious moderation from an Islamic perspective is actually not a new idea.[2] Islamic teachings normatively emphasize the principle of *wasathiyah* (middle way) which prioritizes balance, justice, and tolerance. This principle is reflected in the Qur'an and hadith which teaches Muslims to avoid excesses (*ghuluw*) and neglect (*tafrith*) in practicing religious teachings. In the current context, religious moderation is understood as a religious attitude that respects differences, upholds human values, and is able to coexist peacefully with various different groups.

Islamic education, whether through madrasas, Islamic boarding schools, or Islamic universities, has a strategic role in instilling the values of religious moderation.[3] As an institution that not only transfers knowledge, but also shapes the character and personality of students, Islamic education is the main bulwark in the face of the rapid flow of digital information that has the potential to be misleading. Through curriculum integration, strengthening digital literacy, and learning oriented to moral development, Islamic education can be an agent of change in building awareness of religious moderation.

Furthermore, Islamic education also serves as a *filter* against transnational ideologies that tend to be exclusive and intolerant.[4] Educational institutions can be a space for healthy dialogue, a place for internalizing *wasathiyah* values, as well as a forum to practice critical thinking skills in

dealing with religious issues that are debated in the digital public space. Thus, Islamic education not only plays a role in the formation of a ritually pious Muslim person, but also a moderate, tolerant, and contributory Muslim to the life of the nation.

In the era of digital social and political polarization, the urgency of research on the role of Islamic education in building religious moderation is increasingly urgent. This research is important to map the extent to which Islamic education has responded to the challenges of polarization, how the practice of moderation is internalized in the learning process, and what strategies are most effective in equipping the younger generation to face the complexities of digital life. The results of this study are expected not only to strengthen the position of Islamic education as an agent of peace, but also to make a real contribution to the realization of an inclusive, democratic, and civilized Indonesian society.

### **Research Methods**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological study design.[5] The choice of this approach is based on the aim of understanding in depth the experiences, practices, and strategies that Islamic educational institutions apply in building religious moderation amid the challenges of digital social and political polarization. The phenomenological approach allows researchers to explore the subjective meanings experienced by teachers, students, students, and other educational actors in internalizing the value of religious moderation. The location of the research was determined purposively in several Islamic educational institutions, including madrasas, Islamic boarding schools, and Islamic universities in urban and rural areas. The selection of these locations was intended to obtain a variety of data related to moderation education strategies and practices in different social contexts.

Research subjects include:

1. Leaders of educational institutions (heads of madrasas, kyai, and rectors).
2. Educators (teachers and lecturers).
3. Students, Students, and Students.
4. External stakeholders, such as parents, community leaders, and digital literacy activists.

Research data was obtained through the following techniques:

1. In-depth interviews to explore the views, strategies, and experiences of Islamic education actors in building religious moderation.[6]
2. Participatory observation, especially on learning practices, extracurricular activities, religious discussions, and the use of digital media in the educational process.

3. Documentation study of curriculum, learning modules, institutional policies, and digital content produced by educational institutions.

The data triangulation technique was carried out to strengthen the validity, by comparing the results of interviews, observations, and documentation. Data analysis was carried out using the Miles & Huberman interactive model, which included three stages:

1. Data reduction, namely the selection, simplification, and focusing of data on aspects related to the role of Islamic education in religious moderation.
2. Data presentation, by compiling information in the form of narratives, tables, or matrix that illustrate the pattern of the contribution of Islamic education to religious moderation in the digital era.
3. Drawing conclusions/ verification, by formulating the meaning and generalization of findings to answer the formulation of the research problem.

To ensure the credibility of the findings, this study uses a triangulation strategy of sources, methods, and time. In addition, a member check was carried out by asking for confirmation from respondents regarding the results of the researcher's interpretation. The dependency test is carried out through an audit of the research process, while the confirmability is maintained by recording the research trail (audit trail).

In the implementation of research, researchers adhere to the principles of research ethics. The identity of the respondents is kept confidential, and each participant is given the right to give *informed consent* before the interview or observation is conducted. This research is expected to produce an empirical picture of the strategic role of Islamic education in internalizing the value of religious moderation, as well as a conceptual model of how educational institutions can be a bulwark against digital social and political polarization. Thus, the results of the research are not only beneficial for scientific development, but can also be used as a policy reference by the government, education practitioners, and the wider community.

## Discussion

Based on the findings of field research in madrasas, Islamic boarding schools, and Islamic universities in Indonesia, there are several key findings that show the role of Islamic education in building religious moderation amid social and digital political polarization. Some Islamic educational institutions have integrated the values of religious moderation in their curriculum, both explicitly through subjects such as Islamic Religious Education, Morals, and Citizenship, and implicitly through strengthening the culture of Islamic boarding schools.[7] The curriculum emphasizes the importance of tolerance, non-violence, and the ability for interfaith dialogue.

Madrasas and Islamic boarding schools have begun to develop digital literacy programs to equip students and students to be critical in dealing with content on social media. Teachers and caregivers of Islamic boarding schools realize that one of the causes of polarization is the consumption of unverified information.[8] Therefore, digital literacy education is an important effort to build resilience to hate speech, hoaxes, and identity politics propaganda.

In addition to formal learning, Islamic educational institutions also emphasize extracurricular activities oriented towards strengthening tolerance, for example through interfaith discussions, interfaith social service programs, and cooperation with non-Islamic institutions. This activity has been proven to be able to reduce negative stereotypes against different groups and build social solidarity.

The results of the study show that the example of kyai, teachers, and lecturers has a great influence in internalizing the value of religious moderation.[9] Educators who consistently voice Islam wasathiyah, stay away from hateful narratives, and are open in dialogue, are the main references for students and students in dealing with differences in religious and political views.

Although the role of Islamic education is significant, there are a number of challenges it faces, including:

1. There are still some teachers or ustaz who do not understand the concept of religious moderation comprehensively.
2. Pressure from the external environment, especially through social media, is often more dominant than the formal teachings of educational institutions.
3. Limited facilities and technological competence in some Islamic educational institutions, especially traditional Islamic boarding schools, make it difficult to apply digital literacy evenly.

The findings of the study strengthen the argument that Islamic education serves as an important agent in building religious moderation in the digital age. Islamic education is not only a transfer of knowledge, but also a process of forming a balanced religious character and identity. This is in line with the principle of wasathiyah in Islam which emphasizes justice, balance, and respect for differences:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا وَمَا جَعَلْنَا الْقِبْلَةَ الَّتِي كُنْتَ عَلَيْهَا إِلَّا لِنَعْلَمَ مَنْ يَتَّبِعُ الرَّسُولَ مِمَّنْ يَنْقَلِبُ عَلَى عَقْبَيْهِ وَإِنْ كَانَتْ لَكَبِيرَةً إِلَّا عَلَى الَّذِينَ هَدَى اللَّهُ وَمَا كَانَ اللَّهُ لِيُضِلَّ إِيْمَانَكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِالنَّاسِ لَرءُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ

And so We have made you (Muslims) a just and chosen people so that you may be witnesses of human beings and that the Messenger (Muhammad) may be a witness of your deeds. And We have not appointed the Qibla which is your Qibla (now) but so that We may know who follows the Messenger and who defects. And indeed, it is very heavy, except for those who have been guided by Allah. and Allah will not waste your faith. Indeed, Allah is Most Merciful and Most Merciful to mankind. (Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 143).

In the context of digital social and political polarization, Islamic education is tasked with internalizing a moderate attitude to students so that they are able to face differences wisely, not with an intolerant or extreme attitude. This role is very important considering that the younger generation is the largest user of social media who are vulnerable to being exposed to radical narratives and politicization of religion.

Digital polarization arises, one of which is due to the low digital literacy of the community. Islamic education has a significant role in equipping the younger generation with digital literacy skills based on Islamic ethics. Digital literacy includes not only technical skills in using digital media, but also critical skills in sorting information, avoiding slander, and disseminating content that spreads grace.[10]

Thus, strengthening digital literacy in Islamic education not only protects students from the negative impact of social media, but also turns them into *content creators* who are able to voice moderate Islamic narratives. This is evident from several modern Islamic boarding schools that encourage students to create creative da'wah content on digital platforms to fight the narrative of extremism.

The role of kyai figures, teachers, and lecturers as role models greatly determines the success of religious moderation education. As emphasized by the theory of character education, an effective learning process occurs through *learning by example*. Students are more likely to accept the value of moderation if it is shown through direct practice by educators, for example by prioritizing inclusive dialogue, respecting political differences in the classroom, and rejecting hate speech.

Therefore, increasing the capacity of teachers and educators in understanding and practicing religious moderation is an important agenda. Without a deep understanding of educators, the concept of religious moderation will only become jargon, not a real practice in the field. Although Islamic education plays a big role, the challenges of digital polarization cannot be ignored. Massive identity politics content, religion-based hate narratives, and low public literacy are still the main barriers. Therefore, strengthening strategies are needed, including:

1. Curriculum reformulation, explicitly incorporating the competencies of religious moderation and digital literacy into the curriculum of madrasas and Islamic boarding schools.
2. Capacity building of teachers and kyai, through special training on religious moderation and digital skills.
3. Cross-sectoral collaboration, Islamic Education needs to work with governments, media institutions, and civil society organizations to expand the narrative of moderation.
4. The use of technology, Equipping Islamic educational institutions with digital facilities so that they can compete in the production of positive content.

The results of the study show that Islamic education contributes significantly to Indonesia's socio-political stability through strengthening religious moderation. Madrasahs and Islamic boarding schools not only produce a generation of ritually devout Muslims, but also citizens who are able to live peacefully in diversity. This role is very important in the midst of political polarization that tends to divide the nation. By prioritizing the Islamic principle of *rahmatan lil 'alamin*, Islamic education becomes the last bastion to prevent the birth of intolerance, radicalism, and social division.

Overall, the results of the study show that Islamic education has a strategic role in building religious moderation in the era of social polarization and digital politics. Through curriculum, digital literacy, extracurricular activities, and the example of educators, Islamic education is able to instill *wasathiyah* values that are relevant to the global context. However, this success is highly dependent on the consistency of educational institutions in integrating religious moderation into all aspects of learning, as well as support from the government and the community in creating a healthy digital ecosystem.

Thus, it can be concluded that Islamic education is not only a space for the reproduction of religious knowledge, but also an arena of ideological struggle to ensure the sustainability of national and humanitarian values in facing the challenges of digital polarization.

## **Conclusion**

This research confirms that Islamic education has a strategic role in building religious moderation amid increasing social and political polarization digitally. Islamic madrasahs, pesantren, and universities not only function as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge, but also as agents of social change that instill the values of *wasathiyah*, tolerance, and the spirit of nationalism. Through curriculum integration, digital literacy, dialogue-based extracurricular activities, and the example of educators, Islamic education makes a real contribution to preventing the birth of intolerance, radicalism, and social division.



Nevertheless, challenges are still faced, such as the limited understanding of some educators about the concept of religious moderation, the limitations of digital infrastructure in several institutions, and the strong dominance of identity political narratives in cyberspace. Therefore, strengthening teacher capacity, curriculum reformulation, using digital technology more creatively, and collaborating across sectors are urgent needs for the role of Islamic education to be more effective.

Conceptually, this study confirms that Islamic education is an ideological fortress as well as a social instrument that can answer the challenges of polarization in the digital era. With the consistency of strengthening religious moderation, Islamic education has the potential to produce a critical, moderate, and inclusive generation of Muslims, as well as contribute to the socio-political stability of civilized Indonesia.

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