

THE MAKING OF RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN POST-REFORM INDONESIA: THE FOUR KEYWORDS OF MULTI-ACTOR AUTHORITY DISCOURSE

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Abstract

Post-Reform Indonesia has witnessed intensified religious contestation in which language plays a central role in defining religious legitimacy, authority, and social belonging. This article examines how four influential labels, namely liberal, deviant (sesat), infidel (kafir), and radical, operate as discursive instruments in the construction of religious minorities. Employing a qualitative approach and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study analyzes religious fatwas, statements of Islamic organizations, mass media reports, social media content, digital archives, and academic literature produced and circulated between 1998 and 2024. The analysis involved identifying, categorizing, and interpreting discursive patterns related to the production, circulation, legitimization, and contestation of these four keywords across religious, political, and media arenas. The findings demonstrate that these labels function as mechanisms of authority through which state institutions, religious organizations, media

actors, and digital publics define orthodoxy, delegitimize opponents, mobilize public sentiment, and reinforce boundaries between majority and minority groups. The study further reveals that digital mediation and electoral competition have expanded the influence of these terms beyond theological debates into broader political and civic domains. At the same time, counter-discourses promoted by the state and major Islamic organizations, including Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah, have sought to redefine these labels through narratives of dialogue, citizenship, and religious moderation. This article contributes to the study of religion and power by demonstrating how minority formation is shaped through multi-actor authority discourse. It concludes that linguistic contestation constitutes a crucial arena in the production of religious minorities and the ongoing negotiation of socio-religious harmony in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords: *Religious Minorities; Religious Discourse; Religious Authority; Religious Moderation; Interfaith Harmony*

Abstrak

Indonesia pasca-Reformasi ditandai oleh meningkatnya kontestasi keagamaan yang menjadikan bahasa sebagai instrumen penting dalam menentukan legitimasi, otoritas, dan identitas keberagamaan. Artikel ini menganalisis bagaimana empat label yang berpengaruh dalam wacana keagamaan, yaitu liberal, *sesat*, *kafir*, dan radikal, berfungsi sebagai perangkat diskursif dalam pembentukan kelompok minoritas keagamaan. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan Analisis Wacana Kritis (AWK) terhadap fatwa keagamaan, pernyataan organisasi Islam, pemberitaan media massa, konten media sosial, arsip digital, serta literatur akademik yang diproduksi dan beredar sepanjang periode 1998–2024. Analisis dilakukan melalui proses identifikasi, kategorisasi, dan interpretasi pola-pola wacana yang berkaitan dengan produksi, sirkulasi, legitimasi, dan kontestasi keempat kata kunci tersebut dalam arena keagamaan, politik, dan media. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa label liberal, *sesat*, *kafir*, dan radikal berfungsi sebagai mekanisme otoritas yang digunakan oleh institusi negara, organisasi keagamaan, media, dan publik digital untuk mendefinisikan ortodoksi, mendelegitimasi pihak lain, memobilisasi sentimen publik, serta mempertegas batas antara kelompok mayoritas dan minoritas. Penelitian ini juga menemukan bahwa mediatasi digital dan kontestasi elektoral memperluas pengaruh label-label tersebut melampaui perdebatan teologis ke ranah politik dan kewargaan. Pada saat yang sama, muncul berbagai narasi tandingan yang dikembangkan oleh negara dan organisasi keagamaan besar seperti Nahdlatul Ulama dan Muhammadiyah melalui wacana dialog, kewargaan, dan moderasi beragama. Artikel ini berkontribusi pada kajian agama dan kekuasaan dengan menunjukkan bahwa pembentukan minoritas keagamaan berlangsung melalui wacana otoritas yang diproduksi oleh berbagai aktor. Studi ini menyimpulkan bahwa kontestasi bahasa merupakan arena penting dalam pembentukan minoritas serta negosiasi harmoni sosial-keagamaan di Indonesia kontemporer.

Keywords: Minoritas Keagamaan; Wacana Keagamaan; Otoritas Keagamaan; Moderasi Beragama; Harmoni Antarumat Beragama

INTRODUCTION

Besides serving as a source of normative teachings, religion is also conceived as a form of power that operates through everyday practices, encompassing rituals, discourses, institutions, identities, and politics. Wuthnow posits the significance of religious power because it influences the internal mechanisms that shape what can be said, enacted, and deemed legitimate within a religious community. Within this framework, religion can be understood as an arena for the distribution of power that generates domination, persuasion, and resistance (Wuthnow, 2023). In this light, religious language becomes a critical mechanism for establishing and contesting authority, particularly in plural societies where discourse defines social relations and the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion. In post-Reform Indonesia, the democratization, decentralization, and expansion of media since 1998 have enabled diverse actors, including religious organizations, state institutions, political figures, and digital publics, to produce authoritative discourse through influential labels such as liberal, *sesat* (deviant), *kafir* (infidel), and radical. These terms circulate via fatwas, sermons, media coverage, social media, and public statements, illustrating the discursive and institutional workings of religious power. The rise of *takfiri* and *mutathorifirin* groups, particularly amid the political polarizations of 2014, has posed serious challenges to Indonesia's religious pluralism. Yet these labels are not recent: debates over *kafir* appeared in Nahdlatul Ulama circles between 1930 and 2019, while MUI fatwas since the 1970s have addressed *sesat*, and the 2005 MUI fatwa on pluralism, liberalism, and secularism, together with state-led counter-terrorism discourses on radicalism, reflect a long historical continuity of religious labeling in Indonesia.

Religious discourse, as Lincoln (1989) contends, consolidates authority through legitimacy and emotional resonance, explaining why coercion against minorities relies

on discursive normalization, through narratives of heresy and radicalism amplified across media and sermons, to generate public acquiescence and legitimize unequal treatment (Burhani, 2019; Langton, 2018; Setyabudi, 2019). Recent Indonesian scholarship reinforces this: social media reproduces exclusivism (Kushardiyanti et al., 2022; Tahir et al., 2023), local politics fuels anti-minority sentiment (Alkawy, 2020), institutional fatwas construct moral boundaries (Nasir, 2014; Nasution et al., 2024; Alnizar, 2025), and digital platforms host competing legitimacy claims (As'adi, 2026). Conversely, discourse can also foster integration, via humor and reconciliation (Slama, 2025), while "god terms" wield exceptional political-symbolic power (Allen & Allen, 2016). Hence, religious discourse remains a potent, ambivalent force shaping both exclusion and social cohesion in contemporary Indonesia.

Existing scholarship offers valuable insights into specific minority communities, media platforms, or individual labels, yet largely overlooks how multiple religious labels operate as interconnected mechanisms of authority across religious, political, media, and digital arenas, and rarely examines how diverse actors collectively participate in their production, circulation, and contestation, leaving the relationship between religious language, authority, and minority construction under-theorized. Addressing this gap, this article examines four keywords, namely *liberal*, *sesat*, *kafir*, and *radical*, as discursive instruments in the making of religious minorities in post-Reform Indonesia and proposes the concept of "multi-actor authority discourse" to capture the collective production, legitimization, and contestation of authoritative categories by religious organizations, state agencies, political elites, media institutions, and networked publics. In this framework, discourse acquires authority not from any single source, but through its reinforcement, amplification, and normalization by the converging operations of multiple actors wielding diverse forms of symbolic, institutional, political, and communicative power. Accordingly, this study addresses two research questions:

1. How are the keywords *liberal*, *sesat*, *kafir*, and *radical* produced, circulated, and legitimized across religious, political, media, and digital arenas in post-Reform Indonesia?
2. What forms of counter-discourse have emerged to challenge, negotiate, or mitigate the exclusionary effects of these labels?

By addressing these questions, this article contributes to debates on religion, power, discourse, minority formation, and socio-religious harmony in contemporary Indonesia.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative design employing Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1989, 1992, 1995, 2003) to examine how religious language operates as a mechanism of authority in the construction of religious minorities in post-Reform Indonesia (1998–2024), focusing on four recurring classificatory labels, namely *liberal*, *sesat*, *kafir*, and *radical*. Anchored in the understanding that religious authority during this period has become increasingly dispersed and relational rather than monopolized by a single center (Lincoln, 1989; Nasir, 2014; Wuthnow, 2023), the study frames legitimacy as emerging through multi-actor interactions across religious organizations (MUI, NU, Muhammadiyah), state institutions, political elites, media organizations, and digital publics. To capture this multi-actor field, data were collected from diverse sources: documentary materials including fatwas and official statements; media reports from newspapers, online portals, and digital news archives; digital data from social media platforms mapped using Netlytic and Google Trends to track conversation patterns and keyword salience; and secondary academic literature for historical contextualization.

A purposive sampling strategy was applied, selecting materials based on explicit use of the four keywords, relevance to religious authority or minority construction, and significant circulation across at least one institutional or digital

arena. The analytical procedure followed four CDA stages: corpus construction, coding of keyword instances across actor categories, analysis of discursive patterns in label production and contestation, and final interpretation using Wuthnow's framework of discursive, institutional, identity, and political power. To enhance validity, triangulation across fatwas, organizational statements, media narratives, social media discourse, and academic analyses were employed, ensuring robust understanding of how labels circulate and shift meaning across domains. Ethical considerations were observed throughout, as the study relies exclusively on publicly available texts and digital materials without direct human participation, handled with sensitivity to the contentious nature of religious labeling in Indonesia's plural society.

FINDINGS

The Production and Circulation of Keywords in Religious Minority Discourse

The production of the terms *liberal*, *sesat* (deviant), *kafir* (infidel), and *radikal* (radical) in post-Reformasi Indonesian religious discourse constitutes a discursive practice that constructs social realm. Discourse containing these four terms is produced by various authoritative entities, including public administrations, religious organizations, and influential religious figures. The diverse foundational authorities underlying these actors reinforce the legitimacy of the subsequent circulation of these terms, ultimately resulting in the marginalization of specific religious groups. Ideological persuasion and the evocation of sentiment proposed by Lincoln as two key instruments of discursive power, within the interwoven threads of administrative, moral, and theological legitimacy, have delineated the boundaries between the religious majority and minorities (Lincoln, 2014:9). Such findings reaffirm the relevance of religious discursive power in constructing society through various modern institutions (Lincoln, 2014; Wuthnow, 2023).

The mediatization of public discourse through social media contributes to the circulation and cascading discriminatory effects of religious discourse, embedding

these four terms. This mediatization illustrates an expansion in the contextual usage of *liberal*, *sesat* (deviant), *kafir* (infidel), and *radikal* (radical), moving beyond the boundaries of doctrinal orthodoxy versus heterodoxy to arouse religious sentiment within electoral competition. Consequently, the construction of stereotypes and religious exclusivism highlighted through these four words aligns with the findings of Kushardiyanti et al. (2022) on the #nonhalal hashtag and Tahir et al. (2023) regarding the Muslimah stereotype on social media, while simultaneously expanding the analytical scope into the realms of electoral politics and state institutions. The production and circulation of these four keywords constitute a power mechanism that actively perpetuates unequal majority-minority relations. The following sections provide a deeper analysis of each keyword.

1. Liberal: From Reformist Discourse to Institutionalized Opposition

The article titled '*Menyegarkan Kembali Pemikiran Islam*' (Refreshing Islamic Thought), written by Ulil Abshar Abdalla in Kompas daily on November 18, 2002, marked the explicit emergence of liberalism within Islamic religious discourse in Indonesia. Ulil attributed his role to the coordination of the Jaringan Islam Liberal (JIL, Liberal Islam Network). This network originated in March 2002 from online discussions addressing a religious climate that tended to be dogmatic, literal, and stagnant in its interpretation of Islamic teachings. In his writing, Ulil proposed contextualization and mainstreamed the idea that while 'verbal revelation has indeed concluded in the Quran,' 'nonverbal revelation through human rational *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) continues continuously.' Mass media outlets such as Jawa Pos, Tempo, and the Kantor Radio Berita 68H (Radio News Agency 68H) served as the backbone for disseminating the reformist ideas championed by Ulil and JIL. This choice of dissemination medium is unsurprising, given the active support of senior journalist Goenawan Mohamad for the network.

The expansion of liberal Islamic discourse coincided with broader social and political developments during the post-Reform period. Following the democratic

transition after 1998, Indonesia experienced increasing openness in public debate concerning religion, citizenship, and pluralism. Global events, including the Bali Bombings and the international “war on terror,” further intensified discussions concerning the relationship between Islam, democracy, and modernity. Within this context, liberal Islamic thinkers promoted reinterpretations of religious doctrines in response to contemporary social challenges, while conservative religious groups increasingly viewed such interpretations as threats to established religious authority.

As liberal Islamic discourse gained greater public visibility, various forms of opposition emerged. Resistance was expressed through public criticism, religious sermons, media campaigns, and organizational mobilization. One notable example was the issuance of a death threat against Ulil Abshar Abdalla by several conservative religious figures. Anti-liberal campaigns subsequently expanded through both offline and online platforms. Organizations and activist groups promoted narratives portraying liberal Islam as incompatible with Islamic orthodoxy, while social media platforms facilitated the wider circulation of anti-liberal sentiments. The emergence of movements such as Indonesia Tanpa JIL further demonstrated the growing mobilization against liberal Islamic discourse.

Ulil's article in Kompas sparked various coercive responses from different Islamic groups. In December 2002, the Forum Umat Islam Indonesia called for a death fatwa against Ulil because he was considered to have insulted Islam, and according to Sharia law, the perpetrator of such insults must be sentenced to death. He was terrorized with a book bomb that injured several people at the Institut Arus Informasi in 2014, and was barred from attending scientific forums at UIN Sultan Syarif Kasim, Riau, and in Malaysia. Since the Liberal Islam Network appeared in public discussion, many protests against it have also emerged. The Front Pembela Islam became one of the most consistent actors opposing this network, even holding the ‘*Apel Siaga Indonesia Tanpa JIL*’ at the Hotel Indonesia Roundabout in 2012. This rally responded to the ‘*Indonesia Tanpa FPI*’ demonstration at the same place, which was organized by

people associated with JIL, such as Ulil Abshar Abdalla, Guntur Romli, and Nong Darul Mahmada, who called for the cessation of religious violence. This 'Indonesia Tanpa JIL' movement could also be found as a Facebook page with followers reaching 200,000 people. In 2005, the Council of Indonesian Ulema (MUI), as a semi-formal organization in Indonesia's institutional structure, adopted the ideas of FPI that the development of religious pluralism, liberalism, and secularism had caused public unrest, thus declaring these ideologies haram (Facal, 2020). This fatwa was drafted by the MUI Fatwa Commission led by Ma'ruf Amin, who can also be described as the leader of the conservative group within MUI, and the fatwa was indeed created to appease Islamist groups (Kersten, 2018). Kersten refers to the years 2005 to 2006 as a calibration point for the political polarization between pure Islamist (conservative) groups and alternative Islamic groups in Indonesian Muslim society. Coinciding with Pancasila Day on June 1, 2006, Todung Mulya Lubis read the *Maklumat Keindonesiaan* in front of President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, highlighting the discourse of diversity and a liberal political system, which constitutes the mandate of Pancasila, especially the fourth principle (Tanuredjo, 2006). The declaration was drafted by Universitas Indonesia, the Association for Democracy Education, Universitas Gadjah Mada, the Brighten Institute, and the Tempo Media group, which had actually been initiated in 2005 by the National Alliance for Freedom of Religion and Belief to respond to the fatwa regarding secularism, pluralism, and liberalism.

Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, as part of the conservative Islamist group, responded to the declaration by holding the International Khilafah Conference at Gelora Bung Karno in 2007, which was attended by 100,000 people. Ulil wrote that one of JIL's activities was carried out to respond to the activities of HTI and other Salafi groups that threatened Indonesia's social diversity. HTI indeed frequently appeared in the public eye through demonstrations responding to both transnational and national events affecting Muslims. This emergence, both on the streets and in the hosting of conferences, such as the Islamic Civilization Conference at the Sentul International

Convention Center in 2014, was used to offer the caliphate as a solution to injustice, especially that experienced by Muslims, which is caused by democracy and the liberal economic system (Abdalla-Abshar, 2021)

Since the fatwa was issued, denunciations against JIL have become more massive. The fatwa became the authoritative basis for the denunciations carried out, and even the narration was more pejorative in tone with the acronym *sepilis* (secularism, pluralism, and liberalism) by figuring it as a venereal disease due to amoral sexual activity. Sentiment against liberalism remains strong to this day. In the 2017 DKI Jakarta regional head election, Anies Baswedan, who often campaigned with religious symbols and narratives, also emphasized that he was not included among JIL figures in order to maintain support from Islamist groups (Vebriyanto, 2017). Even President Joko Widodo, since 2014, has been narrated as being supported by deviant and anti-Islamic groups in Indonesia: Shia, Ahmadiyya, transgender (*waria*), and JIL (Nahimunkar, 2014).

The discourse battle between JIL and Islamist groups, such as FPI and HTI, depicts the mutual effort to demystify the episteme of each group. As in the opening of Ulil's writing (2002), Islam that has been monumentalized needs to be positioned as a living organism so that it is able to answer the problems that constantly emerge in the era of human development. Islam is not 'a package from God served to all of us with a simple message, take it or leave it!' which is difficult to debate and question. Meanwhile, Islamist groups attempt to demystify democracy, which precisely creates injustice for Muslims. Islamic formalism becomes the answer and alternative to the democratic system. Although the Islamic formalism between FPI and HTI cannot be equated. FPI does not openly reject Indonesia's democratic system, yet Indonesian democracy needs to be filled with Islamic law, *NKRI Bersyariah*. Rizieq Shihab, the leader of FPI, also held the organization's 21st anniversary concurrently with Indonesia's 74th independence proclamation celebration in 2019, and on that occasion, he also emphasized the antagonism of Islam with communism and liberalism within

the framework of Indonesianness: 'NKRI bersyariah is not a communist-socialist NKRI, NKRI bersyariah is not a liberal-capitalist NKRI (Detik, 2019). HTI indeed rejects the democratic system and liberal economy, viewing the caliphate system as the only way to bring welfare to the Muslim community.

In the end, the battle was won by the liberal group, not because their ideology or narrative was formalized, but because the state used force against its two opponents, FPI and HTI, which were disbanded and declared forbidden organizations in 2017 and 2020 on grounds of ideological issues and terrorism, a prohibition approved by the public as shown by a Saiful Mujani survey in March 2021 of 1,220 respondents (Purnamasari, 2021), reflecting the rolling discourse of the liberal group since the beginning of reform, whose exponents such as Guntur Romli became supporters of the ruling coalition, while conservative Islamist groups, under the shadow of strengthening discourses of diversity, pluralism, and Pancasila, became cornered with the radical label due to suspected affiliation with or contribution to terrorism. Over time, the meaning of the label *liberal* expanded beyond theological debates, increasingly appearing in political contestations and public discourse as a category used to characterize individuals, organizations, or political actors perceived as promoting secularism, pluralism, or progressive social values, and during electoral competitions and public controversies, accusations of liberalism were frequently employed alongside other labels such as radical, kafir, or anti-Islam, functioning not only as a theological classification but also as a broader social and political marker within competing struggles over religious authority and public legitimacy. The findings indicate that the term *liberal* evolved from a reformist intellectual project into a widely circulated label within Indonesian religious and political discourse, and through media circulation, organizational mobilization, public controversies, and institutional endorsement, the label became embedded in broader debates concerning religious authority, orthodoxy, and the boundaries of acceptable religious interpretation in post-Reform Indonesia.

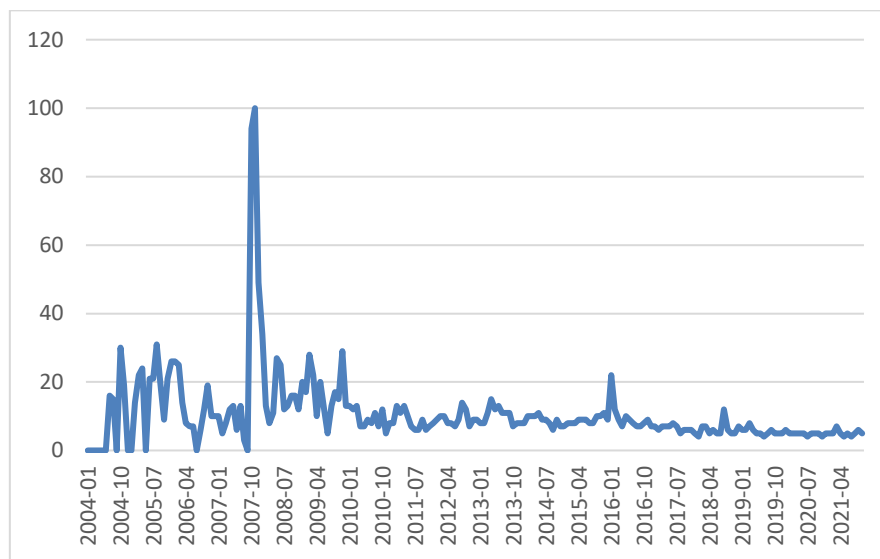
2. *Sesat*: The Production of Religious Deviance

The term *sesat* (deviant) occupies a distinctive position within contemporary Indonesian religious discourse. A search using the keyword *sesat* on major search engines consistently produces news reports, religious opinions, and public controversies concerning deviant sects and heterodox religious movements. Similar patterns can be observed on social media platforms, where the term is frequently associated with debates over religious orthodoxy and minority religious groups. This pattern indicates that the term has become strongly institutionalized within a religious context, both in public discourse and in linguistic practice.

Google Trends data further demonstrate the persistence of the term within Indonesian public discourse. Between 2004 and 2021, searches for the word *sesat* showed recurring peaks associated with religious controversies and public debates regarding particular religious groups. The highest peak occurred in October 2007, coinciding with the issuance of a fatwa by the Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia/MUI) declaring the teachings of Al Qiyadah Al Islamiyah to be “deviant, misleading, and outside Islam.” The temporal correspondence between the fatwa and the surge in online searches suggests the significant role of religious authorities in shaping public attention toward particular religious labels.

Figure 1.

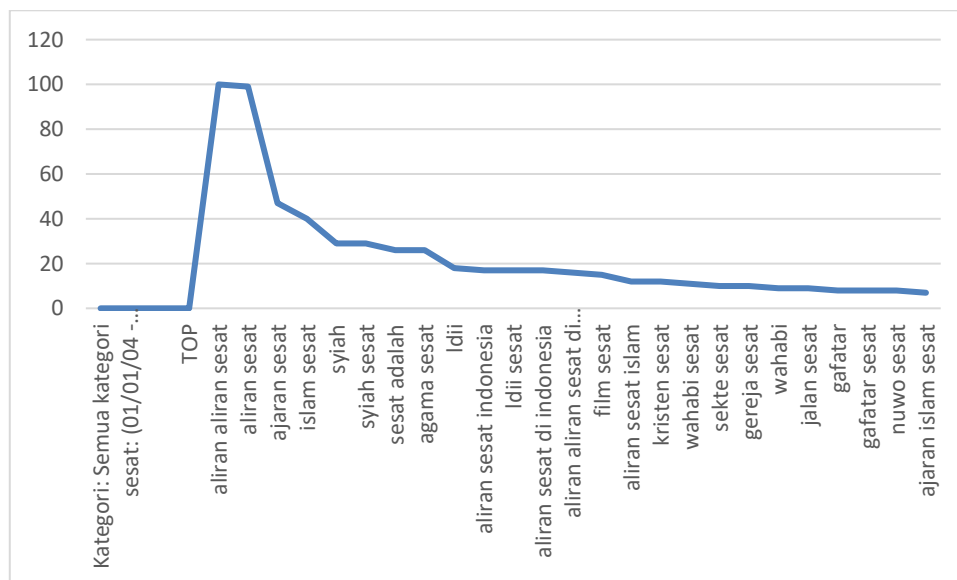
Usage trends of the word “*sesat*” in Indonesia



Source: Compiled from Google Trends data

Figure 2.

Collocations of the word “*sesat*”



Source: Compiled from Google Trends

This institutionalization can be traced back to a multi-actor collaboration involving formal state institutions and religious authorities, who collectively

formulated the attribution of "deviant" to specific teachings, as well as the mass media, which amplified the discourse. The peak usage of the word "sesat" within the 2004–2021 period occurred in October 2007. On October 3, 2007, the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued a fatwa declaring the teachings of Al Qiyadah Al Islamiyah as *"deviant, misleading, and outside the fold of Islam, and its adherents apostates."* This MUI fatwa was corroborated by other major religious organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama. Concurrently, the then Minister of Religious Affairs, M. Maftuh Basyuni, echoed this stance, stating, *"Why is it deviant? Because it does not align with the true teachings of Islam. In Islam, there is only one God, Allah SWT; the final Prophet is solely Muhammad SAW; and there is only one holy book, the Qur'an..."*

This group, accused of being deviant, according to Burhani (2019), is the *'most tragic and pathetic group.... They are not included in legal clauses, and they are not recognized by several religious groups. Although they are part of a recognized religion, that religion discards or does not recognize them.'* Groups like Ahmadiyah, Syiah, or Mormons also fall into this category. Robert (2009) provides a further depiction of the status experienced by Ahmadiyah as a result of the deviant fatwa issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council as well as the government's accommodation of the recommendations in the fatwa by issuing the Joint Decree of the Attorney General, the Minister of Home Affairs, and the Minister of Religious Affairs number 3 of 2008. According to Robert (2009) *'at this point Ahmadiyah stands as political subjects ... homo sacer ... humans who are reduced to nothingness in such a way without any rights and protection...'*

Through the 2008 Joint Decree (SKB), the government, under the pretext of protecting Ahmadiyya adherents' citizenship identity and rights, ironically demanded they renounce their identity, thereby acting as an arbiter in theological disputes, a position that stems from ontological issues regarding the formulation of "Ketuhanan Yang Maha Esa" and the concept of "religion" itself, both heavily influenced by the Victorian mindset, which renders the government's alignment with orthodox beliefs as a form of civilizing mission to restore adherents to the "righteous

path" (Burhani, 2019, 2012). This finding resonates with Alnizar's (2025) analysis of MUI fatwas on Ahmadiyah, which demonstrates how legal-religious language produces ideological boundaries distinguishing legitimate believers from deviant others, functioning not solely as theological assessments but contributing to broader social processes of exclusion by institutionalizing particular interpretations of religious orthodoxy.

Media institutions also played an important role in disseminating and amplifying the discourse of deviance, as news reports concerning alleged deviant sects frequently reproduced official statements, fatwas, and religious judgments, thereby extending the circulation of the label beyond religious institutions and making the category *sesat* widely recognized by the broader public and increasingly associated with particular religious minorities. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the term **sesat** is not merely a theological designation but a widely circulated category produced through interactions among religious authorities, state institutions, media organizations, and digital platforms, and its persistence across official documents, media reporting, online searches, and public debates illustrates its central role in defining the boundaries of religious legitimacy in post-Reform Indonesia.

3. *Kafir*: Religious Labeling Across Political, Social, and Sectarian Contexts

The term *kafir* (infidel) occupies a prominent place in Indonesian religious discourse and has been deployed across diverse historical, political, and social contexts. Although rooted in Islamic theological vocabulary, its usage has extended beyond doctrinal discussions and has frequently intersected with political contestation, social mobilization, and interreligious relations.

One contemporary manifestation of the term can be observed within extremist and terrorist narratives. In several radical ideological frameworks, the definition of *kafir* has been expanded beyond non-Muslims to include governments, political institutions, and individuals perceived as insufficiently Islamic. According to Arif

(2018), radical groups categorized as takfiri classify governments that do not implement Islamic law, supporters of such governments, participants in secular political parties, voters, and citizens demonstrating loyalty to the nation-state as part of the category of *kafir*. This expanded interpretation was used to justify violent actions, including terrorist attacks, by framing them as religious obligations against enemies of Islam (Arif, 2018).

Furthermore, Bali serves as a gathering point for Westerners, who are perceived as waging war against Islam following the invasion of Afghanistan by the United States and its allies, which occurred a month after the September 11, 2001 attacks. In a more contemporary case of terrorism, a woman attacked the police headquarters in Jakarta on March 31, 2021. In a final testament left for her family, the perpetrator stated that "democracy, Pancasila, the Constitution (UUD), and elections originate from infidel (*kafir*) teachings, which are explicitly polytheistic (*musyrik*). Zakiah advises Mama and the family to stay safe from the tribulations (*fitnah*) of the world, namely democracy and elections, and to avoid unknowingly committing apostasy (*murtad*)" (cited in (Suara.com, 2021)). The term *kafir* functions as a discursive driver that motivates, and even justifies, acts of terrorism in Indonesia. This operates similarly to how narratives of white supremacy and "the Great Replacement" motivate terrorist acts in the United States and New Zealand targeting Muslim and Hispanic populations.

The role and function of the term *kafir* (infidel) within these terrorist acts can be understood as a contemporary phenomenon that illustrates aggression in the struggle for power and dominance. Historically, the term *kafir* can also be traced through Indonesia's political struggles, spanning the colonial era, the Old Order, the New Order, and into the current post-Reformasi period. The subsequent sections of this paper will inventory the power dynamics in which the word *kafir* has played a pivotal role, prior to examining the broader consequences of this concept and its definition on

interfaith horizontal relations in Indonesia, a dynamic that has historically engendered numerous instances of discrimination.

The utilization of the term *kafir* to legitimize power contests during the royal era can be exemplified by the *Babad Praya*. This historical chronicle details the late nineteenth-century rebellion of the Sasak ethnic group against Anak Agung Ngurah Aji, a ruler of Balinese Karangasem descent. The insurrection was spearheaded by Lalu Semail (also known as Guru Bengkol), Haji Yasin, Mami' Diraja, and Mami' Sopian.

Tabel 1.

Babad Praya

Translation	Original Text
3. As the Prophet generated his decree, as stated in the Hadith, regarding the law of demise, of the Muslim by the infidel (<i>kafir</i>), and suffering profoundly, under the decree of Anak Agung, Ratu Made wrought catastrophe, breeding resentment and malice..	3. <i>Mara'manik Rasullulah, si Kocap le'dale tulis, le'unduk tingkah kapatian, Islam bau si'kafir, serta mulenta sakit, isi'perintah Anak Agung, Ratu made mina, roga, sakit bayu sala'tampi.</i>

Source: *Babad Praya* (translated by Lalu Gde Suparman, 1994)

Moving into the early twentieth century, the Japanese military government during the colonial era banned the recitation, dissemination, and teaching of the Hikayat Prang Sabhi (The Chronicle of the Holy War) in Aceh, recognizing that the manuscript could cultivate seeds of resistance against the ruling regime. The text infused resistance against colonial authorities with the undertones of a religious holy war waged against oppressive infidels (*kafir*). The Japanese colonial administration drew lessons from the historical resistance of the Acehnese against their previous colonial rulers, the Dutch. The concept of the tyrannical *kafir* within this chronicle proved fluid enough to serve as a foundational ideology for Acehnese resistance, spanning the Dutch colonial era, the Darul Islam rebellion, and the modern Free Aceh Movement (*Gerakan Aceh Merdeka*, GAM) revolution (Rizki, 2020).

The term **kafir** has persistently accompanied political dynamics in modern Indonesia, as evidenced by the 1954 Masyumi Party's Majelis Syura resolution declaring sympathizers of the Indonesian Communist Party as deviant or infidel, fueled by ideological disparities over historical materialism, divinity, and private ownership, a divide that intensified rivalry ahead of the 1955 legislative election, and resurfaced during the 2019 presidential election when both Joko Widodo and Prabowo Subianto were targeted with **kafir** rhetoric (Noor, 2015; Putsanra, 2019). Beyond political power, the consequences of **kafir** usage pervade horizontal interreligious relations, as exemplified by Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia's 2011 mass rally in Bogor rejecting "the arrogance of GKI Yasmin and the subversion of colonial infidels" to oppose church construction, where administrative discrepancies often justify opposition, sometimes escalating to property destruction, while rumors of Christianization combined with administrative disputes formed the basis for the 2012 assault on the Bethel Church in Peunayong, Banda Aceh (Muhammad, 2011; Makin, 2016). The contestation is also colored by intra-religious sectarian divides, as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) drew correspondence with global precedents from Pakistani and Indian ulema and the Muslim World League in its fatwa designating Ahmadiyya as a deviant, infidel group whose adherents are apostates.

The usage of *kafir* subtly excludes non-Muslim citizens from Indonesian political life despite constitutional guarantees of leadership opportunity, as the hashtag #PrabowoKeturunanKafir, amplified on Twitter, functioned as a discriminatory tool to marginalize Prabowo from the presidential race while his opponent Joko Widodo was similarly targeted, creating "invisible victims" among millions of non-Muslim Indonesian citizens whose religious identities were systematically associated with the derogatory label weaponized throughout the campaign. Within Islamic religious narratives, *kafir* operates in direct binary opposition to muslim: the former as the worst of humanity rejecting Allah's blessings, the latter as the finest who attains divine pleasure, and this theologically constructed schema is deliberately transposed onto

political contestations, contaminating multireligious social life and stigmatizing non-Muslim citizens as inferior human beings.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the term *kafir* has been used across multiple arenas, including anti-colonial resistance, ideological conflict, electoral competition, interreligious relations, intra-religious disputes, and contemporary extremist movements, and its persistence across different historical periods indicates its continuing significance as a category employed by various actors to define religious boundaries, identify perceived opponents, and frame social and political conflicts in Indonesia.

4. Radical: From Counter-Terrorism to Digital Political Labeling

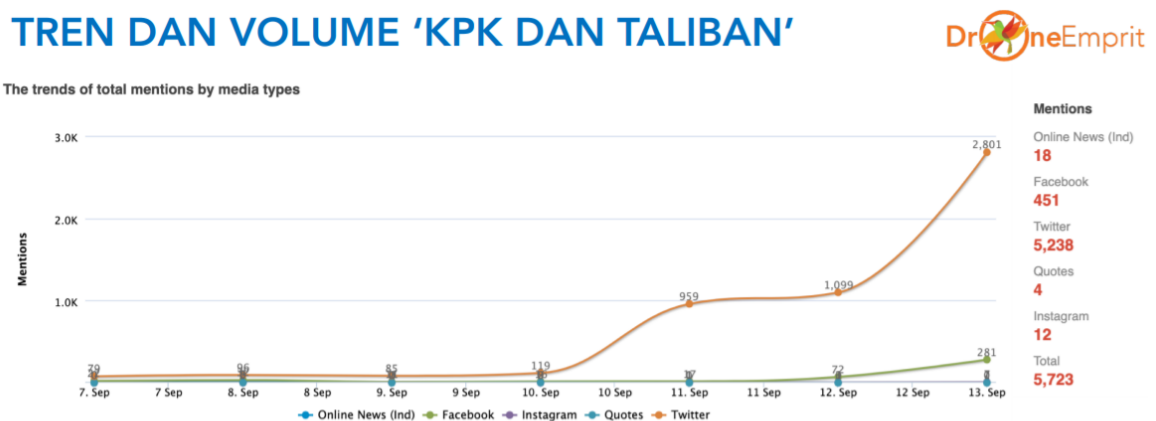
The affiliation of the Bali Bombers I with Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) has directed the discourse on terrorism prevention and mitigation toward educational institutions, including pesantren, Islamic universities, student dawah activity units, and Islamic student organizations in Indonesia. The circulation and transmission of knowledge within these institutions are evaluated to determine whether they could foster the seeds of terrorism. Dogmatism and a rigid understanding of Islamic teachings are argued to be the breeding grounds for extremism, due to radical interpretations that separate 'us' and 'them' both ideologically and sociologically. Liberal Islamic groups emerge to transform such religiosity, proposing '*efforts to engage in ijtihad to find a new formula for translating universal Islamic values within the context of contemporary life... (where) the litmus test is human welfare itself, (because)... frozen Islam becomes a nest of dogmatism that oppresses human welfare itself* (Abdalla-Abshar, 2002).

The Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) issued a 2004 fatwa attempting to clear ideological and theological prejudices from terrorism by defining it as an extraordinary crime that is indiscriminate in its targeting, indirectly responding to liberal groups' accusations that dogmatism results in terrorism and reclaiming interpretive authority that had been decentralized by liberal groups through

dialogical *ijtihad* (MUI, 2004). Within the discourse narrated by liberal groups and moderate organizations like Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, which, despite not theologically recognizing other religions, teach social respect toward non-Muslims, the National Counter-Terrorism Agency (BNPT) implements its counter-radicalization program. Following Noor Huda's (2021) classification of state-led deradicalization, each institution exhibits distinct patterns: BNPT adopts a prescriptive-ideological approach, positing that flawed ideology must be transformed; Densus 88 emphasizes economic-political welfare to soften rigid ideologies stemming from marginalization; the State Intelligence Agency employs a cooperative-instrumentalist approach, engaging perpetrators as reliable informants; and the Ministry of Social Affairs adopts a social-integrative pattern overseeing reintegration with social assistance.

This section focuses primarily on the BNPT program, which presupposes asymmetrical power relations and the institutionalization of 'Islamic knowledge that does not foster terrorism,' intertwining with liberal Islamic narratives in shaping post-Reformasi discourse. Despite differing target demographics between deradicalization and counter-radicalization programs regulated under Government Regulation No. 77 of 2019, both frameworks presuppose a hierarchy of power and definitive knowledge, with the state positioning itself as arbiter of what forms of religious knowledge incline toward terrorism, effectively institutionalizing the label "radical" through sovereign force. Authority reinforcement is achieved by discursively linking formal state and religious authority, as evidenced by the establishment of the Religious Leaders Task Force for terrorism prevention involving various religious organizations. Within this framework, the nexus between knowledge and power dialectically forms a technology of power designed to discipline citizens cum religious adherents (Foucault, 1995), such that both deradicalization and counter-radicalization operate as modes of correction executable only under conditions of domination and objectification.

The term "radical" itself has evolved into a political lexicon that emerges during specific critical conjunctures. A prime example is the 2019 revision of the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) Law, which initially sparked widespread public backlash. Public demonstrations and social media discourses opposing the proposed revision were subsequently countered by narratives alleging that the institution had been infiltrated and dominated by a "Taliban faction." The term "Taliban" itself carries semantic components synonymous with radicalism. Throughout the legislative deliberation of the revision and the selection process of the KPK commissioners, a sustained and organized campaign weaponized this Taliban rhetoric to sway public opinion in favor of the revision and to secure support for the elected commissioner candidates, who were active-duty police generals (Drone Emprit, 2019). Twitter (now X) served as a primary arena for propaganda concerning the KPK and the Taliban. Below is a summary of the data compiled by Drone Emprit regarding the progression of this propaganda campaign.

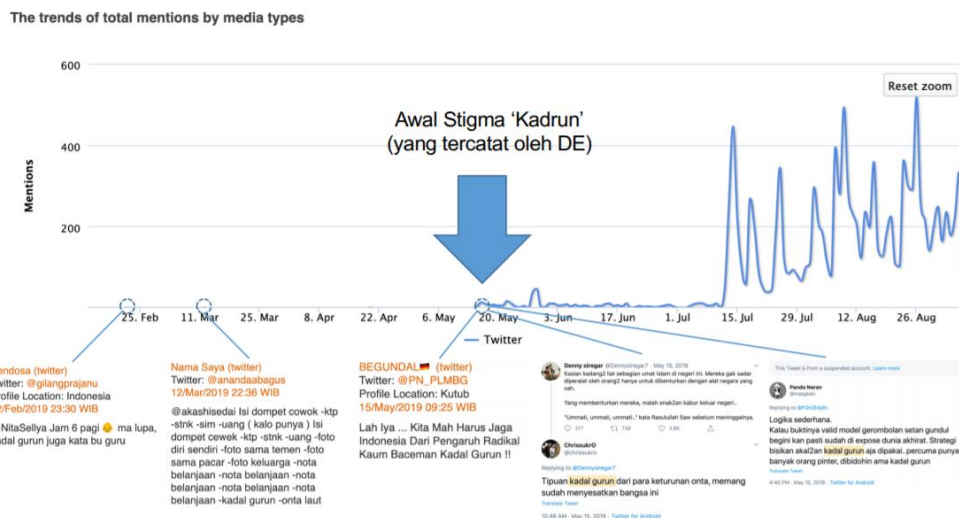


Source: Drone Emprit, 2019



Source: Drone Emprit, 2019

Two years after the enactment of the revised KPK Law, the "Taliban" narrative evolved from a peripheral discourse into a formal policy rationale, as KPK Chairman Firli Bahuri asserted that the National Insight Test (TWK), which utilized a religious moderation index for transitioning employees into civil servants, was explicitly necessitated by the widespread presence of the "Taliban" faction within the institution. Similarly, the term *kadrun* (an abbreviation for *kadal gurun*, or desert lizard) emerged as another significant variation of "radical" during crucial political junctures, manifesting after the presidential election and during the early phase of President Jokowi's second term to identify supporters of Prabowo Subianto, replacing the previous pejorative *kampret* (microbat). Unlike *kampret*, which stigmatized behavioral traits without religious undertones, *kadrun* inherently carries a stigma tied to Islamic identity by utilizing the symbolism of the "desert" to explicitly evoke the Arabian Peninsula as the historical birthplace of Islam (Drone Emprit, 2020).



Source: Drone Emprit, 2019

Although the electoral political contests that birthed the term *kadrun* have concluded, the narrative warfare between the nationalist-leaning supporters of Jokowi and the Islamist factions, who initially rallied behind Prabowo Subianto and Anies Baswedan, remains ongoing. Following Prabowo Subianto's integration into President Jokowi's governing coalition as Minister of Defense, the Islamist factions consolidated their political patronage solely around Anies Baswedan. Concurrently, the nationalist camp maintained the deployment of the stigmatizing *kadrun* label to attack the policies enacted by Baswedan during his tenure as Governor of Jakarta. A data capture of 1,000 Twitter conversations utilizing the hashtags #DukungPSBB (Support Large-Scale Social Restrictions) and #AniesCovidHancurkanNKRI (Anies Covid Destroys the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) on September 18, 2020, underscores the enduring remnants of presidential election polarization, persisting even during the critical period of the COVID-19 pandemic response.

Table 2.

Popular terms within the #4niesCovidHancurkanNKRI hashtag network

No	Word	Number
1	#4niesCovidHancurkanNKRI	978
2	Psbb	330
3	Kadrun	211
4	Dki	207
5	4nies	153

Table 3.

Popular terms within the #DukungPSBB hashtag network

No	Word	Number
1	#dukungpsbb	1029
2	Psbb	546
3	Allah	452
4	@aniesbaswedan	376
5	Gubernur	260

From January 1, 2019, to August 13, 2020, the frequency of the pejorative *cebong* (tadpole) reached 2.58 million mentions, while *kampret* (microbat) accumulated 2.43 million mentions. Meanwhile, the term *kadrun* (desert lizard), which was first deployed in May 2019, rapidly accumulated 1.88 million mentions within that timeframe (Drone Emprit, 2020).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that the term *radical* has undergone significant transformation in post-Reform Indonesia. Initially associated with terrorism prevention and security concerns, the label gradually expanded into religious, bureaucratic, and political arenas. The emergence of derivative labels such as *Taliban* and *kadrun* further illustrates how narratives of radicalism continue to shape public discourse, political competition, and digital communication in contemporary Indonesia.

Counter-Narratives and the Contestation of Religious Authority

The findings reveal that the production and circulation of the labels *liberal*, *sesat* (deviant), *kafir* (infidel), and *radical* are not uncontested processes. Alongside the

expansion of exclusionary religious discourse, various actors have developed counter-narratives aimed at reducing social polarization and mitigating the discriminatory effects generated by these labels. These counter-narratives demonstrate that religious discourse in Indonesia remains a contested arena in which authority is continuously negotiated rather than monopolized by a single institution.

The urgent need for counter-narratives became particularly evident during the period of heightened political polarization surrounding the 2014 Presidential Election, the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election, and the 2019 Presidential Election, when religious labels, namely *kafir*, *liberal*, and *radikal*, were extensively mobilized through sermons, social media, political campaigns, and public debates, frequently transcending their theological contexts to become instruments of political delegitimization, thereby raising serious concerns about social cohesion and interreligious relations. In response, Nahdlatul Ulama re-examined the semantic and affective components of the term *kafir* and, during the 2019 National Conference of Islamic Scholars (Musyawarah Nasional Alim Ulama*) in Banjar, within the *Bahtsul Masail Maudlu'iyah* (thematic jurisprudential deliberation) forum, systematically replaced it with the terminology *non-Muslim*, a shift as profoundly urgent as the transition from "Negro" to "African-American" during racial tensions in the United States, as the former evokes destructive social associations while the latter remains neutral and suitable for a pluralistic society.

This landmark decision, which represents a monumental effort to mitigate the proliferation of hate speech, leverages NU's position as an authoritative institution for the vast Nahdliyin Muslim population and a normative compass for Indonesian Islam, thereby actively dismantling the systemic discrimination that, as Gelber (2021) argues, anchors hate speech through authoritative agents and majoritarian social norms. The initiative demonstrates continuity in NU's pattern of political contribution, characterized by its reliance on jurisprudential (*fiqh*) foundations and terminologies, mirroring the historic Cipanas National Conference and reinforced by the 1954

Muktamar XX in Surabaya, which recognized the Indonesian government as *waliy al-amr ad-daruriy bi asy-syaukah* (a de facto government possessing emergency authority), and by NU's strategic participation in the Mutual Cooperation Legislative Assembly (DPR-GR) following the Presidential Decree of July 5, 1959 (Zahro, 2004).

In its scholarly traditions, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) inherently recognizes two distinct sets of typologies for the term *kafir*. The first set, formulated during the 5th National Congress (Muktamar V) in 1930, is rooted in theological dimensions, comprising *kafir ingkar* (disbelief out of ignorance), *kafir juhud* (disbelief out of obstinacy), *kafir nifaq* (hypocrisy), and *kafir 'inad* (disbelief out of resistance). The second set consists of classifications based on socio-political variables, namely *kafir harbi* (belligerent non-Muslims), *kafir mu'ahad* (treaty-bound non-Muslims), *kafir musta'man* (non-Muslims granted asylum), and *kafir dhimmi* (protected non-Muslim subjects).

The designation of non-Muslim as a substitute for *kafir* operates strictly within the domain of nation-statehood, given that the aforementioned classical socio-political categories fail to encapsulate the contemporary status of non-Islamic citizens within a modern republic. Consequently, this decree is partial and contextual; outside the framework of statehood, the textual proclamations of the Qur'an remain unaltered, ensuring that "...there is no requirement to modify '*Qul yaa ayyuhal kaafirun*' into '*Qul yaa ayyuhal non-Muslim*'" (nu.or.id, 2019).

Prior to Nahdlatul Ulama's formulation to substitute the term *kafir* with *non-Muslim*, Muhammadiyah had already addressed the *takfiri* phenomenon institutionally by conceptualizing the framework of "Moderate Religiosity" (*Keberagamaan yang Moderat*). This formulation was ratified during its 47th National Congress (*Muktamar ke-47*), held from 18–22 Shawwal 1436 H, corresponding to August 3–7, 2015 CE, in Makassar.

"The *takfiri* tendency fundamentally contradicts the inherent nature of Islam, which underscores compassion, politeness, *tawasuth* (moderation), and

tolerance. Recognizing the highly destructive potential posed by takfiri factions, Muhammadiyah calls upon the broader Muslim community, and its members (warga Persyarikatan) in particular, to maintain a critical stance. It urges them to actively curb the expansion of these groups through dialogic approaches, open and enlightening propagation (dakwah), intellectual empowerment, and courteous social interactions" (*Tanfidz Keputusan Muktamar Muhammadiyah Ke-47, 2015*).

Exclusionary discourses labeling others as kafir or sesat have systematically underpinned violence against minority groups, as exemplified by the Ahmadiyya community, where victims have been subjected to violence driven by a distorted zeal for *al-amr bi al-ma'rūf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar* and ideologically justified by fatwas declaring them "heretical and deviating," effectively rationalizing violent actions as legitimate jihad (Burhani, 2021). In response, the 2015 Muhammadiyah National Congress extended beyond organizational and ritual concerns to comprehensively address statehood, nationhood, and universal humanity, issuing a resolution against the takfiri phenomenon that constitutes social activism aimed at projecting Islamic frameworks to resolve modern socio-political dilemmas (Latief & Nashir, 2020). Beyond providing a "counter-narrative" against ideological persuasions underpinning violence and discrimination, this activism materializes in social praxis, with the organization explicitly mandating that "Muhammadiyah urges all its constituent institutions to consistently serve as protectors for oppressed minority groups" (*Tanfidz Keputusan Muktamar Muhammadiyah Ke-47, 2015*). This intervention is significant because, as Latief and Nashir (2020) observe, Muhammadiyah increasingly articulates Islamic concepts within broader discussions of citizenship, democracy, and social welfare, thereby strengthening democratic coexistence and demonstrating that institutional counter-discourse can effectively challenge exclusionary religious labeling.

Counter-discourses also emerge from outside formal religious organizations. The Maiyah community led by Muhammad Ainun Nadjib (Cak Nun), is distinctly community-based. Headquartered in Yogyakarta, this community regularly conducts its propagation (*dakwah*) through cultural and artistic assemblies (*sarasehan*) across rural and urban fringes of Indonesia, particularly in Java. On numerous occasions, the Maiyah community addresses the burgeoning tendency within the public sphere to label other groups as perpetrators of heresy (*bid'ah*), deviance (*sesat*), polytheism (*shirk*), or even infidels (*kafir*). Intriguingly, traditional practices often dismissed as *bid'ah* or *shirk* are actively showcased within these assemblies, subsequently serving as focal points for dialogue between the congregation (*jama'ah*), Cak Nun, and other religious figures. A prominent example of a Maiyah assembly specifically dissecting the concept of *kafir* occurred during the Kenduri Cinta gathering at Taman Ismail Marzuki, Jakarta, in March 2015. The documentary video of this particular event was subsequently uploaded to the YouTube platform (@SPASI, 2015).

“... The various Maiyah circles (in Purwokerto, Pematang, Semarang, Surabaya, Jombang, Malang, Jakarta, etc.) were explicitly urged to pursue two objectives. The first is to unearth and reclaim the true, essential meanings of the Qur'an, jihad, and shahid (martyrdom). It would be beneficial to similarly re-examine other key concepts, such as the definition of Islam, *shirk* (polytheism), and *bid'ah* (heresy). If possible, these must be thoroughly re-elaborated, precisely because they have been deeply distorted and heavily manipulated, to the extent that you now witness the sacred proclamation of 'Allahu Akbar' being weaponized to justify shootings. Furthermore, it was articulated: "I cannot simply accuse my fellow man of being an infidel (*kafir*); in fact, I do not even possess the authority to definitively declare him a Muslim, for I hold no ultimate data regarding his spiritual standing. Let alone judging another person, I do not even presume to definitively assert that I myself am a true Muslim, because evaluating such a status is strictly the divine prerogative of Allah. Whether I am genuinely a

Muslim or not is not for me to decide; I am merely attempting, striving... yet today, we witness people readily proclaiming others as infidels (*ngafir-ngafirno*) everywhere. This phenomenon itself constitutes a form of infidelity; those who recklessly brand others as infidels are the true infidels. Why? Because they are usurping the sovereign prerogative of Allah to make such a judgment..." (Muhammad Ainun Najib, Maiyah Kenduri Cinta, Taman Ismail Marzuki 2015).

Theological foundations from religious authorities shape this discursive shift toward violence, as MUI fatwas (1980, 2005) systematically justified violence against the Ahmadiyya community (Burhani, 2021). Such justification sustains not only perpetrators but also the silent majority, whose passivity and averted gaze constitute tacit approval that validates discrimination (Burhani, 2019; Langton, 2018). Therefore, developing and massively disseminating institutional counter-discourses that challenge this theological legitimacy is pivotal, at minimum catalyzing deliberative dialogue within civil society and preventing authoritarian reliance on a single narrative.

DISCUSSION

Religious Language as a Mechanism of Power

The findings demonstrate that the labels liberal, *sesat* (deviant), *kafir* (infidel), and radical function as more than descriptive religious categories. Rather, they operate as mechanisms of power through which social boundaries are constructed, maintained, and contested. The production and circulation of these labels reveal how religious discourse shapes relations between majority and minority groups while simultaneously influencing broader political and social processes.

This finding supports Wuthnow's argument that religion should not be understood merely as a source of belief or moral guidance but also as a form of power embedded within discourses, institutions, identities, and political arrangements (Wuthnow, 2023). In the Indonesian context, religious power is exercised through a wide range of actors, including religious organizations, state institutions, media organizations,

political elites, and digital communities. These actors collectively participate in defining which beliefs, practices, and identities are considered legitimate or illegitimate within the public sphere.

The empirical findings further illustrate how discursive power operates through the construction of authoritative classifications. The designation of certain groups as *sesat* establishes boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The categorization of individuals or communities as *kafir* creates distinctions between insiders and outsiders. The labeling of actors as liberal identifies perceived theological threats from within religious communities, while the classification of groups as radical enables state intervention through security and counter-terrorism frameworks. Although each label emerged from different historical circumstances, all perform a similar function: they classify social actors into categories that carry unequal moral, political, and social consequences.

These findings resonate with Lincoln's (1989) understanding of discourse as an instrument of social formation, wherein power operates through ideological persuasion and mobilization of collective sentiments, mechanisms clearly demonstrated in the Indonesian case, as religious authorities, state institutions, and public figures produce narratives that define certain groups as dangerous or deviant, which are subsequently amplified through media, social networks, sermons, fatwas, and political campaigns, with repeated circulation embedding these labels within everyday social interactions. A key contribution of this study is demonstrating that the four labels do not operate independently but constitute an interconnected discursive repertoire: individuals labeled liberal may be accused of promoting deviance, groups categorized as *sesat* may be positioned outside legitimate religious boundaries, accusations of *kafir* can exclude political opponents or minorities, and those engaging in excessive *takfir* may themselves become labeled *radikal*, creating a self-reinforcing cycle that regulates religious legitimacy and social belonging.

These findings extend previous studies on religious discourse in Indonesia by showing that exclusionary discourse cannot be explained solely through digital communication or local political dynamics (Kushardiyanti et al., 2022; Tahir et al., 2023; Alkawy, 2020), but rather involves interactions among religious institutions, state agencies, media organizations, political actors, and online communities, forming a broader ecosystem of authority through which religious minorities are continuously categorized, evaluated, and contested. Viewed from this perspective, religious harmony is not a fixed social condition but a dynamic outcome of ongoing struggles over meaning, legitimacy, and authority, as evidenced by counter-narratives from Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and community-based initiatives such as Maiyah, which demonstrate that religious discourse remains an arena of contestation where competing actors continuously negotiate the meanings of religious categories, thereby shaping possibilities for inclusion, exclusion, coexistence, and conflict within contemporary Indonesian society.

Multi-Actor Authority Discourse and the Construction of Religious Minorities

The findings suggest that the construction of religious minorities in post-Reform Indonesia cannot be explained solely through the authority of religious institutions. Rather, the production and circulation of labels such as liberal, *sesat* (deviant), *kafir* (infidel), and radical occur through interactions among religious organizations, state institutions, political actors, media organizations, and digital publics. Each actor contributes to the creation, dissemination, legitimization, and contestation of religious categories that shape social perceptions and majority-minority relations. This process is conceptualized in this article as multi-actor authority discourse, referring to a discursive formation in which authority emerges through the interaction of multiple actors rather than being monopolized by a single institution.

Table 4.

The Four Keywords and Their Discursive Functions

Keyword	Main Authority Actor	Target Group	Main Function
Liberal	MUI, Conservative Islamic Groups	Progressive Muslims	Delegitimization
<i>Sesat</i>	MUI, Ministry of Religious Affairs	Ahmadiyah, Shia, New Religious Movements	Boundary Making
<i>Kafir</i>	Religious Organizations, Political Actors	Religious/Political Opponents	Othering
Radical	State Agencies, Media, Digital Publics	Islamist Groups, Political Opponents	Security Framing

Within this framework, authority is distributed across different institutional domains. Religious organizations formulate classificatory categories and theological boundaries; state agencies institutionalize particular interpretations through regulations, security frameworks, and administrative policies; media organizations amplify and normalize discursive categories through news production and public communication; political actors strategically mobilize religious labels within electoral and ideological competition; and digital publics reproduce, transform, and circulate these categories through networked communication.

This finding complements Nasir's (2014) observation that religious authority in democratic Indonesia is increasingly dispersed across multiple arenas beyond traditional ulama institutions. It also resonates with Allen and Allen's (2016) notion of "god terms," whereby particular religious keywords acquire organizing power over social and political action. In contemporary Indonesia, the authority of labels such as liberal, *sesat*, *kafir*, and radical emerges not from theological legitimacy alone but from their continual reproduction across interconnected institutional domains.

Consequently, the authority of a religious label derives not only from its original source but also from its repeated circulation and reinforcement across

interconnected institutional arenas. Religious discourse therefore operates as a collaborative process through which multiple actors participate in defining legitimacy, orthodoxy, and social belonging.

This conceptualization extends Lincoln's understanding of discourse as a mechanism of social construction and Wuthnow's conception of religious power by highlighting how authority is collaboratively produced in contemporary public spheres. While Lincoln emphasizes the role of discourse in generating legitimacy and mobilizing sentiment, and Wuthnow underscores the institutional and political dimensions of religious power, the Indonesian case demonstrates that authority increasingly emerges through interactions among religious, political, media, and digital actors. Religious minorities are therefore not simply categorized by a single institution but are positioned within a broader ecosystem of interacting authorities that collectively define inclusion, exclusion, legitimacy, and citizenship. The concept of multi-actor authority discourse thus provides a framework for understanding how religious boundaries are negotiated and reproduced in contemporary plural societies.

CONCLUSION

This article argues that the construction of religious minorities in post-Reform Indonesia is shaped through what it conceptualizes as multi-actor authority discourse, a process wherein religious organizations, state institutions, political actors, media organizations, and digital publics collectively produce, circulate, and legitimize religious categories that define the boundaries of legitimacy, orthodoxy, citizenship, and social belonging. The findings reveal that the keywords *liberal*, *sesat*, *kafir*, and *radikal* perform distinct yet interconnected functions: *liberal* challenges alternative interpretations, *sesat* defines theological limits, *kafir* separates insiders from outsiders, and *radikal* facilitates security interventions. Together, they constitute a discursive repertoire structuring majority–minority relations, and their intensification coincided with political polarization from 2014 to 2019, when religious narratives entered electoral and digital spaces, reinforcing Lincoln's (2014) argument that

discourse constructs social realities and maintains authority, while illustrating Wuthnow's (2023) proposition that religion operates as power embedded in institutions, identities, politics, and everyday practices.

Concurrently, counter-discourses have emerged from Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and community-based initiatives like Maiyah, challenging exclusionary language with alternative vocabularies grounded in citizenship, moderation, coexistence, and social equality, while the state-sponsored discourse of *moderasi beragama* represents an institutional response to polarizing narratives. Beyond Indonesia, the concept of multi-actor authority discourse extends Lincoln (2014) and Wuthnow (2023) by demonstrating that religious authority increasingly emerges through interactions among multiple actors, with labels acquiring social power through circulation across mutually reinforcing institutional arenas rather than from a single source, contributing to broader debates on religion, power, discourse, and minority formation. This study is limited to four keywords in post-Reform Indonesia, and future research may examine additional vocabularies, compare discursive dynamics across traditions, or investigate how emerging digital platforms transform the production and circulation of religious authority, deepening understanding of religious discourse, power, and social inclusion in contemporary plural societies.

For religious organizations, media platforms, and policymakers, these findings suggest that reducing exclusionary labeling requires sustained institutional counter-discourse of the kind already modeled by Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and community-based initiatives, rather than one-off statements, and that state programs promoting *moderasi beragama* should coordinate more closely with these existing religious counter-narratives to reinforce rather than duplicate their vocabulary. Further research is required to construct a balanced discursive repertoire regarding the production and circulation of counter-discourses among religious minorities. This can be achieved through a meticulous analysis of the keywords emerging within

religious counter-narratives, such as "religious moderation" (*moderasi beragama*), "public-interest-oriented religiosity" (*beragama maslahat*), "tolerance" (*toleransi*), and "anti-radicalism" (*anti-radikalisme*).

AI DISCLOSURE

The author utilizes several AI-based tools, specifically Grammarly and DeepL Write, solely for grammatical refinement and linguistic enhancement. The use of these instruments is strictly limited to improving readability and does not alter or influence the intellectual substance or core arguments of this work.

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