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Radicalism movement in higher education in Indonesia: Students' understanding and its prevention

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Article Info

Abstract

This study seeks to discover the phenomenon of the radicalism movement in higher education and the students' understanding of this issue along with the prevention that can be undertaken by universities. This study used a mixed method design. In collecting quantitative data, an online close-ended questionnaire was distributed to 500 students from five well-known universities in Medan, North Sumatra, Indonesia. Furthermore, interviews and focus group discussions involving students and lecturers were carried out. The results of this study show that students' understanding of radicalism is still diverse, so it makes students vulnerable to being exposed to radicalism. In an effort to slow down the radicalism movement, the activeness of the lecturers can open the students' minds when encountering radical ideology. Then, the universities must periodically seek to spread religious teachings in an open atmosphere and emphasize moderation and decrease the radicalism movement.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of radicalism in Indonesia is a worrying concern and continues to be a major issue due to its existence in many circles. The term radicalism is commonly related to the subject of terrorism in Indonesia, particularly in the form of bombings in various regions, that have claimed many lives and had a considerable impact on the social lives of Indonesians. At the very least, there have been over 20 bombings since 2001. Of course, the many manifestations of radicalism or violence listed above do not happen by themselves.

The phenomenon of radicalization in Indonesia has been inspired by the socio-political conditions which have been evolving for more than 20 years in the era of reform. This is in line with what Hamzah (2019) mentions, that this phenomenon does not appear spontaneously, but it is through a long process. It is the culmination of "radicalization," a process in which the commitment and use of violent means in political conflict increases (Della Porta & LaFree, 2012). Moreover, radicalization has been carried out by several Islamic activists who were politically alienated and experienced discrimination and were angry with state policies (Bartlett & Miller, 2012).

In Indonesia, radical groups have a good movement structure by establishing new organizations and massively recruiting young people. Sometimes, radicalism is associated with religion (Usman et al., 2014). In circles of scholars who study the revolutionary Islamic movement, it is suspected that radicalism is part of a wave of violence and terror whose embryo has existed since the early 1980s, then increased in the 1990s, and peaked after the fall of the Suharto's regime. The most apparent impact of radicalism is the formation of politicization within religion, where religion is compassionate, most easily ignites fanaticism, becomes the loudest fan to carry out various very harsh actions, both in social life between individuals and groups (Laisa, 2014).

One of the people's concerns is radicalism that has targeted students as the educated young generation. This is an urgent concern since the young generation is the future of the country. It is expected that students are patriotic, tolerant, and loyal to the country (Andrian, 2018). Setara Institute (2019) mentions that students at ten well-known Indonesian state colleges have been exposed to radicalism. Those universities include the University of Indonesia, Syarief Hidayatullah State Islamic University, Bandung Institute of Technology, Sunan Gunung Djati State Islamic University Bandung, Bogor Agricultural Institute, Gadjah Mada University, Yogyakarta State University, Brawijaya University, Airlangga University, and Mataram University. Other news that added to the impression of exposure to the campus world was conveyed by R Ryamizard Ryacudu when he was still the Minister of Defense, who stated at that time that 23.4 percent of Indonesian students were exposed to radicalism (Abdi, 2019). In addition, Asriani (2019) conducted research dealing with radicalism in State Islamic Universities in Indonesia. She clarified that the factors that cause the easy spread of radicalism in universities are first, the desire to make changes quickly using violence, secondly disbelieving in others, and thirdly interpreting jihad in a limited way. However, she discovered that the spread of radicalism in the four universities was not extreme, and its influence among students was relatively small.

Basri and Dwiningrum (2019) looked into the potential for radicalism to grow in higher education. It was found that there was radical potential among students at the Balikpapan State Polytechnic (located in the island of Celebes), which was formed through the actions of external organizations off campus. In addition, it was also found that there were student interactions with external campus organizations that had the potential to form student radicalism in the campus environment.

Students as a preparatory generation who will color the development of advanced and modern civilizations need comprehensive knowledge about radicals. The campus is tasked with producing national cadres who are developed, civilized, and free to compete. On-campus, students are educated to be nationalist and religious. To avoid radical thoughts, students and campuses need to introduce the urgency of knowledge and students' views on radicalism, at least at the campus level. Student activities are reflected in their behavior and life while on campus. Student activities as early as possible can be appropriately managed to convey moral messages and become student habits properly. The ideological factor is one cause of the emergence of radicalism in Indonesia. The student environment with radicalism on campus can occur anytime; this can happen from communication factors between students and other networks.

Students are one of the academic societies that can manipulate the belief of others, that radical movements only attract uneducated people, but radicalism is also considered to have infected students. This study attempted to see the phenomenon of the radicalism movement in higher education and the students' understanding of this issue along with the prevention that can be undertaken by universities. This study was worth conducting due to the growth of radicalism in numerous universities in Medan City, a cosmopolitan area which has had little notice. The study of radicalism in higher education in North Sumatra province has not been explored by researchers, thus, making it necessary to do so.

Methodology

This study used a mixed method design. In line with the research objectives and data collection, a set of online close-ended questionnaire was distributed to respondents who were the subject of this study to obtain the quantitative data. The respondents were 500 students from five well-known universities in Medan, namely, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Universitas Medan Area, and Universitas Sumatera Utara. Each respondent represents a scientific and social department that helps see possible differences in understanding radicalism so that it is accessible in terms of analysis or categorization. In addition, the selected respondents must also represent several student organizations with Islamic religious roots.

In-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to gain qualitative data. The researcher

determined who would be interviewed to get the information he wanted to find from this founding more intensely. The questions asked to the informants deal with radicalism in higher education, which were designed to answer the research questions. A focus group discussion (FGD) was conducted with students, lecturers, and experts (scholars) whose research deals with radicalism and terrorism. This was done to obtain more information related to students' and lecturers' understanding of radicalism. This provided sufficient detail to allow the work to be reproduced.

Results

Radicalism in Universities: Students and Lecturers' Understanding and its Factors

From the results of questionnaires distributed to 500 respondents from five leading universities in North Sumatra, namely, Universitas Muhammadiyah Sumatera Utara, Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Universitas Islam Sumatera Utara, Universitas Medan Area, and Universitas Sumatera Utara, it was found that radicalism was related to acts of violence, non-tolerance, and fanaticism with a yield of 59 percent. The reason that radicalism is a malicious activity is seen in the Ambon case, which claimed many lives. Furthermore, regarding non-tolerance, just as logic, people who commit violence, and in their minds want to win alone, are people who do not tolerate anything. Intolerance is disrespect for the thoughts and opinions of others, and tending to think about oneself. Attitudes like this can damage tolerance between harmonious people. In that context, as illustrated in Medan, the development of radicalism is still flourishing, even though it has a slightly different character from other regions. Is it necessary to carry out radicalism? Of the 500 respondents, 48 percent said radicalism was essential, and 52 percent said radicalism was unnecessary.

What causes this radicalization? Five questions were posed to the participants (students and lecturers) in interviews and FGD about radicalism's various elements. The first question asked how many people believed that economic concerns were at the root of radicalism. This is to see whether economic issues drive radicalism. It is undeniable that the economic dimension has dominated society's demands for education today. Educational institutions, whose graduates can easily find work, are in high demand. This is not wrong or even unreasonable; however, educational institutions must respond

appropriately, because public considerations rely on the dimensions of now and now with a limited scope, whereas educational institutions must also consider the dimension of anticipation.

In the second question, the researcher asked students how much they agreed with the notion that 61 percent education causes radicalism as stated by previous research of radicalism in the perspective of education.

In this case, efforts are needed to enable higher education institutions to become pioneers in the development of integrated human resources in order to meet: (1) the needs of citizens who are ideally oriented toward education through the creation of an educationally conducive environment; (2) pragmatic-oriented community needs through the readiness to educate humans who can be absorbed by the business world according to their respective specifications; and (3) the development of a dynamic academic spirit that can become a vehicle for socializing values, norms, and independent attitudes. This can be done by boosting the active role of the lecturers.

Because this research was conducted on students to see their understanding comprehensively, the third question, which related to the factors underlying radicalism, was a statement of agreement on the attitude of impatient youths as an influencing factor. The results from the field found that students agreed that the impatience factor was one of the factors for young people to take radical actions.

In the fourth question for understanding the factors that influence radicalism, a statement was made as to what extent they agreed that the factors that influence radicalism were factors due to free democracy. It seems that most students agreed that the free democracy factor causes radicalism. This was proven by 57 percent of students who answered this. In this case, freedom in a democracy is abused by a few people who spread issues that contain messages of radicalism. Issues that arise later can gradually influence the views and behavior of readers, not only among students, but also the academic community, including lecturers at Higher Education. It can be proven that after the suicide bombing incident in Surabaya (13–14 May 2018), there was widespread discussion among the public about the increase or persistence of radicalism on the campuses of State Universities in particular.

These discussions and debates started with statements that were widely circulated on social media from several lecturers — including professors — who seemed to approve of the suicide bombings. According to them, the Surabaya suicide bombings were aimed: first, to corner

Muslims; second, in order to obtain an increase in the budget for the eradication of terrorism; and third, as a transfer of the issue of efforts to replace national leadership in the 2019 presidential election. There are also lecturers and professors of state universities who support or provide justification for understanding and the practice of those who want to form an Islamic da'wah or caliphate. At the same time, this thought and practice, both directly and by implication, rejected the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia and Pancasila.

The last question related to understanding the factors behind radicalism was the statement of agreement about the lack of religious knowledge causing people to commit acts of radicalism. Based on this statement, students agreed that the lack spiritual knowledge is the cause of radicalism. The data shows that 60 percent answered agree with this statement.

Religiosity: It's Role to Prevent Radicalism

It should be emphasized here is the religious concept used in this study. In general, what is meant by religiosity is a religious attitude or appreciation. In a more specific context, students' religiosity in this study is the attitudes, perceptions, and appreciation of Muslim students towards the teachings of Islam that they receive, both in understanding and behavior (religious rituals and socio-political attitudes). Of course, it becomes interesting when this research is carried out in various regions, from big cities that are very cosmopolitan.

There are many similarities and also found differences or, more precisely, the uniqueness of each individual. Some of the similarities that were found were as follows: (1) the diversity of educational backgrounds, religious affiliations, and organizational affiliations of most informants were the result of the experiences (social, religious, and in particular political contexts) of individuals who were not linear; (2) the majority of informants tend to maintain their normative religious attitudes or views and tend to be textual, although they are still open to receiving new things; and (3) Informants also predominantly state that their religious learning process is not only obtained in college or school, but also from the internet and other online media, including social media, which young people currently love.

Most informants admitted that they carried out practical prayers such as prayer and fasting well, especially obligatory prayers as young Muslim activists. Some claimed to carry out sunnah worship, such as rawatib sunnah prayer and sunnah fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. There were also confessions among some

activists who said that their worship was still "pervasive," both obligatory, and especially sunnah. In general, they admitted that they had not come to be called "the pious." The reason is that they realize that there are many things in Islam that they cannot do. Many informants said that being good and pious can be done by us and others, and even people who are non-Muslims can be holy in their religious understanding. In addition, holiness is not only our own (in the sense of an individual) but can also be owned by other people, fellow Muslims, even though its expression may vary.

Discussion

What exactly is 'radicalization'? There is no universally accepted definition in academia or government. The concept of radicalization is not solid and evident as many seem to take it for granted. Above all, it is incomprehensible on its own. The Group of Violent Radicalization Experts formed by the European Commission in 2006, tasked with analyzing the state of academic research on violence, noted in 2008 that radicalization is a context-bound phenomenon of excellence (Schmid, 2013).

Many researchers conceptualize radicalization as a process characterized by an increased commitment to and violent means and strategies in political conflicts. From this point of view, radicalization entails a change in perceptions towards polarizing and absolute definitions of a given situation and the articulation of increasingly 'radical' aims and objectives. It may evolve from enmity towards certain social groups or societal institutions and structures. It may also entail the increasing use of violent means.

It is difficult to conclude otherwise that 'radicalization' is a problematic concept by such heterogeneous definitions. Along these lines of thought, Peter Neumann once described radicalization as 'what happened before the bomb went off'. While concisely put, Neumann's observations do not help much in analytical terms due to the lack of a superior approach to achieving an adequate understanding of the concept (Neumann et al., 2008).

The data results prove that radicalism is not yet fully understood by students. Because it is slightly different, Zahratul Mahmudati said, radicalism is a thought or attitude with three characteristics. First, intolerant attitudes and disrespect for the opinions or beliefs of others. Second, the exclusive attitude is a closed attitude and tries to differ from the habits of the people. And the third is a revolutionary attitude, namely, the tendency to

use violence to achieve goals. The term radicalism is purely a western product often associated with fundamentalism in Islam (Mahmudati et al., 2014). In western tradition, Islamic fundamentalism is often exchanged for other terms such as "Islamic extremism" as mentioned by Gilles Kepel or "radical Islam" according to Emmanuel Seven, and there are also the terms "revivalism," "integral," or "Islamism" (Rohimin, 2006).

The features and spectrum obtained in Medan conducted against 500 respondents from 5 well-known universities in Medan are not the same as what Hasan (2013) formulated when explaining the spectrum/variants of Islamism in his research report Narrative and Identity Politics. Hasan uses Islamism as an analytical term which he thinks contains five spectrums or variants (Hasan, 2013).

Halfway through the group membership phase, the endurance shield is turned around. Radical groups make the person resilient to the influence of de-radicalization from outside the group. Radicals getting on campus should be a serious concern (Doosje et al., 2016). When viewed throughout 2017, cases of terrorism were increasingly occurring. The dynamics and patterns of distribution that are different from previous years have made every level of society more alert and responsive, including students.

Netizen talked about the video on YouTube containing the oath of Indonesian students on the IPB campus to establish the *Khilafah.* The video, uploaded on March 30, 2016, shows 3,500 students from various campuses holding a national symposium at the Dramaga IPB Campus, Bogor. The students who attended took the oath with outstretched hands in the style of ISIS, led by a man from the stage. One of the points of the promise is to establish a state with Islamic law, which contains the following:

"We will continue to fight tirelessly, to uphold Islamic sharia under the auspices of the Khilafah Islamiyah state as a complete solution to the problems of Indonesian society."

This viral video makes us aware that radicalism is now indiscriminate. It is no longer targeting people in certain status conditions, but also attacking young people in education.

If this continues, we will only see the harmony between religious communities, diversity, and Pancasila values as stories from the past. If that happens, it would be both sad and tragic. The campus can no longer be skeptical or indifferent to the circumstances around it. Believe it or not, shadows of radicalism often appear in our campus environment.

Reporting from kompas.com, Irfan Amalee, Director of Peace Generation, said that radical indoctrination is carried out in various ways, including:

1. Radical groups use political narratives. Students experiencing an identity crisis or are upset because they see injustice are quickly pushed to wage jihad. This can be seen through the assumption that students and the academic community perceive various issues of radicalism that have led to acts of terrorism in Indonesia.

2. Radical groups use historical narratives, namely teaching historical values that do not generate wisdom but the value of revenge. History educators must make this one of their extensive homeworks.

3. Radical groups use psychological narratives; violent figures are heroes. In short, they consider violence as a solution to solve problems.

4. Radical groups use religious narratives or verses to recruit new members. The verse fragments that the children and the teacher have not sufficiently understood make it easier for young people to join radical groups. And, this method is the most effective way of recruiting.

The entry of radicalism through religious narrative shows the vital role of spiritual and national education. The problem faced by the younger generation, including intellectuals or students, is a matter of identity. They tend to be confused about choosing between religion or national interests. They do not understand national identity, which includes religious rights as citizens. For this reason, radicalism can easily slip into the campus realm.

Considering that the ideology of radicalism is closed, exclusive, and sectarian, it is necessary to cooperate with all parties and sectors to eradicate the spread of radicalism. It needs improvement in education, both systems, and policies. It is essential to increase openness in education, especially in religious teaching. The efforts that can be made to prevent the spread of radicalization in universities are to provide proportional religious learning facilities to students, especially for those who have a passion for learning religion, even though they do not have a strong religious background. This is intended so that students do not learn from sources or radical groups. In addition, the campus must periodically seek to spread religious teachings in an open atmosphere and emphasize moderation.

Conclusion

The understanding of radicalism has not yet reached a firm point, and radical actions do not automatically become terrorist acts. However, three levels of radicals can lead to a terrorist act. Terrorism groups have focused on recruiting new members from educated circles such as college students. To prevent student exposure, an introduction to campus life is necessary. Radical groups indoctrinate using political narratives, historical narratives, psychological narratives using religious records, or verses to recruit new group members. The verse fragments that the children and the teacher did not understand well made it easier for young people to join radical groups. So, the active role of the lecturer is to help prevent this by approaching students. In addition, the campus must periodically seek to spread religious teachings in an open atmosphere and emphasize moderation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

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