Strengthening Nadhatul Ulama as Moderate Islam in the Digital Era

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ABSTRACT

The era of the digital, millennial, or Industrial Revolution 4.0 presents numerous challenges and intense competition, necessitating not only global competencies but also critical thinking skills. This is particularly important for Muslims (specifically NU members) to avoid alienation and marginalization. This paper aims to analyze the strengthening of the moderate ideology of NU, which boasts the largest following in Indonesia and significantly influences the nation's civilization. NU, as a moderate Islamic movement, adopts an inclusive approach through the wise use of social media and digital technology, its role in education, promotion of digital literacy, combating hoaxes, and participation in interfaith dialogue. Furthermore, NU promotes an understanding of moderate Islam, fosters peace, and fights extremism amidst the rapid advancement of information technology. Moderate Islam is perceived not merely as a religion but as a civilized way of life. The efforts of NU in the past, present, and future must remain dynamic, continuously adapting to the challenges of the times on a global scale, to build a more advanced Indonesia in the future.

Keywords: Moderate Islam, Nadhatul Ulama (NU), Digital Era

ABSTRAK

Era digital, milenial, atau Revolusi Industri 4.0 menghadirkan berbagai tantangan dan persaingan yang ketat, yang memerlukan tidak hanya kompetensi global tetapi juga keterampilan berpikir kritis. Hal ini sangat penting bagi umat Muslim (khususnya anggota NU) untuk menghindari keterasingan dan peminggiran. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis penguatan ideologi moderat NU, yang memiliki pengikut terbesar di Indonesia dan sangat mempengaruhi peradaban bangsa. NU, sebagai gerakan Islam moderat, mengadopsi pendekatan inklusif melalui penggunaan bijaksana media sosial dan teknologi digital, perannya dalam pendidikan, promosi literasi digital, melawan hoaks, dan partisipasi dalam dialog antaragama. Selain itu, NU mempromosikan pemahaman tentang Islam moderat, mendorong perdamaian, dan memerangi ekstremisme di tengah pesatnya kemajuan teknologi informasi. Islam moderat dipandang bukan hanya sebagai agama tetapi juga sebagai cara hidup yang beradab. Upaya NU di masa lalu, sekarang, dan masa depan harus tetap dinamis, terus beradaptasi dengan tantangan zaman di skala global, untuk membangun Indonesia yang lebih maju di masa depan.

Kata kunci: Islam Moderat, Nadhatul Ulama, Era Digital

1.   Introduction

The Digital Era, also known as the Industrial Revolution 4.0, has transformed various aspects of human life, including the social, political, and cultural domains. For example, it has shifted the practice of using paper to paperless, from traditional market shopping to online shopping, and from taking a Blue Bird Taxi to ordering GoCar/Grab Car from home. This disruptive digital era also impacts Islamic community organizations. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), historically recognized as a traditional Islamic group, must adapt to the digital revolution to avoid being overwhelmed by the wave of change.

In this article, we explore the phenomenon of NU, known as a "traditionalist" organization, which effectively leverages digital technology to promote national Islam, peaceful and friendly Islam, and to counter conservative Islamic groups, particularly those with transnational ideologies, such as proponents of the Islamic caliphate and the Islamic State of Indonesia. Through digital techniques, NU seeks to build strength and plays a significant role in addressing the challenges of the ever-dynamic era.

Islam in Indonesia is known for its democratic, peaceful, and civilized character, which is largely attributable to the influence of Islamic mass organizations, particularly NU. Islamic moderation plays a crucial role in fostering humanitarian and global civilization, as exemplified by NU's promotion of Islam Nusantara. The contextualization of traditional Islamic characteristics towards moderation positively impacts various facets of social life, including the social, political, economic, and legal domains. This complexity enables moderate Islam to unify religious perceptions rooted in the principles of ahlus sunnah wal jama'ah, which emphasizes *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *i'tidal* (justice), and *tawazun* (balance). These foundational principles mitigate extreme interpretations of religion (*Tatharruf*) https://www.harakatuna.com/islam-moderat-di-indonesia.htm.

Many scholars have written about Moderate Islam, including Azroor, Z., (2019), Hilmi, M. (2012), and Wahyudi, W.E. (2018). Azroor (2019) noted that transnational ideologies with a "fierce" face, such as HTI, the Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafi movements, have made significant inroads, particularly post-reform. This is evidenced by their success in infiltrating Indonesia's two largest Islamic mass organizations, NU and Muhammadiyah (MD), in 2006-2007. In response, the 33rd NU Congress and the 47th MD Congress in 2015 underscored these organizations' commitment to not only rehabilitate after infiltration, but also to more aggressively promote Indonesia's unique Islamic style globally (Azroor, 2019).

Hilmy (2012) identified at least five characteristics of Islamic moderation within Indonesian Islamic thought. The first is the ideology of nonviolence in preaching Islam. Second is the adoption of modern life patterns, including science and technology, democracy, and human rights. Third, rational thinking is used to approach and understand Islamic teachings. Fourth, a contextual approach is used to interpret Islamic sources. Fifth is the application of ijtihad (independent reasoning) to establish Islamic law (*istinbat*). These characteristics can be further expanded to include tolerance, harmony, and cooperation among different religious groups (Hilmy, 2012).

In contrast to Hilmy (2012), who emphasizes the substantive characteristics of moderate Islam, Wahyudi, W.E. (2018) interprets moderate Islam as a "mid-position between liberalism and Islamism." According to Burhani, individuals or organizations that occupy the middle ground between liberalism and Islamism are considered moderate. Thus, moderate Islam is defined as the balance between these two poles (Wahyudi, 2018).

NU's vision of moderation is reflected not only at the theological level, but also at the social, political, and cultural levels. Politically, the NU's moderation is evident in its acceptance of the Indonesian state construct, which is based on Pancasila, the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI), the 1945 Constitution, and the motto Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, collectively known as the Four Pillars of Nationality. As an organization, NU agreed not to alter the existence of these four national pillars. Neglecting any of these components in national and state life could have fatal consequences for the sustainability of modern Indonesian states.

The Republic of Indonesia, Pancasila, the 1945 Constitution, motto Bhinneka Tunggal Ika, democratic values, and human rights are often seen as features of moderate Islam in the Western context. However, moderate Islam in Indonesia generally rejects secularism, which is often associated

with Western moderation bias. This rejection of secularism differentiates the concept of Islamic moderation in Indonesia from its Western counterpart (Wahyudi, W.E., 2018: 924).

In the digital era, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) strategically utilized various digital platforms to reinforce its stance as a moderate Islamic organization. NU has embraced digital da'wah media such as social media, NU Online, and Aswaja TV to disseminate content that combines radicalism and terrorism while promoting the value of the ukhuwah trilogy (Ma'arif 2023; Mukhammad, Zamzami, Abd, A'la, Zumrotul, Mukaffa, 2023). NU's approach involves building narratives around religious moderation through online media, emphasizing the teachings of tolerance and peace (Agoes, Moh., & Moefad, 2023). Additionally, the strategy of mainstreaming religious moderation via portals such as Islami.co plays a crucial role in filtering radical narratives and promoting moderate Islamic perspectives (Sutrisno 2023). By leveraging digital tools, NU effectively communicates its message of compassion and understanding, countering extremist ideologies and contributing to a more inclusive and tolerant Islamic discourse in the digital landscape.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the characteristics of Islamic moderation in Indonesia and evaluate the extent of NU's approach to building narratives around religious moderation through online media. The findings offer practical recommendations for policymakers and Islamic organizations to leverage digital media to promote tolerance and counter radical narratives. By emphasizing NU's role of NU in fostering peace and tolerance, this study contributes to broader efforts to reduce extremism and promote social harmony. It will also present Indonesia's approach as a model for other Muslim-majority countries, enriching the global discourse on moderate Islam.

2. Method

The research employed a library research method, utilizing data sources exclusively from various references and documents to analyze literature related to the topic of moderate Islam and NU in the digital era. The data in this study were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical method, which aims to describe, record, analyze, and interpret the existing conditions.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Historical Background and Foundation

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is Indonesia's largest Islamic organization established in 1926 by traditionalist Muslim scholars. NU plays a crucial role in Indonesia's social, political, and religious landscapes, advocating for a moderate interpretation of Islam that emphasizes tolerance, peace, and respect for cultural and religious diversity. Founded by influential ulama such as Hasyim Asy'ari, the NU was created to preserve and promote the traditional Islamic teachings of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah in response to modernist and reformist movements. The organization has deep roots in Indonesian society, integrating local customs and traditions with Islamic principles.

The NU is a Muslim community organization that engages in significant national and global efforts. According to the Statutes of the NU Association, Article 2 states that the aim and purpose of establishing NU is "to maintain one of the four schools of imams, namely Imam Muhammad bin Idris al-Syafi'i, Imam Malik bin Anas, Imam Abu Hanifah Annu'man, or Imam Ahmad bin Hambal, and to do whatever will benefit the religion of Islam" (Van Bruinessen M., 1994: 307).

Article 3 of the Statute outlines NU's efforts, which include: establishing relations between ulama of the sects mentioned in Article 2; examining previously used teaching books to ensure they align with the teachings of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah and not Ahlu Bid'ah; promoting Islamic teachings based on the schools of thought mentioned in Article 2 through beneficial means; increasing the number of Islamic madrasas; addressing matters related to mosques, prayer houses, and shelters, as well as issues concerning orphans and the poor; and establishing bodies to advance agricultural, commercial, and corporate affairs not prohibited by Islamic law (Esha, M.I., 2015: 47).

From this explanation, we can understand that NU's socio-historical presence is deeply intertwined with the public struggles for Muslims, particularly within Islamic boarding schools. NU has been instrumental in developing national awareness, building national independence, and promoting Islam based on the Quran and Sunnah, while preserving local wisdom as an essential part

of its preaching. In addition, the NU focuses on educational development and improving the economy of Muslims in rural areas through agricultural and trade initiatives.

3.2. NU's Role as Moderate Islam in the Digital Era

Many studies emphasize that NU serves as a fortress for the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, which necessitates its involvement in various domains, including the digital realm. NU experiences numerous dynamics in the social, political, cultural, economic, and educational spheres, as well as in facing the rapid advancement of information technology. Despite being known as a "traditional" Islamic organization, the NU must adapt to the digital age. Its limited activities in cyberspace pose the risk of its preaching being overshadowed by Islamists, fundamentalists, and terrorists. Ideological battles are evident in cyberspace, particularly on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube. On YouTube, NU faces numerous ideological attacks targeting both its rituals and prominent figures (Tim 2021: xiv).

In higher education, the NU has established a range of institutions, from institutes and colleges to universities, spread throughout Indonesia. These NU-affiliated universities facilitate the dissemination and academic development of NU's Wasatiyyah Islam. Internally, these institutions prepare cadres with technological skills to enhance NU's adaptability to the digital age. Externally, the state benefits from the NU's commitment to national unity, strengthened through its higher education institutions (Tim 2021: xvii).

Universities play a strategic role in addressing ideological issues to protect the long-term interests of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia. In promoting the country's ideology, Islamic universities explicitly advocate moderate Islam. They play a crucial role in fostering a moderate Islamic society, building democracy, and integrating the concepts of Islam and the nation state. Islamic universities contribute to Indonesian nationalities by improving the quality of community and civic life. The transformation of State Islamic Institutes (IAIN) into State Islamic Universities (UIN) exemplifies efforts to enhance Islamic higher education's capacity to address contemporary human problems and advance Islamic civilization. This transformation also extends to NU universities, which are expanding their focus to include the social sciences and humanities alongside technology.

Through its educational framework, which includes both Islamic boarding schools and higher education institutions, the NU seeks to balance tradition with modernity. The NU's approach involves developing modern higher education programs that incorporate science and technology. Islamic higher education aims to systematically study and develop Islamic sciences, improve Islamic da'wah, and produce ulama and cadres for social and da'wah institutions. NU universities are committed to harmonizing Islam and nationality, thus serving as ideological fortresses in which young people are educated from the NU perspective (Fridiyanto, 2021:285).

This aligns with NU's Fundamental Principles (Fridiyanto 2021:391), which include the following:
1. Preserving valuable traditions while adopting new and better practices (*al-Muhafazah ala al-qadim al-salih wa al-akhz bi al-jadid al-aslah*).
2. Maintaining benefits (Ri'ayah al-Maslahah) and local culture (*Ri'ayah al-Urf or al-'Adah*).
3. Prioritizing the hierarchy of authority (*Taqdim al-Afdal*) reflects the continuity of tradition.
4. Practicing prudence (*al-Ihtiyat*), especially in doctrinal matters, preferring terms such as istinbat to ijtihad.
5. Upholding a moderate attitude (*tawassut*), demonstrating flexibility in thinking while staying rooted in tradition and adapting to changing situations.

These principles highlight NU's commitment to preserving the legacy of past ulama (da'wah wali songo) while embracing new beneficial practices. The NU's actions are guided by the principles of care and moderation, aiming for the common good (Faizah, Nur. M. Shaiful Umam, 2023).

As an Islamic educational institution, the role of the State Islamic University (UIN) has evolved significantly. Initially, the UIN (formerly the State Islamic Religious Institute [IAIN]) was seen primarily as a missionary institution responsible for disseminating religious teachings in society. However, this missionary focus overshadows its broader role as an academic institution. UIN is now recognized for

its responsibility to foster academic and scientific rigor. The diverse approaches to religious studies at UIN reflect the dynamic nature of Islamic thought at Indonesia's largest university. This dynamism led to the development of the UIN, particularly in Jakarta and Yogyakarta, as pilot projects under the Department of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia. These projects integrate religious and general faculties with an epistemological and ethical framework that combines scientific and religious principles (Abdullah, M.A., 2006: 99).

The goal of STAIN, IAIN, and UIN is to produce graduates with three core competencies: academic analysis, innovation, and leadership. These competencies align with the demands of social, scientific, and professional challenges, integrating scientific and religious ethos under the auspices of the Department of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia (Abdullah 2006:100). UIN's influence of UIN on the transformation and modernization of Islamic sciences in Islamic boarding schools has been substantial. The modern perspective on Islamic studies taught at UIN encourages Islamic boarding schools to move from a closed, apathetic stance towards progress, fostering openness to societal realities. Since the 1970s, this influence has led many Islamic boarding schools to engage in economic activities, rural development, and the establishment of formal schools or madrasas Abdullah, M.A., 2006: 100).

The role of moderate Islamic institutions, such as NU, is critical, especially as Islam in Indonesia is increasingly associated with violent movements and terrorism ("Angry Islam"). However, Islam's mission is to bring mercy and peace to all humanity ("Friendly Islam"). Therefore, the Indonesian model of Islam and democracy must be grounded in the principles of the Pancasila and 1945 Constitution. Rejecting the integration of Islam and democracy, as advocated by fundamentalist and radical Islamic intellectuals, poses a threat to the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). This rejection risks sacrificing the state (an Islamic state), which should remain a worldly concern, not a matter of dogma.

Moderate Islamic intellectuals also clarify their understanding of Islamic Sharia. As a way of life, Sharia should align with its objectives of protecting freedom, life, individual honor, property rights, and ensuring human regeneration. When Sharia conflicts with these goals, they must be reconsidered. The solution lies in Islamic democracy, which has been developed by moderate Islamic thinkers through various Islamic thought projects (Abdullah, M.A., 2006: 26).

3.3. The Challenges and Opportunities for Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the Digital Era

In a socio-religious context, NU faces significant challenges in the digital era, including major ideological battles, the rapid advancement of information and communication technology, and the pervasive flow of globalization, which has altered patterns in all aspects of life. The increasing use of the internet among millennial youth has led to changes in how this generation consumes religious information. Traditional methods, such as studying religion through books and physical teachings from religious teachers, are being "abandoned" in favor of online media that often present religious information in instant and partial forms. This trend is evidenced by the growing number of viewers of religious content on platforms, such as YouTube and Facebook.

As a mass organization, NU can no longer rely solely on traditional lectures to deliver preaching and learning materials. The limitations of traditional methods in terms of audience reach and accessibility necessitate the adoption of technology-based media in preaching and education. Millennial audiences prefer to access lectures and da'wah materials easily and on demand via social media. Therefore, NU must balance Islamic literature spread through social media, countering intolerant, liberal, and radical conservative ideologies with moderate, humanist, and nationalism-loving Islamic content.

3.3.1. Strategies for NU in the Digital Age

The following are the proposed strategies that the NU can employ:
1. Building Digital Literacy on an Educational Basis. Digital literacy, as defined by Paul Gilster, is the ability to effectively use technology and information from digital devices in various contexts. The NU needs to promote these skills within its affiliated educational institutions,

such as LP Ma'arif (the NU's formal educational institution) and RMI (Indonesian Rabbithah Ma'ahid or the Association of Islamic Boarding Schools).
2. Creating Channels and Social Media Accounts for Islamic Studies. Traditional da'wah methods using print and electronic media are becoming outdated owing to high costs, limited distribution, and changing consumer preferences. Modern audiences, especially urbanites, prefer to access religious content via live-streaming services on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. NU has made strides with initiatives such as TV9 Nusantara and channels managed by various Islamic boarding schools and figures, such as the Gus Mus Channel and Online Santri Channel.
3. Creating a Moderately Islamic Website. Given the blocking of radical sites by the Ministry of Communication and Information, there is a need for NU to provide reliable and enlightening religious websites. NU Online, developed in 2002, serves as an official medium for disseminating NU's voices, opinions, and religious positions, addressing various societal issues from a moderate Islamic perspective.

3.3.2. *The Impact of the Digital Era on Moderate Islamic Groups*
The digital era brings both opportunities and challenges to moderate Islamic groups.
1. Combating Online Radicalization. NU must develop effective strategies to counteract extremist content and promote a moderate narrative
2. Ensuring Inclusivity. NU's digital initiatives must reach diverse audiences and address various demographic needs.
3. Staying Technologically Updated*. NU must keep pace with rapidly evolving digital trends and tools to maintain relevance and effectiveness.

The era of disruption has led to a war of ideologies (*ghazwah al-fikr*) between ideological and non-ideological Islamic groups, potentially alienating the millennial generation from traditional religious figures. The ease of Internet access allows millennials to seek information independently, often leading to the delegitimization of ulama. Radical Islamic groups have effectively utilized online media to reach this new market, highlighting the need for moderate Islamic activists to master social media and spread their ideas.

The millennial generation's preference for practical, easily accessible religious thought presents a challenge for spreading deeper Islamic teaching. Moderate Islamic activists must adapt their strategies to the behavioral changes brought about by technological advancements and the era of disruption by utilizing online media to effectively engage with the younger generation.

In conclusion, while NU has made significant progress in the digital realm, ongoing challenges include combating online radicalization, ensuring inclusivity, and staying technologically updated. By addressing these challenges, the NU can continue to promote moderate, humanist, and nationalism-loving Islamic values in the digital age.

3.3.3. *Digital Communications*
Effective communication is essential for conveying thoughts and fostering a harmonious lifestyle. Individuals must practice wisdom in receiving and disseminating information to ensure that it is thoughtfully considered, thereby minimizing potential negative impacts. Additionally, verifying the truthfulness of the information, including its sources and facts, is crucial. Conflicts can arise not only in real life but also in the virtual world, which can mobilize the masses. Al-Qur'an advises social media users to provide thorough clarification to avoid misinterpretations and provocations.

Maintaining good communication is vital for a harmonious life as humans coexist with others. Practicing good communication etiquette and considering the psychological condition of the person being addressed ensures a smooth interaction. The content of communication should also be tailored to the recipient's understanding to prevent misunderstanding. A saying emphasizes: "Speak according to the listener's ability to comprehend." The government and police have enacted regulations to address

hate speech and hoaxes, including Law Number 40 of 2008 on the Elimination of Racial and Ethnic Discrimination and MUI Fatwa Number 24 of 2017 concerning Guidelines for Worship via social media.

Part of effective communication involves the da'wah model, which should align with the vision and mission of Islam, promoting unity amidst diversity and encouraging good deeds, even on social media. Islamic da'wah should foster a tolerant and inclusive society. To guide followers effectively, Islamic teachings must be supported by a harmonious da'wah model, fostering a moderate and wise understanding of religion, particularly regarding differences. Da'wah should promote interpersonal communication with a moderate paradigm that upholds equality, togetherness, and justice. This approach ensures that Islam continues to bring peace to all the aspects of life. A moderate communication transformation in da'wah serves as an alternative to countering extreme ideologies and provides a society with balanced and wise information. The humanist-based da'wah model instills a cool, tolerant, and moderate approach to religious preaching.

In the millennial era, promoting moderate Islam has become a key government policy for preventing radical movements that oppose the state under the guise of religion. This emphasis on moderation influences the content of Indonesian education and encourages educators and students to understand and practice religious moderation. The NU remains a vital force in promoting moderate Islam and fostering social harmony in Indonesia. By embracing digital technology and adapting to contemporary challenges, NU aims to continue its legacy of tolerance, education, and community services, contributing positively to national development and the global discourse on Islam.

4. Conclusion

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the largest Islamic community organization, is currently navigating the significant disruptions of Digital Revolution 4.0, which impact its relations across social, political, cultural, and national Islamic politics. In this global archipelagic era, the NU must assert its presence and influence in every sphere it encounters. The positive socio-historical values crystallized from the teachings of the predecessor ulama (Wali Songo) must be instilled within the archipelago and strategically transformed for the global community. As transnational exchanges of Islamic ideas continue, Indonesian Muslims, through NU, must foster a moderate and compassionate model of Islam known as *rahmatan lil'alamin*.

In this context, the NU must continue to develop its human resources to actively participate in these arenas of struggle. Digital platforms have become battlegrounds for ideological, cultural, and political discourses. The NU's work, whether past, present, or future, must remain dynamic, adapting to current developments and challenges. As a religious organization, NU contributes to maintaining the nation's sovereignty and integrity and defends the Republic of Indonesia through wise communication and da'wah strategies on social media.

The ability to think critically on a global scale is a part of Islamic tradition. The sources of Islamic teachings—Al-Qur'an, Al-Hadith, and the historical experiences of Muslims during the golden age (7th-13th century AD)—have always encouraged and fostered the tradition of global competence and critical thinking. It is time for these global skills and critical thinking to be reclaimed and practiced by Muslims, particularly those within the NU, to effectively respond to global challenges.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest related to the research, writing, and/or publication of this article.

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