

## COUNTERING RADICALISM THROUGH TAFSIR: State and Jihad in Indonesia's Thematic Quranic Interpretation

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### Abstract

*Indonesia has witnessed a rise in radical ideologies that threaten unity, promote intolerance, and incite violence, as radicalism become more complex and adaptive. In response, the Ministry of Religious Affairs undertaken various counter-radicalization initiatives, notably through the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* publication. Among many themes addressed, the most notably ideas are jihad and statehood. This article explores the construction of counter-radical discourse by MoRA through this institutional tafsir, analyzing its function as a state instrument. Employing qualitative methods and Foucault's power relations theory, the study integrates data from interviews with the tafsir's authors, reader surveys, content analysis, and archival review. The findings reveal that *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* defines jihad as a defensive act. It presents jihad as non-violent efforts like seeking knowledge and defending faith ethically. It emphasizes that jihad must follow moral guidelines rooted in the Prophet's example. Additionally, the tafsir affirms that Islam does not mandate a specific government form, like caliphate, and supports the compatibility of the Indonesian state with Islamic principles. Drawing on Foucault's theory, the state uses this tafsir to influence shaping religious discourse to legitimize national unity, promote moderate Islam, and delegitimize radical ideology. While promoting religious*

*moderation, this state-endorsed tafsir centralizes interpretive authority under state auspices, potentially marginalizing individual Quranic interpreters. By positioning state-sponsored exegesis as the normative reference, the initiative risks undermining the pluralism and independence traditionally valued in Islamic scholarship. This study contributes to the discourse on state-religion dynamics, institutional authority, and the politics of religious interpretation in contemporary Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** counter-radicalism; state; jihad; thematic quranic

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## Introduction

Indonesia, in recent years, has continued to face threats from radical and extremist groups. Some major incidents are suicide bombings in three churches in Surabaya (May 13, 2018), suicide bombing in the Medan Police Station (November 13, 2019), an attack in the South Daha Police Station, South Kalimantan (June 1, 2020), and a suicide bombing at the Makassar Cathedral Church (March 28, 2021). The perpetrators came from Islamist groups such as the ISIS-affiliated Jamaah Ansharut Daulah (JAD), Al-Qaeda-affiliated Jema'ah Islamiyah (JI), and the pro-ISIS Mujahidin Indonesia Timur (MIT). These groups not only have the potential to expand their networks but also pose a serious threat to national security of Indonesian (Barton 2021). In addition, their strategic use of digital platforms and social media complicates the government to eliminate these groups' networks (Schmidt 2021: 237). Through digital media, they increase the intensity of radicalism and also use ideological narratives to gain the support of the Islamic masses. Therefore, this widespread threat needs to be addressed critically with a comprehensive counter-radicalization strategy that includes social and ideological aspects (Haripin 2020, 295-299).

Following the 1998 *Reformasi*, several groups labeled as proponents of "leftist Islam," including Salafi-Wahhabi movements, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and Front Pembela Islam (FPI), grew significantly at the national level (Fealy 2004). This expansion stemmed from increased openness to new ideologies and substantial financial support from the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia. These groups have often been

linked to Wahhabi ideology (Jahroni 2015). In response, Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, and Jordan intensified their counter-radicalization efforts (al-Shalabi 2011; Jahroni 2020).

Within this context, the Indonesian government, through the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), formed a team of Quranic scholars to develop the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, a Quranic thematic interpretation aimed at countering radical religious narratives (Kementerian Agama 2012). Scholars praised the project for promoting objectivity, contextual relevance, and balanced interpretation due to its collective authorship. However, interpretations produced under state auspices are often influenced by ideological and political interests, limiting the expression of individual exegetes' (*mufassir*) perspectives. This similar concerns have been raised about other state-endorsed works like *al-Quran dan Terjemahnya*. In response, this study critically examines the state-led counter-narrative initiative, particularly how *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* shapes religious discourse and influencing Quranic interpretation within Indonesian society.

Studies about *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* by MoRA in recent years are quite diverse. Generally, they are grouped in two themes of discussion. The first focuses on thematic content, including issues such as women, religious moderation, and others. For example, studies on women or gender-related themes (Purwanto 2019; Jihani 2021; Azkiyah 2022), power relations, politics, and tafsir/interpretation (Kurniawan 2019; Hartono 2019; Zain & Mutaqin 2022), and the methodology and process of preparing *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* (Fuad 2022; Nugroho et al. 2024).

Those previous studies have presented valuable insights into the content, methodology, and tracing the ideology grounding the preparation of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*. However, they have yet to explore the construction of discourse carried out by MoRA. The gap will be addressed in this article focusing on two strategic themes within the entire series of the said publication: the concepts of *jihad* and statehood. The themes are chosen to analyze the counter-narrative pattern used to confront radicalism by MoRA and reveal public response to the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*. Consequently, this study is intended to elaborate the broader implications of institutionalized Quran interpretation in shaping religious discourse and authority in Indonesia.

## Research Method

This study employs a qualitative research method grounded in Michel Foucault's theory of power relations. A descriptive-analytical approach is used to investigate the construction of religious discourse in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* published by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA). The primary data source is the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* which has 26 thematic series, yet, this article particularly discusses only two themes: statehood (published in 2011) and *jihad* (published in 2012).

To complement the textual analysis, interview data were collected from the writing team, committees, and secretariats involved in developing the tafsir, including personnel from MoRA and LPMQ (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran). The article also includes archival studies related to the tafsir compilation process and secondary sources such as academic writings on the tafsir project. Additionally, a reader-response survey was conducted with 100 participants, comprising 10 lecturers and 90 students from the Department of Quranic Exegesis at UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, UIN Sunan Kalijaga Yogyakarta, and UIN Sultan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi. Respondents were selected through purposive random sampling to represent both central and peripheral academic institutions. The survey aimed to assess familiarity and reception of the tafsir among academic and student communities. The responses were further analyzed through their published articles, theses, and dissertations. This multi-source method triangulates textual evidence, interviews, observation, and survey data to reveal the dynamics of state power and discourse construction within the tafsir project.

## Results and Discussion

### Compiling *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*: Selection and Control

*Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is a theme-based (*maudûi*) interpretation compiled by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA) through Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran (LPMQ). It was published between 2008 and 2012, covering 26 main themes, including religious moderation, women, *jihad*, statehood, environment, health, contemporary fiqh, education, and family issues. The drafting team of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* consists of reputable Quranic exegetes, scholars, and multidisciplinary experts, who are selected based on the specific themes addressed in each volume. For instance, themes such as moderation, *jihad*, and women involve scholars whose expertise is in fiqh, socio-cultural studies, and

Quranic exegesis. Meanwhile, themes of environment, science, and medicine involve experts from those respective fields.

*Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* was recommended by Indonesian scholars at the Mukernas Ulama al-Quran in Yogyakarta (May 2006) and Ciloto (December 2006). The forum formally endorsed the project, proposing a thematic format (26 themes) as an alternative to the traditional *tahlili* method. The drafting process began with MoRA, in consultation with LPMQ, appointing Prof. Dr. M. Atho' Mudzhar to lead the project. On his recommendation, Dr. Muchlis M. Hanafi was selected to head the writing team, chosen over a more senior candidate for his Al-Azhar background in *tafsir*, as well as his youth, dedication, and leadership potential (Hude 2022).

The exegetes were selected based on their mastery in the Quran and Islamic law. Another important consideration was the representation of major religious organizations, including Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, MUI, Persis, the al-Azhar alumni network, LIPI, and Islamic universities in Jakarta and Yogyakarta (Hanafi 2022). This broad representation aimed to ensure inclusivity and prevent domination by any sect. However, all scholars shared alignment with the state's moderate, tolerant religious ideology, while figures affiliated with hardline groups like FPI, HTI, or JI were excluded. This process reflects the state's intent to shape and control the religious discourse in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*.

Originally set by MoRA, theme selection became more participatory after 2008. The writing team was allowed to propose topics aligned with national priorities like the RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan). While MoRA retained final approval to ensure moderate and non-controversial content, themes and sub-themes were formalized through team forums. Writers chose topics based on their expertise and were given less than a year to complete each draft.

The core stage was the plenary session, where drafts were presented and reviewed by interdisciplinary teams, including experts in *tafsir*, law, science, and other fields. These sessions involved rigorous discussions over sensitive issues like *jihad*, radicalism, women's status, and sexuality, reflecting different ideologies and interpretive approaches. Although the committee reported that disagreements were resolved via deliberation and consensus, the process had limitations.

In practice, consensus-building constrained individual expression, as junior exegetes were reluctant to challenge senior scholars. Many personal insights and controversial views were excluded to maintain ideological coherence. This dynamic has led to interpretations that sometimes diverged from the same exegetes' views published elsewhere, highlighting the tension between collective authorship and individual freedom.

In *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, interpretations such as banning women from being president or minister distinct with the more progressive views of scholars like Quraish Shihab, Nasaruddin Umar, Huzaifah T. Yanggo, and Nur Rofiah. Similarly, defining women's *aurat* (body parts that must be covered) as the entire body except the face and hands conflicts with Shihab's view that the *hijab* symbolizes dignity rather than requiring full coverage (Shihab 2004; Umar 2001). These differences show how compromise and consensus in collective tafsir can constrain *mufassirs'* individual interpretations.

In the final phase, the revised draft was printed in limited copies and circulated for review at the Mukernas Forum of Quranic Scholars. While feedback was collected, the writing team retained final decision-making authority. Once completed, *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* was distributed to schools, Islamic universities, and seminar forums under MoRA, with a digital version also made available for free download on the LPMQ website to improve access (Hanafi 2022).

These steps illustrate MoRA's strong influence over the tafsir's development. It reflects the state's great effort to control the interpretive process. Seen through Michel Foucault's theory of power relations, the production of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is a discursive practice where knowledge is generated through institutional structures. Here, religious discourse serves as a disciplinary tool (Foucault 1977); the state exercises power by selecting exegetes, assigning themes, and enforcing editorial procedures. This practice reveals a "truth regime," a system that filters, constructs, and legitimizes certain narratives (Foucault 2008). The composition of the writing team, largely aligned with state ideology, illustrates this control, normalizing dominant interpretations while marginalizing dissenting voices. Groups like HTI and FPI are excluded, and minority exegetes face subtle pressure to conform, limiting interpretive diversity.

## Government's Counter-Narratives of Radical Religious Beliefs

The government's counter-narrative against radicalism and extremism is articulated through several key discourses in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, most notably those on *jihad* and statehood. These themes are central to the ideological foundations of many radical and extremist groups. In Indonesia, such groups often draw on the ideas of Sayyid Qutb and other Islamist movements to justify their views on *jihad* and the Islamic state. This section examines how *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* offers alternative interpretations that challenge and counter these radical perspectives.

### *The Doctrine of Jihad: From Offensive to Defensive*

The interpretation of *jihad* in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is intentionally framed as a counterpoint to the narratives propagated by radical and extremist groups. *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* articulates the principle of *jihad* not as what Sayyid Qutb called as offensive (Qutb 1993), but the work emphasizes a defensive character. *Jihad* is allowed, according to *Tafsir al-Quran tematik*, only under certain situation where Muslims are subjected to direct attack. The interpretation explicitly rejects the perception that *jihad* can be used against non-Muslims or certain institutions because they do not practice Islamic law. Similar view is also found in several exegetical works (Hamdan 2020: 56).

Furthermore, *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*'s interpretation on *jihad* extends beyond the conventional conception, namely armed conflict. It encompasses a more extensive scope, including practicing *jihad* through wealth, the pursuit of knowledge, and self-discipline. Furthermore, the *tafsir* stipulates strict criteria that must be fulfilled for an individual to qualify for *jihad*. Consequently, this shows that not all Muslims are eligible to this spiritual obligation.

The *jihad* theme raised in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is triggered by several factors. After the shocking September 11, 2001 attack, the writers team observed widespread misinterpretation among Muslims, who began to interpret *jihad* in a narrow sense, leading to violent and extreme attitudes. The argument is that the *jihad* verses-revealed in the Meccan period (*Makkiyah*) which are oriented toward *da'wa*, tolerance, and moderation-have been replaced by the Medinan (*Madaniyyah*) verse,

which are predominantly about war (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2012, 99).

In this context, the theme of *jihad* in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* also aims to refute the Western negative stigma against Islam, which frequently claims that Islam is spread through coercion and violence, outlined by the doctrine of *jihad* (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2012, 4). This perspective asserts that Islam is a religion that fosters aggression in its expansion. This misinterpretation is not exclusive to the Western audiences; within the Muslim world itself, certain communities interpret *jihad* narrowly as an armed struggle that offers two outcomes: noble life or martyrdom (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2012, 37).

*Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* asserts that both Westerners and Muslims possess a constrained understanding of *jihad*. The term in the Quran encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings, extending beyond warfare and including more profound spiritual dimensions. Moreover, numerous verses in the Quran and hadith explicitly delineate limits, rules, and ethical principles for implementing *jihad*. In this regard, the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* endeavors to furnish a comprehensive understanding of the verses concerning *jihad* and to interpret them within their historical and scriptural contexts (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2012, 184).

The said tafsir offers two conceptions of *jihad*, with the meaning adopted in any given discussion depending on the Quranic verses under consideration. *Jihad* is defined as exerting every potential, power, effort, and strength, in all seriousness, to confront what is despicable in order to uphold the religion of Allah. This definition distinguishes between non-physical and physical *jihad*. Non-physical *jihad* means striving against one's own lust or Satan's temptation. To achieve this type of *jihad*, one is required to overcome desires and cultivate greater faith and determination (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2012, 39).

In contrast, physical *jihad* involves battle against those considered enemies of the faith, such as disbelievers, polytheists, hypocrites, apostates, rebels, and public security disturbers. This practice involves direct combat using physical weapons and needs significant personal sacrifice. It is directed at individuals who either disobey Islamic faith or practice polytheism. The permissibility of such confrontation, nonetheless, hinges on specific criteria, including—but not limited to, the following situations: (1) violation of a treaty; (2) initiation of armed conflict; (3) expulsion of Muslims from their country of origin; and (4) instigation of

defamation, vilification of Islam, and expression of aggression and hostility against Islam and Muslims (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2012, 39).

According to *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, if any of the four conditions are met, combat against non-believers or polytheists is permissible. These prerequisites underline that the government tafsir's conception of physical *jihad* is defensive rather than offensive character. The concept "defensive *jihad*" is undertaken to protect oneself and one's rights from direct forces. In contrast, "offensive *jihad*" is classified as open *jihad* (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2012). Some Muslims may justify initiating hostilities even without infidel transgressions against the four provisions above. For groups adopting an offensive stance, such as Sayyid Qutub and Sa'id Hawwa, the absence of a legal system based on the Quran and hadith is sufficient to classify a country as a legitimate target (Hawwa 1985; Qutb 1993).

*Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* also references several provisions of *jihad*, as outlined by the Prophet's practices, which effectively transformed the paradigm of warfare during the *jahiliyah* (pre-Islamic) era, characterized by plunder, robbery, murder, and the abuse of women and children. During the Islamic period, *jihad* was interpreted as following the orders of God to liberate humans from the authoritarian system. Under Islamic principles and the Prophet's teachings, warfare was executed with strict ethical constraints, including the avoidance of harming the vulnerable such as women and children, and prohibiting combat in public places (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2012, 89).

The interpretation of *jihad* in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, examined through Michel Foucault's power relations theory, is a form of truth production using structured discursive means to counter the narrative of Islamist groups. MoRA's more moderate interpretation of *jihad*; which exemplifies what Foucault calls as *productive* rather than *repressive* power (Foucault 1983). Instead of using coercion, this interpretive strategy neutralizes radical ideologies by presenting alternative meanings within a regulated discourse.

In this way, MoRA's attempt in interpretation acts as a mechanism of knowledge, referring to Foucault's theory, that disciplines the Muslim society in Indonesia. The state does not merely prohibit radical thought. Instead, it attempts at shaping the conditions under which religious truth is comprehended and internalized. This approach aligns with Foucault's

idea of governmentality, where power operates through the control of body and consciousness. By describing *jihad* as an ethical and societal effort, instead of an armed conflict, MoRA guides and regulates how religious teachings are fathomed and how religious identity is established.

#### *Legitimizing the Nation-State through Quranic Discourse*

State discourse in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* has emerged as a means through which the government seeks to counter groups advocating for transforming of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) into a caliphate system. In Indonesia, there have been two conflicting ideologies: support for NKRI and the aspiration to establish a caliphate (Khamdan et al. 2024, 180). In the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*'s perspective, Indonesia's present form and system of government are the outcome of a scholarly consensus that deserves adherence. Furthermore, this consensus does not conflict with Islamic teachings. The Quran and hadith, the primary sources of Islamic law, do not explicitly delineate the form and system that must be adopted (Fata et al. 2021, 12). Consequently, the arguments surrounding the system and form of statehood are understood by the involved exegetes of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* in a contextual and substantive manner.

The state as presented in this tafsir is defined as any area on the surface of the earth which political, military, economic, social, and cultural powers are regulated by a governing institution residing in that area. This interpretation elaborates that for a region to be considered a state, four conditions must be met: it has the presence of a population, the existence of a defined territory, the establishment of a sovereign government, and the recognition by other nations (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 20).

According to this explanation, the state has numerous benefits because it plays an instrumental role in regulating people's lives. *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* asserts that the existence of a state is absolute in the Quran and that the head of state has multiple titles, such as caliph, *amirul mukminin*, president, sultan, or king (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 1). The concept "state" in the Quran is expressed in several terms, namely *mulk*, *khalifah*, *ulul-amr*, *imâm*, *sultân*, and *shûrâ* (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 3).

In Islam, Muslim thinkers are divided into three positions regarding the ideal form of the state. The first group, including prominent figures such as Abû Ala al-Mawdûdî, Hasan al-Bannâ, and Sayyid Qutb, advocates for the establishment of a government based on Islamic sharia. As exemplified during the Prophet Muhammad's era in Mecca and Medina, they affirm that the state must be founded on the principles outlined in the Quran and hadith. In the contemporary Indonesia, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) is among the groups that advocate for this perspective.

The second position firmly states that religion should be separated from state. This secular perspective positions religion as a private matter. The real practice is what has been practiced historically in Turkey during the era of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or in communist China. The third viewpoint asserts that Islam does not possess a distinct constitutional framework. Instead, it is characterized by a set of ethical values to guide public life and governance (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 7). This approach is exemplified by modern countries that substantively incorporate Quranic ethical values, such as Indonesia and other Muslim-majority countries (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 1).

According to *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, Islam does not strictly regulate the form and system of statehood. Muslims can develop their political structures based on Quranic values. This was practiced in the appointment of the four *Khulafâ al-Râshidîn*, who were selected through systems according to the circumstances of their time (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 1). For example, the first caliph, Abu Bakr al-Siddiq was chosen through *ijma'* (consensus) of the Prophet's Companions after deliberation. The second caliph, Umar ibn Khattab was selected through a will from his predecessor. He was formally enthroned at the Prophet's Mosque (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 8-9).

Uthman ibn 'Affan, the third caliph, was appointed by senior Companions and approved by the preceding caliph. Finally, Ali ibn Abi Talib was elected as the fourth caliph with the endorsement of the senior Companions through an electoral process. These caliph election methods indicate that Islam did not establish a specific method for appointing a head of state. The methods may vary, but the basis must still be in conformity with Islamic values (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 9).

The *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* states that the Quran merely provides the fundamental principles of governance without offering a detailed framework for establishing a state. This enables state officials to select their system of governance based on the conditions—society, history, and needs—of the region while still adhering to Islamic principles (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 185). The *tafsir* further asserts that numerous principles govern the state, including trustworthiness (*amanah*), justice (*'adl*), and deliberation (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 98). Based on this, state-related issues can be resolved through a multi approaches, encompassing the Quran, the Sunnah, and *ijtihâd* (independent reasoning) or *ra'y* (considered opinion) (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2011, 148).

The perspective of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* challenges those who advocate for establishing an Islamic state or *Khilâfah Islamiyah*, asserting that the said system represents the authentic Islam. Additionally, it counters the critiques of so-called “leftist Islam” movements, such as Sayyid Qutb’s accusations that the majority of contemporary Muslim nations are *jahiliyyah* states. It also debates the viewpoint of Abu’ Ala al-Mawdudi, who advocated for establishing a state governed by sharia law. Consequently, this perspective offers a substantial foundation for asserting that the Indonesian state does not contradict Islamic principles, as outlined in the Quran and Sunnah.

In light of these considerations, *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* does not definitively endorse any specific form of state, whether *Khilâfah Islamiyah* promoted by HTI or the secular state associated by communist ideologies. It argues that various forms of statehood can be lawful so long as they stay with the principles of Islam. Accordingly, some exegetes (*mufassirûn*) interpret Quranic verses about governance strictly in the textual content. When an interpreter asserts a particular form of state not explicitly mentioned in the verse, the interpretation often reflects personal reasoning rather than objective exegesis. Moreover, the flexibility in determining legitimate forms of state is illustrated in the history of caliphs’ appointment, precedents in the appointment of caliphs, from the consensus that appointed Abu Bakr al-Siddîq to the electoral process that led to the leadership of Alî ibn Abî Talib.

*Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is a state’s discursive practice in building religious discourse on the relationship between Islam and political structure. Within the framework of Foucault’s power relations theory

(1980, 133), this interpretation shows how MoRA, representing the state, deploys power/knowledge to produce authoritative knowledge to support state authority. Through a more flexible perspective of political systems, the Ministry's interpretation actually emphasizes that Indonesia's modern state system is a legitimate system and does not contradict Islamic teachings. This interpretation also negates the opinions of Islamist groups such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) and pro-Islamist ideologues like Sayyid Qutb and Al-Mawdudi who actively promote the *khilāfah* system. In this condition, MoRA's *tafsir* is used as an instrument to homogenize people's religious understanding to a more moderate state ideology. In Foucault's framework (2008, 16-40), this practice exposes how the state addresses the production of religious discourse, both legal-formal and spiritual, as part of an extensive strategy to regulate belief and practice.

The official writing of *tafsir* by the state can be understood as a process of power that works subtly by using religious discourse. Through the text interpretation, state authority works politically, without coercion, producing a discourse that appears to be objective religious. In this way, the state is acting (Foucault called it) as "pastoral power," guiding religious people to adhere to a certain ideology. The state got its way to transform exegesis into a control mechanism that nurtures citizens to obey not only God but also the government. Through power relations, the state also uses substantive principles such as justice and deliberation as validation tools to create a "regime of truth," that secures public trust. This way, the state strengthens its position and at the same time negates other alternative thoughts that are considered deviant. Ultimately, the above process proves that, based on the power relations framework, the state can work without being repressive, but can be mainstreamed through religious and educational institutions (Foucault 1977, 195-228).

### Reader Critique of State Influence

The writing of the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, produced by scholars (*ulama*) and overseen by the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, has led to a degradation of the religious authority of the exegetes. This, in turn, has resulted in an ineffective counter-narrative process within the *tafsir* itself. Public no longer regards the exegesis product as the result of the scholars' interpretation, but rather as one influenced by ideological interests and state power. As a result, the counter-narrative goals of the *tafsir* are weakened since many readers question its credibility and

neutrality. The scholars involved are regarded less as autonomous interpreters of sacred text and more as instruments of government policy. This sensitivity has led to a reduction in engagement with the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, with some readers choosing to dismiss it altogether, perceiving it as compromised by state's ideological bias.

One of the most cited examples of ideological influence in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is its interpretation of female leadership. The tafsir affirms that women should not assume leadership positions because such responsibilities may be burdensome for them. Instead, women are encouraged to focus on education and healthcare (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2009: 70). This claim is based on the interpretation of Q.S. an-Naml [27]:23-24, telling the story of Queen Bilqis (a female ruler) who failed in promoting monotheistic values:

*“...This verse even seems to portray the failure of a female monarch (Queen Bilqis) in fostering faith and monotheism, which would inevitably affect broader societal development...”* (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2009, 72).

In support of this interpretation, the tafsir cites a hadith narrated by Al-Tirmidhi and Al-Nasa'i from Abu Bakrah:

*“A people who entrust their affairs to a woman will never succeed.”*

Based on these two sources, the tafsir draws conclusion,

*“...Given the extensive duties and responsibilities, the position of head of state or regional leader is not appropriate for women”* (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran 2009, 74).

This interpretation triggers criticism written in some studies, arguing that it reflects a particular ideology and power dynamics rather than objective exegesis (Hartono 2019; Fuad 2022; Nugroho 2024). This critique arises from their consideration of the historical context in which the interpretation was developed. *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* was compiled between 2008 and 2012, marked by political contestation between Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) and Megawati Soekarnoputri. From the readers' perspective, the interpretation is viewed as politically charged, supporting SBY's leadership while implicitly rejecting the possibility of female leadership, using religious texts as a tool of legitimization. In response to these misogynistic and patriarchal interpretations, some

studies claim that the exegetes of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* have compromised their independence (Jihani 2021; Azkiyah 2022).

Another criticism was directed at the composition of the exegete team of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*. It is perceived as government-driven ideological project due to its failure to accommodate the perspectives of alternative religious groups. It is noted that the exegetes involved in that institutional tafsir are drawn from circles affiliated with MoRA and mainstream Islamic groups. This suspicion is further compounded by the fact that the *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is the RPJMN (National Medium-Term Development Plan) project.

The absence of dissenting opinions from minority groups in the tafsir project contributes to the suspicion that the text represents a state-approved religious narrative rather than a broad consensus. Moreover, the diminution of the exegetes' authority in *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is due to the dissemination of classical tafsir in Indonesia, both original electronic and translated versions, often imported from the Middle East. These widely accessible commentaries significantly influence the evolution of Islamic studies in Indonesia. Public considers the imported exegetical works as more authoritative than the Quranic commentaries produced by Indonesian scholars, or even under state sponsorship.

Criticism is also directed at the process of selecting the drafting team of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*. The ministry claims that the team members were solely selected based on academic expertise, yet, in fact, public notes that they have close ties to the government. This has led to a perception that the tafsir is susceptible to ideological bias of state policy. Moreover, the composition of the team reveals that MoRA prioritizes ideological coherence over scholarly diversity, ensuring that the Quranic interpretation would be align with ministry's institutional goals and political orientation (Kurniawan 2019, 53).

The readers also claim that *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is a project initiated by a government agency, in this case, LPMQ (Lajnah Pentashihan Mushaf al-Quran), operating under MoRA. The Quranic interpretation sponsored by government institutions restricts the exegetes' freedom to express their thoughts. This restriction is obvious in issues that are considered sensitive and controversial, especially on gender issues. On some contentious issues, dissenting views of exegetes tend to be marginalized or omitted. Even when the alternative views exist, they are often criticized and dismissed (Nugroho 2024).

Based on the combined lenses of hermeneutics and power relations theory, the content of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is significantly shaped by state influence and power structures. This claim is substantiated by evidence spanning the entire production process, from initial funding, the selection of the exegete team, and thematic determination, to the editorial oversight, publication, and dissemination. Each stage is mediated by actors working closely with state institutions. Although *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* attempts to present itself as the product of an autonomous scholarly collective, it remains difficult to disentangle the work from the ideological and political objectives of state power.

### Public's Perceptions and Acceptance

Based on survey results regarding familiarity with *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, 51.1% of respondents never read it, 46.7% had read some of it, and only 2.2% claimed to have read the entire content. In question about tafsir's independence, 26.8% of respondents stated that it is free from government interference, 9.7% strongly disagreed with this claim, and 63.4% of respondents chose a neutral position. The data shows that the popularity of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* is still low. Even among the academics of Quranic Science and Tafsir (IAT), the intended main subjects of the tafsir's promotion, the familiar is limited. This reveals that distribution and socialization process to the academic community is not optimal, with familiarity below 50%, raising doubts in ability to assess the independence of tafsir.

The above data is also supported by an open-ended survey responded from IAT lecturers and students. In this category, 74% believe that the MoRA's tafsir is potentially influenced by political pressure or power interests, albeit to varying degrees of skepticism and expectations. As a state institution, MoRA is considered vulnerable to power influence in preparing the tafsir. Respondents assert that the content reflects the political context, especially on sensitive issues or certain policies. In addition, bureaucratic pressure, the need for political legitimacy, and potential government intervention are also believed to be difficult to avoid.

Furthermore, the survey shows that the legitimacy and credibility of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, written under the direction of MoRA, is questioned by IAT lecturers, and students. They believe that the influence of power on thematic interpretations is unavoidable, undermining the

tafsir's scientific authority and lowers its acceptance in society. Ideally, tafsir for the general public should be independent and free from external influences. On that basis, MoRA is suggested to adopt a more transparent and participatory approach to the production of tafsir. MoRA should also give more efforts in its dissemination. These ways can enhance the product's institutional acceptability and credibility as well as its epistemological and social legitimacy.

Nevertheless, 26% of respondents believed that the team of exegetes was able to maintain the independence of interpretation. The involvement of competent and independent tafsir experts, accompanied by a scientific and transparent process, can safeguard the tafsir from political influence. Although MoRA is a government body, some respondents believe that mechanism is implemented to ensure the objectivity and quality of the tafsir.

Despite widespread criticism and doubt, the survey result shows that some still consider *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* as capable of escaping from state authorities. The assessment comes from the reputation of the involved scholars, regarding as ones whose credibility and personal integrity are high. Nevertheless, the emergence of two perceptions, a skeptical majority and more optimistic minority, shows that the tafsir's image is still not established. On that basis, a more open and structured system for writing tafsir, accompanied by massive socialization can strengthen the recognition and acceptance of state-sponsored interpretations.

## Conclusion

This article concludes that *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik*, as a state-initiated exegetical project under the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MoRA), has the potential to diminish the religious authority of individual *mufassir* (exegetes). The tafsir's development process—from funding and team selection to thematic planning, editorial oversight, publication, and dissemination—positions it as a government-mediated interpretation of the Quran. As a result, its content is no longer perceived solely as the product of scholarly independence, but rather as shaped by ideological interests, state influence, and the dominant perspectives of majority interpreters. This perception has led to the understanding that *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* functions more as a counter-radicalism instrument of the state, rather than as a purely academic or religious text. Consequently, its effectiveness and legitimacy are questioned. Some scholars have criticized the work for

undermining the exegetes' interpretive authority, suggesting that it reflects the institutional voice of MoRA, more than the intellectual autonomy of its authors. This critique is supported by evidence that exegetes involved in the project often cannot express dissenting views, and that interpretations presented in the tafsir sometimes contradict their positions expressed in other independent works.

Moreover, the limited dissemination and socialization of *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* have further weakened its impact, as many potential readers remain unfamiliar with its content. These dynamics underscore the challenges of producing religious interpretation within a state-controlled framework, particularly in contexts where scholarly independence and pluralism are highly valued. For *Tafsir al-Quran Tematik* to obtain higher acceptance and credibility, future initiatives will require more transparent, participatory processes and a commitment to ensuring that diverse scholarly voices can be represented without constraint.

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