

Reconstructing the Meaning of Terrorism in Political Communication: Ideology and Legitimation Strategies of Islamic Political Parties

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Abstract

This study investigates how elite actors within Islamic political parties in Indonesia construct and articulate the meaning of terrorism in relation to ideology and electoral strategy. Employing a qualitative constructivist approach, the research draws on semi-structured interviews and party documents to explore the production of political narratives. The findings reveal two dominant tendencies. Moderate Islamic parties define terrorism as individual criminal behavior detached from religious identity and emphasize constitutional commitment and national stability. In contrast, conservative Islamic parties interpret terrorism within broader structural injustices and socio-political dynamics, while still rejecting violence as a legitimate political method. These differing constructions shape framing strategies, deradicalization approaches, and political positioning in democratic competition. The study highlights that terrorism operates not only as a security issue but also as a strategic instrument for political legitimacy and identity differentiation.

Keywords: *Terrorism, Islamic Political Parties, Social Construction, Political Framing, Legitimacy.*



A. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian politics, terrorism can no longer be reduced to a mere issue of criminality or an isolated security threat. Rather, it has evolved into a complex arena for the articulation of ideological interests and power strategies. Since the Reformasi era, the manner in which the state and political actors produce and disseminate meanings surrounding terrorism has undergone significant transformation. Whereas earlier approaches were dominated by security-oriented and repressive responses, subsequent developments reveal an expanded issue dimension encompassing religion, collective identity, media narratives, and electoral calculations. Within this context, terrorism should not be understood solely as a factual occurrence, but as a discursive construction continuously produced and negotiated within the political arena (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Jackson, 2005).

This transformation cannot be separated from what security studies conceptualize as securitization the process through which an issue is positioned as an existential threat that justifies extraordinary measures (Buzan et al., 1998). Once terrorism is successfully constructed as a threat to state stability and social cohesion, extraordinary policies tend to gain broader public legitimacy. In this process, language and symbolism play a central role, as they function to define, categorize, and

shape perceptions of threat (Balzacq, 2011). The meaning of terrorism does not constitute a neutral entity; rather, it emerges as a discursive product embedded with political interests.

Within the context of Indonesian Islamic politics, this issue becomes even more complex and sensitive. Islamic-based political parties occupy a particularly dilemmatic position. On the one hand, they seek to preserve Islam's image as a peaceful religion compatible with democratic values. On the other hand, they must respond to state policies that frequently articulate terrorism through a rigid security logic. This tension reveals an intricate relationship between religious identity and representational politics, wherein parties are compelled to negotiate their ideological positioning amid structural pressures and constituent expectations (Fox, 2018; Roy, 2004).

This reality demonstrates that narratives surrounding terrorism are never entirely objective. They are shaped through framing practices that determine which aspects are emphasized and which are marginalized (Entman, 1993). In political practice, framing extends beyond a mere communication strategy; it constitutes a central mechanism in the construction of collective identity. Party elites function as agents who delineate the conceptual boundaries between radicalism, extremism, and terrorism. These terminological distinctions are not naturally given but are politically articulated categories carrying normative and strategic implications.

Previous studies have predominantly positioned the state and the media as the primary actors in the production of terrorism discourse. Public policy scholarship has largely concentrated on the effectiveness of counterterrorism regulations and institutional dynamics, while communication studies have focused on media framing and its influence on public opinion (Nacos, 2016). Although these contributions remain significant, scholarly attention to how Islamic party elites internally formulate and articulate terrorism narratives remains relatively limited. Yet, the internal party sphere constitutes a strategic arena where political positions are shaped through ideological negotiation and electoral considerations (Mouffe, 2005).

Building upon this gap, this study is guided by several key questions. How do Islamic party elites interpret terrorism within the framework of their ideological commitments and political interests? Through what internal mechanisms are official party positions constructed and legitimized? To what extent does this construction reflect both political communication strategies and ideological positioning amid electoral competition? By addressing these questions, this study seeks to uncover the relationship between meaning production and strategies of political representation.

This study rests on the assumption that social reality constitutes a collective construction shaped through interaction and the institutionalization of meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Terrorism narratives are understood as discursive products that undergo processes of production, institutionalization, and reproduction within party structures. Within this framework, language functions not merely as a communicative tool but as an instrument of political legitimation (Fairclough, 1995).

What party elites articulate does not simply reflect ideological positions; it actively shapes the horizon of public understanding.

Within the context of electoral democracy, political identity is constructed through strategies of differentiation (Laclau, 2005). Political parties may position themselves as guardians of national stability, moral representatives of the ummah, or advocates of social justice. Such positioning does not emerge spontaneously but is carefully crafted through communicative calculations that take into account electoral constituencies and the broader national political constellation (Scammell, 2015). Terrorism narratives function not only as responses to security concerns but also as strategic instruments for image formation and political legitimation.

This study moves beyond a mere comparison between moderate and conservative Islamic parties. Its primary focus lies in examining the processes of meaning construction, framing strategies, and the political implications that emerge from them. Through this approach, the study seeks to explain how terrorism narratives intersect with ideological legitimation and electoral strategy within the evolving dynamics of Indonesian democracy.

B. METHOD

1. Approach and Paradigmatic Framework

This study is grounded in the epistemological assumption that social reality never appears as a fully objective and value-free fact. Terrorism, like other political phenomena, is understood as a socially constructed outcome shaped through interaction, symbolic exchange, and the negotiation of meaning among political actors (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). On this basis, the qualitative approach within a constructivist paradigm is not adopted merely as a technical methodological choice, but as an ontological consequence of how this research conceptualizes reality itself. Reality is viewed as something constructed, institutionalized, and continuously reproduced within social and political structures.

From a constructivist perspective, language occupies a central position as the medium through which social reality is formed (Fairclough, 1995). Terms such as “radicalism,” “extremism,” and “terrorism” do not function as neutral categories; rather, they carry normative weight and specific political implications. When party elites speak about terrorism, they do not simply describe events; they engage in framing processes that shape public interpretation (Entman, 1993). This study does not aim to determine the normative validity of any particular definition. Instead, it seeks to trace how such definitions are produced, legitimized, and strategically mobilized within political contexts.

The constructivist paradigm enables an examination of the power relations embedded in the production of discourse (Foucault, 1972). Questions concerning who possesses the authority to define threats, how moral claims are constructed, and how legitimacy is built through the language of security become central to this inquiry. The construction of narratives is analyzed through the stages of externalization, objectivation, and internalization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The analysis moves

beyond rhetorical examination and extends to the institutionalization of meaning within party structures and its implications for external political communication.

This approach also allows for a nuanced reading of the interplay between ideology and strategy. In the context of electoral democracy, narratives function not only as expressions of normative commitments but also as instruments of political positioning (Scammell, 2015). The constructivist framework provides a robust theoretical foundation for understanding the interconnection between meaning production, power relations, and strategic calculation within Indonesian Islamic politics.

2. Subjects and Informant Selection Strategy

Informant selection in this study was conducted through a purposive sampling strategy oriented toward informational depth rather than statistical representation (Creswell, 2014). The guiding principle was to ensure that selected participants possessed both epistemic authority and strategic positioning within the party's process of narrative production. Not all party members play a role in shaping official positions; therefore, selection was deliberately focused on actors directly involved in policy formulation, public communication, and internal ideological deliberation.

Beyond formal structural positions, this study also considered the experiential background and organizational functions of informants. Involvement in legislative teams, electoral campaign bodies, communication divisions, or cadre development units constituted important criteria, as each institutional role brings a distinct interpretive lens to the issue of terrorism. Communication officials tend to assess framing in terms of its impact on public perception, whereas ideological leaders prioritize doctrinal consistency and normative legitimacy. This variation enriches the data spectrum and enables a more comprehensive analysis of intra-party dynamics.

This strategy further facilitates comparative analysis not only across parties but also within parties. Such an approach allows the study to identify whether terrorism narratives appear homogeneous or are instead shaped by internal contestation. Avoiding reductive assumptions that portray parties as monolithic entities is essential in this regard (Mouffe, 2005). Rather, the party is conceptualized as a discursive arena in which ideological and strategic negotiations unfold.

To enhance credibility, the validity of informants was strengthened through cross-verification of their positions and roles within the party structure. This procedure ensured that the collected data genuinely reflected processes of meaning production at the elite level, rather than merely representing individual opinions detached from organizational structures.

3. Data Collection Techniques

The primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews designed to maintain a balance between the researcher's analytical direction and the informants' narrative freedom (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). This format enabled in-depth exploration through follow-up questions whenever ambiguous terminology or

normative statements required clarification. The interviews captured not only the substantive content of responses but also the processes through which informants articulated meaning.

In practice, the interviews were treated as dialogical interactions rather than merely formal question-and-answer sessions. The researcher paid close attention to tone, pauses, word choice, and nonverbal cues that could indicate issue sensitivity or political caution. Field notes were systematically employed to document these contextual dimensions, ensuring that interpretation did not rely solely on verbal transcripts but incorporated the broader communicative setting in which meaning was produced.

To enhance data credibility, document triangulation was conducted by comparing informants' statements with official party documents, including political platforms, speeches by party leaders, and press releases addressing terrorism-related issues (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This comparative procedure enabled the identification of consistencies or discrepancies between internal discourse and external party communication. Through this triangulation strategy, the study avoided dependence on a single data source and instead established cross-validation processes that strengthened the validity of the findings.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

Data analysis was conducted in a staged and iterative manner. The initial phase involved open coding aimed at identifying preliminary conceptual categories emerging from the raw data, such as "structural injustice narratives," "defensive framing," or "constitutional legitimation" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process enabled the researcher to disentangle the complexity of interview material into more structured units of meaning while remaining grounded in participants' articulations.

The subsequent phase, axial coding, was employed to trace relationships among categories, including underlying argumentative patterns and causal linkages. For example, the analysis examined how emphasis on constitutional supremacy related to pluralistic legitimation strategies, or how narratives of injustice were connected to critiques of state-centered security approaches. In the final stage, selective coding, core categories were synthesized into conceptual propositions that explained variations in narrative construction between moderate and conservative Islamic parties.

Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the analytical process by acknowledging potential interpretive biases stemming from academic background and social positioning (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Peer debriefing and member checking were conducted to ensure that interpretations remained consistent with the interview context and participants' intended meanings. Through this approach, the analysis moved beyond descriptive reporting and generated conceptual insights that contribute to the theoretical development of identity politics and political communication within the Indonesian context.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Terrorism as Individual Criminality or Structural Injustice?

The findings reveal that differences in how Islamic party elites define terrorism extend beyond terminological preferences; they reflect deeper and more systemic ideological orientations. Among moderate Islamic parties, terrorism is consistently framed as an act of individual criminal deviance that contradicts both religious teachings and constitutional norms. This approach demonstrates a tendency toward the depoliticization of religion, whereby violence is explicitly detached from Islam as a collective identity. Such a strategy aligns with a framing logic aimed at limiting associations between religion and violence through normative simplification (Entman, 1993).

From a political communication perspective, this separation can be interpreted as an effort to safeguard pluralistic legitimacy within a democratic public sphere (Scammell, 2015). By emphasizing that perpetrators act as deviant individuals, moderate parties construct a symbolic distance between Islam and extremism. This strategy simultaneously reinforces their positioning as actors compatible with the rule of law and constitutional supremacy. Theoretically, this approach exemplifies the construction of reality through language, in which particular definitions are produced to secure ideological positioning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Conservative Islamic parties do not confine their framing to the category of criminality alone. While acknowledging the legal violations involved, they simultaneously emphasize structural factors such as economic inequality, political marginalization, and global policies perceived as discriminatory toward Muslims. This narrative reflects a broader contextual orientation, in which acts of violence are interpreted in relation to social structures and power relations (Bourdieu, 1991).

This perspective does not aim to legitimize violence, but rather to situate radicalization within its perceived structural conditions. Within the framework of securitization theory, the rejection of purely criminal categorization may be understood as a form of resistance to the dominance of state-centered security narratives (Buzan et al., 1998). Through this framing, conservative parties seek to maintain symbolic solidarity with constituents sensitive to injustice, while simultaneously rejecting violence as a legitimate political method.

These contrasting approaches reveal two distinct framing strategies: normative simplification versus structural contextualization. The first reinforces national legitimacy through constitutional affirmation, whereas the second strengthens moral legitimacy through the articulation of social justice. In the context of identity politics, both strategies represent different modes of constructing the boundary between “us” and “them” (Laclau, 2005).

2. Terrorism as an Instrument of Political Differentiation and Positioning

The findings indicate that terrorism functions not merely as a response to security concerns but also as a strategic arena for political differentiation. For moderate Islamic parties, commitment to counterterrorism is constructed as an

integral component of a pro-democracy and pro-stability political identity. By emphasizing constitutional supremacy and cooperation with state security apparatuses, these parties cultivate an image of themselves as strategic partners in maintaining national order.

This strategy reflects a form of political branding that positions the party as an inclusive version of Islam compatible with democratic governance (Scammell, 2015). Within this framework, anti-terrorism narratives operate as instruments of institutional legitimation. The discourse extends beyond security concerns to encompass commitments to pluralism and social cohesion. Issue framing serves as a vehicle for electoral expansion, particularly in constituencies characterized by heterogeneous voter compositions.

Conservative Islamic parties adopt a more cautious and reflexive communication strategy. They tend to avoid rhetoric that could reinforce stigmatization of Islamic identity, while actively rejecting generalizations that associate Muslims with violence. This approach can be understood as a form of defensive framing effort to shield collective identity from negative constructions (Entman, 1993).

From the perspective of populism theory, this orientation may also be interpreted as an articulation of solidarity with groups perceived as marginalized (Mudde, 2007). By questioning the dominance of state-centered security narratives, conservative parties construct differentiation from the state while simultaneously reinforcing internal cohesion within their electoral base.

Electorally, both strategies demonstrate that terrorism narratives are inseparable from calculations of public support. Framing is not a neutral activity; it constitutes an element of political competition that weighs both risks and strategic opportunities (Mouffe, 2005). Terrorism emerges as a site for the articulation of identity as well as a terrain for negotiating legitimacy within democratic contestation.

3. Religion–State Relations in Deradicalization Strategies

Differences in the construction of terrorism meanings directly shape the deradicalization strategies proposed by each party. Moderate Islamic parties tend to position the state as the primary actor in preventing and countering radicalism. Emphasis is placed on legal regulation, the strengthening of law enforcement institutions, and rehabilitation programs grounded in public policy frameworks. This orientation reflects an institutional paradigm that conceptualizes security as a structural responsibility of the state (Buzan et al., 1998).

Within this framework, legitimacy is built through demonstrated commitment to the constitution and the national legal order. The state is positioned as the guardian of stability, endowed with legitimate authority to delineate the boundary between freedom and threat. Such a strategy reinforces the party's image as an actor supportive of national stability and the supremacy of law.

In contrast, conservative Islamic parties emphasize cultural and educational dimensions in addressing radicalization. Social transformation, moral reinforcement,

and community-based engagement constitute the primary focal points of their approach. This perspective reflects the belief that radicalism cannot be resolved solely through legal instruments, but requires value-based interventions and long-term normative cultivation.

This cultural orientation aligns with the proposition that identity and ideology are shaped through processes of socialization and internalization of values (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Deradicalization is understood not merely as structural intervention but as a process of cultivating collective consciousness.

These differences reveal two intersecting yet distinct policy models: an institutional model and a cultural model. Each carries different implications for religion–state relations, party legitimacy, and constituent mobilization strategies. Within the Indonesian democratic context, this divergence enriches ideological dynamics while simultaneously demonstrating that security narratives are inseparable from broader strategies of political representation.

D. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the meaning of terrorism within Indonesian Islamic political parties is neither fixed nor purely reactive, but actively constructed through ideological positioning and strategic communication. The findings show that moderate and conservative Islamic parties do not merely differ in rhetorical tone; they systematically construct distinct interpretive frameworks that shape political legitimacy and electoral strategy. Moderate Islamic parties define terrorism as individual criminal deviance detached from religious identity, thereby reinforcing constitutional nationalism and pluralistic legitimacy. Through this framing, they position themselves as guardians of democratic stability and expand their appeal to heterogeneous constituencies. In contrast, conservative Islamic parties contextualize terrorism within broader narratives of structural injustice, marginalization, and socio-political inequality. Although they firmly reject violence, they resist purely securitized interpretations and emphasize moral solidarity with communities who perceive injustice. These contrasting constructions reveal that terrorism functions not only as a security issue but also as a strategic discursive arena for identity differentiation.

The study confirms that ideological orientation shapes how political actors define threats, articulate solutions, and negotiate legitimacy within democratic competition. It further shows that framing practices operate as instruments of electoral calculation rather than neutral descriptive tools. By integrating meaning construction with political positioning, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how religion, security discourse, and democratic contestation intersect in contemporary Indonesia. The proposed conceptual model clarifies that ideological inclusivity tends to produce constitutional-nationalist framing and pluralistic legitimation, while contextual normative orientation generates justice-based framing and internal electoral consolidation. This finding expands existing scholarship by demonstrating that terrorism narratives are embedded in intra-party negotiation and strategic calculation rather than merely reflecting state discourse. The study also reveals that

deradicalization strategies mirror these ideological differences, producing institutional and cultural policy orientations that carry broader implications for religion–state relations. Practically, the findings suggest that policymakers must recognize the diversity of ideological interpretations when designing counterterrorism and deradicalization initiatives. Ignoring these differences may risk reinforcing polarization or misinterpreting political positioning as ideological extremity.

The study acknowledges its limitation in focusing on elite discourse within a limited number of parties, which may not capture grassroots dynamics or voter reception. Future research should therefore explore how these constructed narratives circulate among party supporters and how they influence public perception across different media environments. Comparative studies across other Muslim-majority democracies could further test the transferability of the conceptual model developed here. Longitudinal research may also examine whether shifts in electoral competition alter framing strategies over time. This study affirms that ideological differences do not stop at normative disagreement; they structure meaning production, communication strategy, and electoral consequences in systematic ways. Terrorism, in this context, emerges as a site where identity, power, and legitimacy are continuously negotiated within democratic politics.

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