

Negotiation and Agency of Migrant Students within Salafi Muslim Communities in Pekanbaru

Dony Arung Triantoro¹, Yudhisti Indra Fz², Bifa Fanisa Basri³

¹Universitas Teuku Umar, Aceh

²Universitas Muhammadiyah Riau, Riau

³Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Kesehatan Medika Seramoe Barat, Aceh

Email: donyarungtriantoro@utu.ac.id

Keywords

Muslim university student, Salafi's Mosque, Pekanbaru

Abstract

This article analyzes the negotiation practices and agency of Muslim migrant university students in Pekanbaru in response to Salafi power relations. Economic constraints drive many of these migrant students to reside in community-owned mosques, including those managed by groups adhering to Salafi ideology. Building upon this context, the study addresses a central question: how do Muslim migrant university students negotiate their positions and exercise agency when confronted with Salafi power relations in Pekanbaru? This research employs a qualitative method with a narrative approach, with data gathered through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. The findings indicate that Muslim migrant university students residing in Salafi-managed mosques do not inherently adopt Salafi religious practices. Instead, they demonstrate the capacity to negotiate and express agency within specific contexts. This strategy enables them to pursue their educational goals while simultaneously securing welfare opportunities during their urban residency. Consequently, this article argues that restrictions on Salafi da'wah activities among Muslim university students are unnecessary, as these students possess the requisite negotiative capacity and agency to navigate such power relations.

Kata kunci

Mahasiswa Muslim, Masjid Salafi, Pekanbaru

Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis praktik negosiasi dan agensi mahasiswa Muslim pendatang di Pekanbaru dalam merespons relasi kuasa Salafi. Keterbatasan ekonomi mendorong sebagian mahasiswa Muslim pendatang untuk tinggal di masjid-masjid milik masyarakat, termasuk masjid yang dikelola oleh kelompok Muslim berideologi Salafi. Berangkat dari kondisi tersebut, artikel ini mengajukan pertanyaan utama: bagaimana mahasiswa Muslim pendatang menegosiasikan posisi dan menjalankan agensi mereka dalam menghadapi relasi kuasa Salafi di Pekanbaru? Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan naratif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa Muslim pendatang yang tinggal di masjid yang dikelola oleh komunitas Salafi tidak serta-merta mengadopsi praktik keagamaan Salafi. Sebaliknya, mereka menunjukkan kemampuan untuk melakukan negosiasi dan mengekspresikan agensi dalam konteks tertentu. Strategi ini memungkinkan mereka untuk tetap mengejar

tujuan pendidikan sekaligus memanfaatkan peluang kesejahteraan selama tinggal di kota. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini merekomendasikan bahwa tidak perlu ada pembatasan terhadap aktivitas dakwah Salafi di kalangan mahasiswa Muslim, karena mahasiswa Muslim memiliki kemampuan negosiasi dan agensi atas relasi kuasa Salafi tersebut.

Introduction

Migration to major cities is understood by many university students in Indonesia as a strategic endeavor to secure a better future. This mobility is generally motivated by a desire to become more educated, modern, and prosperous through access to diverse urban facilities (White, 2012). However, urban life also presents an array of challenges, ranging from escalating economic demands and the acceleration of globalization to the pluralism of religious traditions and practices flourishing within urban spaces.

University students who receive adequate economic support from their families tend to adapt more seamlessly to urban culture. Conversely, those with limited financial means or those raised in traditions of self-reliance often face economic precariousness when navigating the city. In such circumstances, some seek part-time employment to maintain their livelihoods, while others utilize religious spaces, such as mosques and musalas, as a survival strategy. These student migrants dedicate themselves to maintaining places of worship and sustaining religious activities—such as performing the azan, serving as prayer leaders (*imam*), or delivering sermons (*khutbah*)—as a form of contribution that simultaneously serves as a source of livelihood. In exchange, they receive accommodation and a modest stipend, although these earnings typically fall below the city's minimum wage standards. In the context of Pekanbaru, this role is known as *ghorim* (referred to by a minority as *takmir* or *marbot*), denoting individuals who safeguard and revitalize religious activities within a mosque. For many Muslim university students in Pekanbaru, becoming a *ghorim* is a common practice; indeed, many mosques, particularly those adjacent to university campuses, are managed by students.

However, residing within a mosque environment does not always align with the religious traditions these students previously embraced. The informants in this study, for instance, operate within spaces dominated by Salafi authority, which differs significantly from their original religious backgrounds. Previous scholarship has demonstrated that cities serve as critical arenas for the growth of Salafi movements in Indonesia (Aidulsyah, 2023; Hasbullah et al, 2022; Rosadi, 2019; Rosidi, 2024). Pekanbaru is no exception, emerging as a prominent hub for the expansion of Salafi ideology. This is evidenced by the presence of several major Salafi-affiliated mosques, such as the Raudhatul Jannah and Abu Darda Mosques. While their primary activities are concentrated in these locations, Salafi influence and authority extend to other public mosques. In this study, Salafi power dominance is understood as the authority they exercise in mosque management, whether through formal positions as administrators

and imams or as influential figures within the organizational structure. Against this backdrop, this paper examines how Muslim university students negotiate their religious identities amidst the dominance of Salafi power.

This article argues that the identity negotiation of these university students is intrinsically linked to their efforts to access welfare opportunities, or what Eileen M. McCaffrey terms “life chances” (McCaffrey, 2012). Muslim university students hailing from mainstream Islamic traditions, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) or Muhammadiyah, who reside in Salafi-dominated Mosque environments, negotiate their religious identities as a strategy for urban survival. Nevertheless, they do not entirely abandon their primary identities; rather, they preserve and perform them within specific contexts.

Extensive research has addressed the negotiation of Islamic identity. Several studies highlight the negotiations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the post-9/11 era (Fajriani, 2014; Shannahan, 2011; Takim, 2004), while others explore the intersections between Islamic identity and popular culture (Jati, 2015; Nurani, 2019; Sunesti et al, 2018). However, studies specifically addressing the negotiations of university students within the context of Salafi power dominance remain relatively scarce. For instance, while Hasbullah et al, examine Salafism in Pekanbaru, their work focuses primarily on societal reception toward Salafi da'wa, the factors driving such acceptance, and its broader implications (Hasbullah et al., 2022). Their analysis does not sufficiently account for the dimensions of negotiation and agency among university students living under Salafi dominance. Given that social acceptance is never absolute and invariably involves processes of negotiation and agency, this study intends to fill that scholarly lacuna.

Method

This article employs a qualitative method with a narrative approach (Murray, 2018). The narrative approach is utilized to explore the lived experiences and personal stories of informants during their residence and social interactions within mosque environments predominantly influenced by Salafi groups. The study focuses on Muslim university students in Pekanbaru. Pekanbaru was selected as the research site due to its complex socio-religious landscape. On the one hand, the city provides a fertile ground for the development of various Islamic organizations, such as Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, Persatuan Islam, Jamaah Tabligh, and Salafi groups. On the other hand, as the provincial capital, Pekanbaru serves as a major educational hub that attracts students from different regions across Riau Province to pursue higher education. The increasing influx of students from outside the city often leads them to utilize mosques as temporary accommodation during their studies.

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and documentation. Five informants were purposively selected based on their active involvement as Muslim students residing in mosques dominated by Salafi communities. Interviews were conducted to explore their experiences of living within such

environments, particularly in relation to their religious practices and social interactions. Observation was employed to directly examine the processes of negotiation and agency enacted by both Muslim students and Salafi groups in everyday settings. Meanwhile, documentation was used to record and capture the physical and social conditions of Salafi-dominated mosques as supplementary data for this study.

The data analysis followed three main stages. First, data reduction, which involved selecting and focusing on data relevant to the research problem. Second, data display, in which the data were organized and presented in the form of thematic narratives across several sub-sections. Third, conclusion drawing, which entailed reflecting on the findings to generate comprehensive interpretations and arrive at final conclusions addressing the research questions.

Results and Discussion

Muslim Youth, Mosques, and Salafi Presence in Pekanbaru

One of the primary spaces that connect migrant Muslim youth with Salafi communities in Pekanbaru is the mosque, alongside Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and economic activity centers. As noted by Hasbullah et al, Salafi groups in Pekanbaru receive substantial financial support from transnational networks, particularly from the Middle East, enabling them to establish mosques, schools, Islamic boarding institutions, and religious study circles across various locations (Hasbullah et al., 2022). In addition, the expansion of Salafi da'wa in Pekanbaru is facilitated by the openness of the local Malay society, which is generally receptive to diverse religious expressions. This cultural openness allows Salafi preaching not only to flourish within Salafi-affiliated mosques but also to extend into public mosques, where Salafi actors actively participate as mosque administrators, prayer leaders (*imams*), and religious instructors.

On the other hand, Muslim youth who migrate to Pekanbaru to pursue higher education—both in public and private universities—often face financial constraints, particularly those who lack sufficient economic support from their families to cover accommodation, daily expenses, and academic needs. As a result, many of them choose to reside in mosques as a survival strategy. Typically, they serve as *gharim*—individuals responsible for maintaining the mosque, performing the call to prayer (*azan*), leading prayers, and managing daily religious activities. While some mosques provide financial incentives or allowances for these roles, others only offer basic accommodation without any monetary support.

The recruitment of university students as mosque *gharim* has become a common practice among certain communities in Pekanbaru. Based on the author's approximately six years of residence and professional engagement in the city, this pattern appears widespread, particularly in mosques located near university areas. Several factors explain this phenomenon. First, many members of the Muslim community in Pekanbaru are employed as civil servants, traders, or private-sector workers, leaving them with

limited time to manage and sustain mosque activities. Second, students are often preferred as *gharim* because they are perceived as educated individuals with sufficient religious competence, making them suitable to perform duties such as delivering the *adhan*, leading prayers, and substituting for preachers when necessary.

Becoming a mosque *gharim* is relatively accessible for Muslim youth in Pekanbaru. Information regarding recruitment is widely circulated through WhatsApp groups and informal networks. Several mosque committees establish specific criteria, including the ability to perform the *azan*, deliver sermons, memorize certain chapters of the Quran, and uphold the cleanliness of the environment. Additionally, information is often disseminated through word-of-mouth, particularly among peers who have previously resided in mosques. In many cases, students assume these roles as successors to senior *gharim* who have graduated.

Within this context, the mosque functions as a crucial interface linking Muslim youth and Salafi communities. Although not all mosques in Pekanbaru are dominated by Salafi groups, this study focuses on those where Salafi influence is particularly prominent. In such settings, Muslim youth from various regions across Riau Province take on the role of *gharim* as a means of sustaining their livelihoods while pursuing higher education.

The research informants, MS, RS, DL, RH, and AF, represent examples of migrant youth residing in Salafi-dominated mosques. Interviews with these informants reveal that their original religious backgrounds are not Salafi, but rather rooted in traditions associated with Nahdlatul Ulama, which emphasize practices such as collective *dhikr*, devotional chanting (*shalawat*), commemoration of the Prophet's birthday (*maulid*), and the recitation of *qunut*. Nevertheless, they willingly adapt to living within Salafi-dominated environments as part of their broader strategy to survive economically and pursue their educational aspirations.

The Identity Negotiation of Muslim University Students under Salafi Power Dominance

Within the context of Pekanbaru, the mosque functions not merely as a place of worship, but also as a social space that converges diverse religious orientations within a dynamic arena of interaction. In this environment, Muslim youth—particularly university students—hailing from organizational backgrounds such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah engage in direct interaction with Salafi-affiliated communities. These encounters engender processes of mutual influence, negotiation, and the exercise of religious identity agency, which manifest in both mundane daily practices and congregational worship. Consequently, the mosque emerges as a crucial arena for the formation and contestation of Islamic meanings among the youth. The varied religious backgrounds of the Muslim university students involved in these dynamics are systematically detailed in Table 1 below, which delineates their diverse

affiliations, religious experiences, and respective positions in responding to the dominance of specific religious discourses.

Table 1. Background and Religious Practices of Informants

| No. | Name | Age | Religious Background | Religious Practices |
|-----|------|--------------|-----------------------------|---|
| 1 | MS | 20 years old | Islamic Boarding School, NU | <i>Sholawat</i> (Invocations/Prophetic blessings), Dhikr in congregation |
| 2 | RS | 21 years old | Islamic Boarding School, NU | <i>Sholawat</i> (Invocations/Prophetic blessings), Dhikr in congregation, Affinity for music |
| 3 | DL | 21 years old | Islamic Boarding School, NU | <i>Qunut</i> (supplication in prayer) |
| 4 | RH | 23 years old | Senior High School, NU | Dhikr in congregation, <i>Qunut</i> (supplication in prayer) |
| 5 | AF | 23 years old | Islamic Boarding School, NU | Dhikr in congregation, <i>Qunut</i> (supplication in prayer), <i>Maulid Nabi</i> (Commemoration of the Prophet's birthday), <i>Yasin</i> recitation in congregation |

Source: Research results

The data presented in Table 1 indicate that the religious backgrounds and practices of Muslim students are predominantly rooted in traditions associated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). This is reflected in several distinctive religious practices, including shalawat (devotional chanting), collective dhikr, the recitation of *qunut* in the dawn prayer, communal recitation of *Surah Yasin*, the celebration of the Prophet's birthday (*maulid*), and a generally permissive attitude toward music. However, during their residence in mosques dominated by Salafi groups, these traditions encounter contrasting Salafi practices, such as the non-recitation of the *basmalah* aloud (*jahr*) during prayer, the absence of collective dhikr, the prohibition of music, the omission of *qunut*, the dominance of Salafi preachers in religious lectures, the absence of communal *Yasin* recitation, and the rejection of *maulid* celebrations. This dominance is reinforced by structural factors, particularly the strong involvement of Salafi actors in mosque management, which enables them to shape religious activities—including prayer practices and study circles—according to Salafi norms.

Muslim students residing in Salafi-affiliated mosques in Pekanbaru demonstrate ongoing processes of identity negotiation across both ritual and social dimensions. In ritual contexts, they tend to conform to local practices, such as not reciting the *basmalah* aloud, omitting *qunut*, and refraining from collective dhikr. However, such conformity is neither permanent nor absolute; rather, it is situational and context dependent. Their compliance should therefore be understood as an adaptive strategy rather than a full ideological internalization.

This phenomenon can be interpreted as a form of negotiation shaped by three key factors: theological considerations, welfare concerns, and social relations. From a theological perspective, students generally perceive that differences in ritual practice do not necessarily signify fundamental divergences in *aqidah* (creed). If these differences remain within the shared framework of tawhid, they are considered tolerable variations. This perspective is reflected in the statement of informant DL, who emphasized that shared belief constitutes the primary basis for accepting Salafi practices. This finding aligns with the work of Hasan, who argues that Salafism in Indonesia is not always perceived as a threat but is often negotiated within a broader framework of shared Islamic identity (Hasan, 2009).

“I accept it as long as the principle of tawhid—*la ilaha illa Allah*—is maintained, because we share the same creed. What we reject is when the creed is different. Sometimes Salafism is not entirely wrong; some aspects are correct. The problem lies with individuals who do not fully understand it. As for their scholars, God willing, their creed is still the same as ours, and we can mutually accept differences” (Interview with DL, 2022).

From a welfare perspective, acceptance of Salafi practices is closely linked to the students’ position as *gharim*, who depend on mosque facilities for accommodation during their studies. In this context, conformity is driven not only by religious considerations but also by pragmatic needs to maintain access to resources. As expressed by informant MS, adaptation functions both as a form of social etiquette and as a survival strategy. This phenomenon can be analyzed through the concept of habitus proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, where individual actions are shaped by their position within a social field and the power relations that govern access to resources (Bourdieu, 1990).

“As long as I am with them, I just follow their religious practices. As a *gharim* in their mosque, it would feel inappropriate to oppose their views. I follow them as long as it does not contradict my own traditions. If I resist, I am afraid of being expelled from the mosque” (Interview with MS, 2022).

MS’s statement is further supported by DL, who highlighted the financial stability of Salafi groups. According to DL, Salafi communities have strong financial resources that enable them to support religious activities and mosque operations, making these mosques attractive places to reside.

“Their advantage lies in funding. Salafi groups are willing to spend on religious activities and mosque operations, such as Qur’anic learning sessions for men and

women. That is why it is comfortable to stay in this mosque” (Interview with DL, 2022).

In Pekanbaru, several Salafi-affiliated mosques demonstrate a relatively high degree of economic stability, which, in turn, serves as a significant draw for the Muslim community, particularly urban dwellers and university students. This economic robustness is reflected not only in the physical grandeur of the architecture but also in the institutional capacity to manage resources and provide socio-religious services. For instance, the Raudhatul Jannah Mosque is recognized for its various business units established within the mosque premises, which support its operational sustainability and proselytization (da'wa) activities. Similarly, the Abu Darda Mosque, situated near the university district, features representative infrastructure and operates without relying on conventional donation boxes (*kotak infak*). Despite this, the mosque remains capable of organizing large-scale social programs, such as providing free iftar (fast-breaking) meals throughout Ramadan, which consistently attracts a substantial number of participants.

This phenomenon suggests that Salafi mosques function not only as religious centers but also as economically robust and well-organized institutions. From the perspective of Pierre Bourdieu, such conditions can be understood as the accumulation of economic capital that is subsequently converted into symbolic capital to reinforce religious legitimacy in the public sphere (Bourdieu, 1990). The ability to provide adequate facilities and consistent services contributes to increased trust among congregants and expands the influence of Salafi da'wa in urban settings. This observation is consistent with Hasan, who argues that the growth of Salafism in Indonesia is driven not only by doctrinal purification but also by the strengthening of socio-economic bases and strategic engagement with public space (Hasan, 2009).

Meanwhile, social factors also play a crucial role in shaping students' adaptive attitudes. Positive daily interactions with Salafi communities—characterized by friendliness, acceptance, and familial relationships—encourage students to adjust their practices to maintain social harmony. As noted by informant RS, acceptance is primarily relational rather than ideological, as he continues to practice his original religious traditions outside the mosque context. This reflects a form of identity compartmentalization, which, in the framework of Erving Goffman, can be understood as impression management, a strategy through which individuals present different identities depending on the social context (Goffman, 2023).

“I just follow them because they treat me well. They are kind and treat me like their own child, since I am a newcomer. So, I adjust to them, but outside the mosque I practice my own tradition, NU” (Interview with RS, 2022).

Overall, these findings demonstrate that the negotiation of religious identity among Muslim students does not occur in a linear manner, but rather through complex and layered processes of adaptation. Within the framework of Anthony Giddens's structuration theory, this reflects a dialectical relationship between structure and agency, where individuals are not entirely constrained by dominant norms but retain the capacity to reinterpret and redefine their religious practices according to situational contexts (Giddens, 1984). Accordingly, compliance with Salafi practices in mosque environments should be understood as a situational strategy of identity negotiation, rather than as an indication of a permanent transformation in religious identity.

Muslim University Students and the Agency of Religious Practice

The phenomenon of Muslim university students in Pekanbaru residing in mosques dominated by Salafi groups does not position them as purely subordinate subjects. This is due to their capacity for agency in responding and adjusting contextually to Salafi religious practices without forfeiting their original religious identities. In a conventional sociological context, agency is often understood as a form of resistance against social structures. However, following the perspective of Saba Mahmood, agency does not always have to manifest as open resistance or opposition (Mahmood, 2005). Agency, within her concept of the politics of piety, is defined as the capacity for the "inhabitation" of specific religious practices consciously to achieve certain ends. In this context, the students' choice to follow Salafi protocols—such as omitting the *qunut* supplication or communal *dhikr*—is not a sign of lost autonomy. Rather, it is a form of agency employed to achieve specific goals within the existing social structure: namely, survival and welfare while pursuing higher education in Pekanbaru.

In terms of ritual practice, students show a tendency to adhere to the procedures prevailing in the Salafi Mosque environment, such as not reciting the *qunut* during the *Subuh* prayer, not vocalizing the *basmallah* (reciting it *sirr* instead of *jahr*) and abstaining from communal *dhikr*. However, this compliance is not absolute. Instead, these practices represent a form of contextual adaptation performed while they occupy a specific social space. This indicates that their religious actions do not merely reflect a shift in belief, but rather a social strategy to maintain social acceptance. As expressed by one informant:

“As long as we are with them, I simply follow their religious traditions. Furthermore, as a *ghorim* in their mosque, it feels uncomfortable to oppose their views. I follow them as long as it does not violate our own religious traditions. If I were to oppose them, I fear being expelled from the mosque” (Interview with MS, 2022).

The informant's statement demonstrates that agency is exercised not to dismantle Salafi dominance, but to acquire new capital for survival. In a broader context, the

agency exercised by Muslim students while living in Salafi-dominated mosques can be understood through the lenses of social and economic capital. From Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, the mosque is an arena of contestation where individuals strive to obtain and maintain social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1990). Salafi mosques possess binding rules (*doxa*) for Muslim students who face economic capital constraints during their studies in Pekanbaru. Consequently, access to resources such as free accommodation, stipends, and mosque facilities becomes vital capital that must be preserved. To secure this capital, Muslim students perform ritual compliance toward these religious practices. According to Bourdieu, such acts of obedience are calculative; students accept these norms to secure their material needs. Thus, these actions are not merely a form of religious submission to Salafism, but a survival strategy within that social structure.

On the other hand, the agency of Muslim students is also evident in how they interpret theological differences. They perceive Salafi practices as not being entirely contradictory to their own beliefs. This is reflected in informants' statements asserting that differences in practice are not a crucial issue if they remain within the same shared creed (*aqidah*). Based on Anthony Giddens' framework, these students' actions fall under "discursive consciousness"—the ability to explain the reasons behind their actions (Giddens, 1984). These Muslim students possess a high degree of discursive consciousness; they understand the differences and are capable of actively interpreting the structure. Thus, social practices are not "taken for granted" but are processed through reflection. University students can distinguish between core principles (*aqidah*) and peripheral matters of worship (*furu'iyah*), allowing them to maintain a sense of orthodoxy even while performing religious traditions that are not their custom.

In the negotiation practices of Muslim students living in Salafi-dominated mosques, agency is also visible in their ability to differentiate religious practices based on spatial context. An informant (RS) stated that he follows Salafi religious practices only when inside the mosque environment, whereas outside the mosque, he returns to his original religious traditions. This phenomenon can be understood through the framework of interactional performance. Erving Goffman divides the stage of interaction into the front stage and back stage. On the front stage, students perform as devout Salafi followers by adopting specific Salafi ritual attributes—such as abstaining from loud dhikr, *qunut*, or communal *Yasin* recitations—as a form of social harmony and conflict avoidance. Meanwhile, on the back stage, outside the mosque, they return to their primary religious traditions. This indicates that religious identity is not static, but rather dynamic and performative.

Beyond theological and welfare factors, the social relations built within the mosque environment also strengthen these adaptive practices. Interactions characterized by friendliness, inclusivity, and a sense of kinship encourage university students to adjust as a form of social reciprocity. This shows that agency is influenced not only by normative structures but also by the affective dimension of everyday social relations. In

this context, we can draw upon Marcel Mauss's concept of "The Gift" (Mauss, 2024). The hospitality and facilities provided by Salafi Mosque administrators are viewed as a "gift" that demands symbolic reciprocity. Students reciprocate by demonstrating polite behavior and following local worship norms. Religious practice thus becomes a strategy for maintaining social cohesion rather than a mere expression of doctrine. The success of mosque administrators in fostering a socially warm atmosphere is often more effective in "disciplining" student behavior than direct indoctrination.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that the negotiations undertaken by Muslim students in Pekanbaru operate across multiple dimensions, encompassing both religious rituals and everyday social relations. These negotiations are shaped by a range of factors, including theological considerations, welfare needs, and social dynamics. Importantly, the process of engaging with Salafi religious practices does not entail the erosion of the students' original religious identities. Rather, it should be understood as a situational strategy of identity negotiation, rather than as evidence of a permanent transformation of religious identity.

At the same time, students exercise agency in ways that are dynamic and context dependent. This agency is not oriented toward challenging or dismantling Salafi dominance; instead, it functions as a means of acquiring new forms of capital necessary for sustaining their livelihoods. In a broader sense, the agency enacted by Muslim students while residing in Salafi-dominated mosques can be interpreted as the accumulation of social and economic capital. Accordingly, this article argues that there is no need to impose restrictions on Salafi da'wa activities among Muslim students. The findings indicate that these students possess the capacity to negotiate and exercise agency within Salafi power relations, enabling them to navigate such environments without losing their foundational religious identities.

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