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Building the Soul of the Indonesian Nation: Mohammad Hatta on Religion, the State Foundation, and Character Building

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Ronald A. Lukens-Bull & Al Makin

Paradoxical Pluralism: Training Militants for Tolerance in an Indonesian Youth Movement

Abstract: *This article explores the paradoxical militarized pluralism as practiced by Banser, the paramilitary wing of Ansor (Nahdlatul Ulama's youth movement). Based on ethnographic fieldwork and reading literature about the issue, the study reveals how Banser's ideological training programs propagate pluralistic values at the grassroots level, reinforcing Indonesia's ideological foundation Pancasila. However, the organization's reliance on hierarchical command structures contradicts liberal democratic ideals of reasoning and individual conscience. The paper also demonstrates Banser's dual role as both a bulwark against religious extremism and a site of ongoing ideological contestation in national level of Indonesia and within NU's. The finding shows a model of "illiberal pluralism" - communally bounded, effective in promoting pluralism in the grassroot level, yet it may slip into authoritarian style, merely fulfilling the political interest of its elite commands. Ultimately, the study questions whether institutionalized militant methods can produce authentic tolerance, or merely enforce a hegemonic version of top-down command. The paper invites broader debates about pluralism's compatibility with illiberal political frameworks in post-reformasi Indonesia, while democratic trajectory is declining.*

Keywords: Ansor, Pluralism, Tolerance, Banser, NU, Youth Movement.

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Abstrak: *Artikel ini membahas paradoks pluralisme termiliterisasi yang dipraktikkan oleh Banser, sayap paramiliter Gerakan Pemuda Ansor (organisasi pemuda Nahdlatul Ulama). Berdasarkan penelitian etnografi dan kajian literatur, studi ini mengungkap bagaimana program pelatihan ideologi Banser menyebarkan nilai-nilai pluralisme di tingkat akar rumput, memperkuat landasan ideologis Indonesia, Pancasila. Namun, ketergantungan organisasi pada struktur komando hierarkis bertentangan dengan cita-cita demokrasi liberal seperti penalaran dan kesadaran individu. Temuan penelitian mengidentifikasi model "pluralisme iliberal"–pluralisme yang terikat secara komunal, efektif dalam mempromosikan nilai-nilai pluralisme di tingkat akar rumput, namun berpotensi merosot menjadi gaya otoriter yang hanya memenuhi kepentingan politik elite komando. Pada akhirnya, studi ini mempertanyakan apakah metode militeristik yang terinstitusionalisasi dapat menghasilkan toleransi otentik, atau hanya memberlakukan versi hegemoni dari perintah dari elit ke akar rumput. Artikel ini mengajak pada debat lebih luas mengenai kompatibilitas pluralisme dengan kerangka politik iliberal di Indonesia pasca-reformasi, di tengah kemunduran trajektori demokrasi.*

Kata kunci: Ansor, Pluralisme, Toleransi, Banser, NU, Gerakan Pemuda.

ملخص: تتناول هذه المقالة مفارقة التعددية العسكرية التي يمارسها بانسر (Banser)، الجناح شبه العسكري لحركة الشبيبة أنصار (منظمة شباب نهضة العلماء). بناءً على البحث الإثنوغرافي والدراسات الأدبية، تكشف هذه الدراسة كيف تنشر برامج التدريب الأيديولوجي لبانسر قيم التعددية على مستوى القاعدة الشعبية، مما يعزز الأساس الأيديولوجي لإندونيسيا، البانكاسيلا. ومع ذلك، فإن اعتماد المنظمة على هياكل القيادة الهرمية يتعارض مع المثل الديمقراطية الليبرالية مثل العقلانية والوعي الفردي. تحدد الدراسة نموذج «التعددية غير الليبرالية» – وهي تعددية مرتبطة مجتمعياً، وفعالة في تعزيز قيم التعددية على مستوى القاعدة الشعبية، ولكنها قد تنحدر إلى أسلوب استبدادي يخدم فقط المصالح السياسية لنخبة القيادة. في النهاية، تتساءل الدراسة عما إذا كانت الأساليب العسكرية المؤسسية يمكن أن تنتج تسامحاً أصيلاً، أو مجرد فرض نسخة مهيمنة من الأوامر من الأعلى إلى الأسفل. تدعو هذه المقالة إلى نقاش أوسع حول توافق التعددية مع الأطر السياسية غير الليبرالية في إندونيسيا ما بعد الإصلاح، في ظل تراجع المسار الديمقراطي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أنصار، تعددية، تسامح، بانسر، نهضة العلماء، حركة الشباب.

Studies have shown that religious pluralism in Indonesia—particularly within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and similar groups—differs significantly from liberal pluralism in Western secular democracies. Often described as communal, illiberal, religious, or limited pluralism, the Indonesian model emphasizes collective identity and religious patriotism over individual liberty or rational autonomy (Menchik 2016; Bush 2009; Formichi 2021; Hefner 2021; Feener 2014; Budiati 2024; Mietzner and Muhtadi 2020). Anchored in Pancasila, Indonesia's pluralism integrates religion, culture, and politics framed in the state ideology. The case of Banser illustrates this uniquely Indonesian form of tolerance, combining grassroots education and paramilitary training as a model of promoting pluralism. Let us start with the following illustration.

On December 24th, 2000, two young Muslims in paramilitary uniforms stood guard outside a church in Central Java as the Christmas Eve service was underway. One of them, Riyanto, discovered a bomb that had been placed next to the church. Lacking either the time or the expertise to diffuse the bomb, he did the only thing he could, he took up the bomb, shouted a warning, and ran away from the church. It exploded in his arms severely wounding his compatriot and killing him. In the 20 plus years since this happened, Riyanto has been honored with the appellation, "Hero of Peace", has been made the focus of a display at the Nahdlatul Ulama museum in Surabaya, and has had annual memorial services to not only remember him and honor his sacrifice but to reinforce for the members of his militia that such sacrifices are expected of them all. Even in other settings, Riyanto is held up as the shining example of what it means to be in Banser.

If the present, or even recent, history of NU youth is that of protecting religious minorities and pluralism, this has not always been the case. NU touth were an important auxiliary force in the Revolution NU's role as a political party during Sukarno's Guided Democracy era highlights its foundational involvement in Indonesia's early political structures (Hidayat 2021). In the 1945-1949 and in the 1965-1966 national bloodletting that left at least 1,000, 000 alleged communists dead. historical accounts make it abundantly clear that economic tensions and manipulations by the military were important in 1965 (Sulistiyo 1997, Roosa 2006, McGregor 2009, Robinson 2018, 7, 133), however, current members of Ansor and Banser interpret both

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the slaughter of communists and the protection of Christians as arising from protecting the unity and sanctity of the Indonesian State. Elsewhere, Lukens-Bull has explored the historical trajectory of an organization formed in revolution and anointed in blood (1965-1966) that is now pluralistic (Lukens-Bull 2023).

As shown, Banser's approach to pluralism is grassroots, communal, and illiberal—merging religious doctrine with military-style training to promote a practical form of tolerance. This model emphasizes action-based defense of pluralism, such as protection efforts and physical preparedness. While limited in scope, it reflects the dynamic nature of Indonesian pluralism, shaped by political competition, intra- and inter-religious diversity, and shifting interests during the reformasi era and democratic transition (Mietzner Muhtadi 2020; Kayane 2020; Arifianto 2020; Akmaliah 2020; Amal 2024). When discussing Banser, our focus is on grassroots actors rather than the elite leadership, who engage directly with political elites through negotiation and influence. These two levels—the grassroots and the leadership—may operate with different interests, strategies, and forms of engagement.

It should also be noted that Indonesia's democracy over the past decade has faced increasing criticism for signs of decline. Scholars and observers have pointed to persistent corruption and its weak of eradication, weak law enforcement, and entrenched practices of clientelism and patronage at both local and national levels, alongside a shift toward populist authoritarianism (Mietzner 2012; Aspinall and Berenschot 2019; Aspinall and Warburton 2018; Huda et. al 2025). At the grassroots level, communal identity often serves as a key source of legitimacy and political support for the ruling elites.

Banser is the paramilitary wing of Ansor, the young men's organization[1] for Nahdlatul Ulama (Renaissance of the Scholars; NU). NU is the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, and because Indonesia is so large, the largest in the world. It has been long committed to Indonesia as a non-shariah state as well as multi-religious and multi-ethnic nation (Barton 2002, Bush 2009). Ansor seeks to train non-radical Muslim leaders with a range of expertise and foci. Elsewhere, Lukens-Bull has discussed other ways *kiai*, and the NU community has recognized the need to redirect young men toward counter radicalism through education (Lukens-Bull 2001). Banser often guards Christian churches, and businesses from being targeted by extremists like the Islamic

Defenders Front (*Fron Pembela Islam)*. In June 2000, it was prepared to send forces to defend Christians against attacks from `a Muslim militia called Laskar Jihad. Further, Banser volunteers have been responders to "shock" events like earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. In 2014, they worked with local and national security forces to prepare to counter ISIS if it were to come to Indonesia.

However, the internal dynamics within NU's youth reflect the broader diversity and pluralism that characterize the organization as a whole. NU encompasses multiple factions with varying degrees of tolerance and differing responses to religious diversity. While certain segments within NU demonstrate openness toward Christian communities, they may exhibit less tolerance toward groups within Islam but seen as deviant, such as the Ahmadiyah, Shia, Gafatar, or Lia Eden (Menchik 2016; Budiarti 2024; Kayane 2020; 2022; see also other cases of discrimination against minorities: Makin 2016; 2017; 2019; Fenwick 2018). These variations underscore the fluid and contested nature of tolerance and pluralism both within NU and in its relations with religious others.

The first author has worked with Ansor since the summer of 2014 examining its history, interviewing leaders, and attending events from the local to the national scale and has interviewed various leaders in the NU community going back to the mid-1990s. He attended many different Ansor events including fast-breaking events, rallies, and trainings. During his 2018-2019 fieldwork, he observed several Banser basic training program several advanced leadership courses, and two specialist trainings. During these weekends, he participated as able, engaged in discussion with both participants and trainers, and interviewed leadership. The second author has attended many NU events as both participant and observer. Together the authors organized and conducted focus groups about Ansor and Banser. In addition to witnessing training presentations multiple times, we were able to collect slide presentations from trainers and organizers. The training files were translated and summarized using a LLM AI (Chat GPT). The results were compared to the original by the authors both of whom are fluent in Indonesian. The summaries were deemed to be accurate. The first author also attended a quinquennial congress in which new leadership was elected as well as both regional and national working meetings (usually a two-day affair).

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Overview of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Ansor, and Banser

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) was established in 1926 by several leaders of the pesantren (traditional Islamic boarding school) based traditionalist, or classicalist (Lukens-Bull 2005:14) community to support and coordinate the efforts of that community in the context of Dutch colonialism (Fealy and Barton 1999) and to counter the spread of Wahabism. A common theme heard in NU circles since the 1990s is that faith is a personal matter not a state matter or even a societal matter. To seek a Muslim society, one should preach and teach.

NU has several autonomous units that are responsible for different segments of NU's mission including young men, young women, school age children, university students, and traditional Islamic education, among others. These organizations, like Ansor, receive advice and guidance from the NU national leadership, but do not receive directives. Banser is a semi-autonomous organization under Ansor; it can and does receive directives from the Ansor national leadership. Ansor, in general, is loyal to NU – culturally if not always organizationally (there have been historical disagreements; Anam 1996 23-24, 81-82). Further, Banser members will refer to their organization the guard dog of the *kiai* (traditional Muslim leaders The *kiai*'s dual role as spiritual and political leaders significantly shapes the movement's ideological trajectory (Yani et al. 2022), which emphasizes the important of traditional authority in the NU community. The main NU organization is run by men typically over the age of 50 and has roles for both religious scholars ('alim, *kiai*) and non-experts.

It is difficult to create descriptions of Banser members that are not stereotypes. There are some generalities, but they are basic in the extreme. One must be a Muslim and be recommended by a *kiai* or another NU figure. There can be flexibility in the basic requirements of being between the ages of 18 and 40 and male[2].

There is a stereotype that Banser members are roughnecks, toughs, and even thugs. Obviously, all members want to be part of a paramilitary organization so there is a tendency toward action over talk. The stereotype continues that Banser engages the less educated elements of NU youth —there are, of course, counter examples including PhD holders within the organization, but we lack any quantitative data to indicate trends. There are members who used to be "preman," who decided to clean up their lives and direct their action-oriented tendencies toward good.

This is true of other organizations such as FPI (Front Pembela Islam) (Syaefudin 2014) , the *pecalang* (community security) of Bali, and even security guards (*satpam*).

The post-reformasi period in Indonesia has witnessed significant transformations in the national context, marked by heightened political competition and increased engagement in the public sphere. Since 1998, democratization has opened space for both social and political mobilization, including among Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Within this landscape, NU has experienced internal and external contestation, especially in relation to Muhammadiyah, HTI, FPI, and PKS (Amal 2024). Notably, the relationship between NU and the National Awakening Party (PKB)—originally established by Abdurrahman Wahid in 1998 serving as a political vehicle for NU followers—has also evolved, particularly following the 2020 general elections, with Banser distancing itself from PKB. These developments reflect broader struggles over religious authority and political legitimacy within NU and mirror similar patterns within Muhammadiyah and PKS (Akmaliah 2020). The increasing role of religious identity in political discourse and mobilization, traceable to the emergence of ICMI (Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals Association) during the later New Order period, underscores the enduring interplay between religion and politics in post-authoritarian Indonesia (Porter 2013).

Counter Reputations

Most people within NU, as well as religious minorities with whom we have interacted, express positive feelings about Banser. Comparatively, Muhammadiyah has also influenced national politics, albeit through a different organizational structure and ideological orientation (Al-Ansi and Kartono 2023). In interviews, KOKAM (Muhammadiya's paramilitary) leaders expressed they wished their organization was as robust. It is noteworthy that the relationship between Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has historically been shaped by complex religious, social, and political dynamics, often characterized by subtle forms of political competition. While Muhammadiyah has focused on formal public sectors such as education, healthcare, and the establishment of universities and hospitals—typically associated with the middle class—NU has maintained a stronger grassroots base, primarily through its extensive pesantren network. In this context,

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Banser's cadre development and programming reflect NU's broader efforts to engage in democratic participation and social mobilization from the ground up.

Unsurprisingly, analyses of Banser's role may reflect certain biases if the broader contextual factors outlined above are not adequately considered. However, the reasons for these biases will be worth exploring elsewhere but lie outside the scope of this paper. In short, a private militia violates the sensibilities of Western scholars and a militia that supports pluralism and democracy violates our experiences with militias closer to home. We may need to explore the "liberal" disdain for uniformed personnel. Some observers tend to focus on the events of 1965-66 and presume that Banser could return to its violent ways. The political scientist Robin Bush says that a 10 March 1998 meeting of multiple NU youth organizations to discuss the future of Suharto, the atmosphere was tense because of the very presence of Banser (Bush 2009:113). In 2012, NU leaders reported that a French journalist labeled Banser an (active) terrorist organization but were not able to give a name or more information. A September 2017 Time Magazine article's headline and photo, clearly gives the impression that Banser is a dangerous group, even if the article itself is more nuanced. The photo caption goes as far as putting scare quotes around the phrase "militant moderates" and suggesting that all 50 million people associated with NU go through the paramilitary training (Stahlhut 2017; Lukens-Bull 2023). A researcher in the Indonesian Science Academy says that he sees no difference between Banser, common thugs, and the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI) and holds up Banser's role in the 1965-66 massacres as evidence[3]. An incident in Garut, West Java in which Banser members tore down an burned a flag associated HTI confirmed this perspective of Banser for some.

Those who do not trust Banser fear that they will engage in violence like they had in the anti-communist massacres in the 1965-66. Implicit in this paper are several reasons why this is unlikely. The first is simply a question of having experienced fighters. There are very few 1965-66 fighters still alive, whereas in 1965-66 many of the fighters or leaders had been fighters in 1945-1949 during the War for Independence. In the 1960s, Ansor/Banser (not fully distinguished at this time) was, in some ways, the post-Independence continuation of Laskar Hizbullah (Salim 2004, 39, 43; Anam 1996, 63; Kusumu 2011, 33).

In the context of Indonesian democracy, competing powers, authorities, and claims emerge within an open space where religious and communal identities play a crucial role—unlike Western liberal democracy, which prioritizes individualism, equality, and rationality. The case of Banser exemplifies the influence of identity and grassroots communal ties. Meanwhile, HTI and NU compete in a public sphere where social, religious, and political interests intersect (Amal 2024; Akmaliah 2020).

The most important changes are both organizational and ideological. Prior to 1998 Banser was localized and only responsible to local *kiai*—one became a member by being asked by a *kiai* to join. Banser did not have effective centralized command until 1999-2000. Prior to this, training, command, and even uniforms were not unified. Each region would design and conduct their own training, so there was not consistency. with this came the fact that local Banser units were at the command of a local *kiai*, whoever recruited them. The moving to a chain of command may be a direct attempt to move beyond cults of personality; such locally commanded units are what participated in 1965-66. When we asked one advisor and former leader of the Yogyakarta Banser command, what *kiai* thought about this shift, he suggested that *kiai* still have considerable authority. In asking him how it might work, we started with something simple, like a request to provide security. He said that if branch members are asked to provide security by a *kiai* they would simply let the regional command know. However, if the request were more serious, it should be reported all the way up the change of command for approval.

Between accepting Pancasila as a sole ideological basis under Suharto, the defending of churches, and the fact many Ansor meeting space were emblazoned with banners reading "House of Tolerance," one might conclude that Ansor and Banser had become "defender of diversity" (Lukens-Bull 2023). Today, as an organization, NU is committed to anti-radicalism. Although their focus was on NU broadly and not specifically about Banser, Marcus Mietzner and Burhanuddin Muhtadi (2020) describe what they call the "myth of pluralism" for NU and argue that pluralism and tolerance are not really what drives the organization. Furthermore, they present survey data to prove that people who self identify with NU do not reply to survey questions in way that reflects a pluralistic point of view. The primary problem

with their results is based on how they chose to select and identify participants. They used a random sample of the general population and asked respondents to identify their religious orientation and their frequency of involvement. Using self-identification and a numerical indication of involvement cannot adequately assess the impact of training for those who have gone through *kaderisasi* (cadre training). Millions of Indonesians identify with NU, Muhammadiyah, and other organizations even if they are not fully invested in or trained by the organization. Given a standard list of choices, members of the often-violent group, FPI (*Front Pembela Islam*, Islamic Defenders Front) would choose NU even though FPI has no organizational ties and is consider by NU's official youth movement to be their enemy (*musuh*; cf Woodward et al 2014). Therefore, there is no contradiction whatsoever between the idea that NU, as an organization, is plural, tolerant, and anti-radical and the fact that some people who self-identify as being NU in orientation are in fact none of those things. What is needed is a survey that correlates degree of involvement in the organization, including formal training, and these perspectives. What we present here are details of the training to demonstrate how both militancy and multicultural nationalism are inculcated. Future surveys informed by ethnography will be able to better measure the success of such efforts.

Moreover, the concept of tolerance within Banser has been simplified and operationalized at the grassroots level for broader accessibility. As previous studies have noted, NU encompasses diverse factions with varying degrees of tolerance—both toward internal Islamic differences (*Aswaja* or *Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah*) and external religious groups. For Banser, tolerance is a defining feature that distinguishes it from other groups labeled as intolerant, even shaping its military-style training. This raises critical questions: Can military training genuinely foster tolerance and pluralism? And to what extent can tolerance be cultivated without rational discourse and deliberation?

Training for Militancy and Tolerance

Banser's training program is designed to cultivate both discipline and ideological commitment, ensuring that its members embody the principles of moderation while maintaining the readiness of a paramilitary force. The training regimen includes physical conditioning, leadership development, and emergency response preparedness, equipping

members to handle crisis situations such as protecting religious sites and maintaining public order. Beyond physical training, Banser places significant emphasis on ideological education, reinforcing the values of Pancasila as well as Nahdlatul Ulama's vision of a pluralistic Indonesia. Through a combination of military-style drills and ethical instruction, Banser seeks to develop cadres who are not only prepared to counter extremism but also dedicated to safeguarding religious harmony and social stability. We have included as training both formal and informal training including training weekends, films, and leadership meetings.

Core Values in a Film

We start our discussion on training with a brief analysis of a film, *Bumi itu Bulat (The Earth is Round https://dai.ly/x9c7pjg).* Although a theatrical film may not seem like a training program, in this case the production, message, and consumption of the film clearly show it as part of the training efforts of the organization. In 2019, Ansor was involved in the production of this film. Gus Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, the head of Ansor at the time served, as one of the executive producers. The film served as a statement of Ansor and Banser's commitments for both its own members and for the nation more broadly. It opened to the public in theaters but many local units attending screenings together and in uniform. In a way, the screenings served as continuing education for established members and to attract both new members and potential sympathizers. The film is a morality play thinly disguised as a romantic comedy. The plot concerns a five-person a-cappella group striving for their big break, but its bigger project is to weave an underlying theme of promoting a tolerant and pluralistic form of Islam.

The narrative follows the journey of the a-cappella group members, each grappling with personal challenges and representing diverse cultural, religious, and ideological backgrounds. Rahabi, hailing from a NU family, harbors bitterness towards his father's involvement in Banser, a group that takes up much of his father's time, even to the point that he was absent when Rahabi's mother passed away. Rahabi's quest for fame and success is driven by a desire to fulfill his mother's dying wish of financially supporting his sister's medical education. Hitu, from Ambon, joins Banser after they aided his family during a riot. While it is not clear what his family's religious affiliation was, since being Muslim is a requirement to join Banser, if he was not a Muslim at the

beginning of the story, he is by the end. Markus, a Chinese Christian member, is underdeveloped, defined primarily by his religious identity. Sayid lacks clear religious identification beyond his name and the fact that Ansor and Banser are not as familiar to him as they are to Rahim. The lone woman in group, Tiara, dealing with family issues and a love interest in Rahabi, depicted through flashbacks of having experienced some trauma prior to her current practice of wearing hijab.

The pivotal moment arrives when the group attracts the attention of a music producer, who will sign the group, contingent on them recruiting Aisha, a former teen pop sensation. Aisha had previously gone through "Hijra" or a return to a more religious lifestyle. She reflects the real-life experience of a few Indonesian music stars. As a character, Aisha allows the film to explore what other have called "the conservative turn" in Indonesian Islam (van Bruinessan 2013). Aisha introduces Rahabi to Ibu Hartini, a controversial figure advocating for Sharia as the basis of the state. Rahabi seeks an interview with her, engaging in activities aligned with Hartini's group to prove his commitment, although Rahabi's questioning challenges Hartini's ideologies. Rahabi, Aisha, and Tiara form a triangle of love interests, which makes the film ostensibly a rom-com.

The film climaxes with a confrontation at a church where a group demands its demolition, reflecting the conflicting narratives within Indonesian society. Shamsul, Rahabi's father, stands against the aggressive group, resulting in an altercation where Shamsul is injured. Aisha attempts to dissuade Rahabi from joining the conflict, using divisive language that distances her from "others." Her attempts at romantic overtures are met with laughter by the audience, highlighting the absurdity of her approach. Rahabi's decision to stand by his friends and family reiterates the film's message of unity and tolerance. *Bumi itu Bulat* strategically mirrors Indonesia's societal fabric, encapsulating diverse beliefs and cultural clashes. The film subtly aims to advocate for tolerance and unity amid a time of political significance, serving as a moral compass encouraging pluralism and understanding just ahead of elections.

Training Weekends

The core argument of this paper is that Banser today is what it is through the ongoing process of centralization of command and training.

This next section explores the ways in which Banser seeks to train a tolerant and moderate militia. Core to all Ansor and Banser training are key sessions on what it means to be part of NU, the ideological and religious commitments of the organization including supporting Indonesia as a pluralistic democratic state, the protection of minorities, and NU's more mystically inclined interpretation of Islam.

During his 2018-2019 fieldwork, the first author observed several training sessions at the first two of the three levels. The first level of training is called Pendidikan Dan Latihan Dasar (Basic Education and Training is abbreviated as DIKLATSAR is the minimal level of training needed to become a member of Banser. The first author was told repeatedly that the ideal goal was that this would be a three-day training for Banser that someone should take after a 1-2 day training to the learn the basics of Ansor members. However, at the time of the research this ideal had not yet been achieved. The second level involves two kinds of training: advanced training for regional leaders and advanced training for specialists. The first is called Kursus Banser Lanjutan (Advanced Banser Course) and is abbreviated as (SUSBALAN) and the second is called Kursus Banser Khusus (Special Banser Course) which is abbreviated at SUSBANSUS. The third level is training for national level leaders and is called Kursus Banser Pimpinan (Banser Leader Course) and is abbreviated SUSBANPIM. Since the first two are more common, we have been able to observe multiple iterations of them. The last one is uncommon, and we have yet been able to observe them.

The first two levels have a similar structure; hence we will describe the typical structure of a weekend. There is, of course, minor variation following the interests and abilities of trainers. After screening and registration, the first activity is often a physical training drill which usually includes crawling on the ground and getting a little dirty. At one iteration, they fired fireworks and bottle rockets over the recruits to imitate live fire exercises. After which the recruits were asked if they wish to quit. The only time I saw a recruit quit was in the context of a four-day training after a one-day training on the basic Ansor membership training. It was clear that those who walked away at this point may have only ever intended to join Ansor and not the paramilitary sub-organization.

The rest of a typical weekend might include: 1) the History and ideology of NU; 2) *Ke-NU-an* — that is being NU which includes discussion and practice of *qunut* prayers (added to the sunrise salat),

tahlilan (prayers for the dead), 3) the concepts of Pancasila (Five Principles of Indonesian Nationhood) and *NKRI Harga Mati* including the ideas of tolerance and the inclusion of minorities within the national and local communities. Attention is also given to improving the economic standing of members through sessions on entrepreneurship and small business ownership. In addition to prayer and fellowship, the training also has messier and harder physical training including long marches and wading chest deep through flooded rice fields or other bodies of mostly muddy water.

One of the early presentations lays out the aims and scope of Banser training or *kaderisasi* (making cadre). The presentation "Philosophy of Cadre Formation" provides an in-depth look at the ideals, structure, and symbolism behind the leadership development practices typical of many NU kadersisi training but here focus on youth. The philosophy of cadre formation within the organization is deeply rooted in Islamic teachings, emphasizing unity, structured cooperation, and a shared sense of purpose. Cadres serve as the backbone of the organization, ensuring its continuity and adherence to Islamic principles. This structured approach aligns with Qu'ranic teachings and Hadith, which compare the Muslim community to a building or a body where each part supports the other and specifically references Durkheim. An organization, therefore, is more than just a social group; it is a structured and coordinated effort toward a common goal, requiring strong leadership and disciplined members.

The core values of cadre formation are encapsulated in the acronym K.A.D.E.R., standing for key qualities for effective leadership. Creativity (K) fosters innovation and proactive thinking, while Aggressiveness (A) emphasizes resilience and determination. Discipline (D) ensures order and consistency, and Effectiveness (E) promotes efficiency and resourcefulness. Rationality (R) advocates for intelligence, loyalty, and logical decision-making. These qualities collectively shape individuals who can drive the organization forward while staying committed to its fundamental principles (Shah 2018).

Advanced Training Weekends

The more advance training weekends start with a review of basic training knowledge. After a basic screening process, trainee candidates are tested on knowledge and skills gained from their earlier training

and required two years of active membership. This included reciting of certain songs, marching, squats, push-ups, and other series of exercises. The candidates also undergo psychological screening conducted primarily through written tests which are measuring levels of obedience, perseverance, and endurance. The reason for the test is to figure out and predict the person's capacity for commitment and potentially as leader.

At one weekend training, the acting commander for East Java, nicknamed "Mustang" gave on talk on NU's understanding of religion. He reminded them that they were all Muslims because their parents were and not because they had received a revelation (*dapat hidayah*). This was presented as a foundation for tolerance; people do not chose the families into which they are born. He also talked about acceptable kinds of innovation (*bida hasanah*). But this is in part because NU is often accused of innovation (*bida*), so it is important to remind potential leadership that not all bida is bad. He went as far as to say that the Quran, meaning Mushaf, the textual Quran is bida because it did not exist in the time of the prophet. During this session, Masteng told a ghost story, a Banser member's wife having difficulty in childbirth and needed surgery to save both her and the baby – the cost was Rp 14 million (about a year's wage at minimum wage), and he simply did not have it. Feeling rather down, he left the hospital and sat an *angkringan* (small food stall) to have a smoke and a coffee, while he was there a man came up and sat down, he asked the young man what was wrong and the Banser member told the older man about his troubles and how he needed money. The old man left and came back and gave the young man Rp 14 million. The young man asked the older man for his address because he at least wanted to tell him how things turned out and to repay him if he was ever able. Of course, with the money the lifesaving surgery was performed. After everyone was home and settled, he went to the village and looked for the address the older man had given him and only found a graveyard. He asked around and described the man and indeed locals recognized the description but said he was describing a *kiai* had been dead for a few years. The story ended with the affirmation "if you are in Banser, God will take care of your needs."

Citizenship and Relationship to the State

The second author observed several NU gatherings which were pertinent to the outcome of a *bahtsul masail* (discussion among NU

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leaders) and an attempt to characterize non-Muslims from a civic rather than a religious standpoint. According to one of the bahtsul masail held in Banjar Patoman in 2019 and observed by the second author, non-Muslims should not be regarded as kafir (infidel). According to Islamic theology, non-Muslims in theological discussions did not gain equality in political and societal affairs. Non-Muslims are commonly classified as kafir harbi (warring infidel) or kafir zimmi (peaceful infidel). In this bahtsul masail, some *kiai* argue that the term infidel refers to the political and sociological background of long-ago wars. However, in today's environment, non-Muslim is more fitting. The word "non-Muslim" should not be used to diminish citizenship rights, which should be treated equally by all Indonesian citizens, regardless of faith or religion. This also strengthens the concept of religious freedom, according to NU elites.

The presentation titled "The Historical Role of NU in Social and National Contexts" by Ruchman Basori highlights the significant role that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has played in Indonesia's development, particularly in its anti-colonial efforts and its contributions to national unity (2019). NU often positions itself as integral to the formation of Indonesia, citing the pivotal role of its leaders and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in the struggle against colonialism. This anti-colonial legacy is notably marked by NU's 1945 Jihad Resolution, which called on Muslims to defend Indonesia's independence (Syukur et al 2025).

In 1983, NU further cemented its commitment to Indonesia by formally accepting Pancasila as the nation's foundational ideology, supporting a unified, multi-faith state. NU's ideological stance emphasizes a moderate form of Islam (Aswaja) that values balance, tolerance, and justice This governance model has been praised for advancing religious tolerance while supporting good governance (Al Qurtuby 2013), following the principle of Amar Ma'ruf Nahi Munkar—promoting good and preventing evil. Looking forward, NU aims to deepen its impact on Indonesian society by focusing on moderate religious education, social empowerment, and economic development, all contributing to a peaceful and inclusive Indonesia. (Basori 2019).

Another presentation discusses Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) approach to governance and national identity in Indonesia, emphasizing its perspective known as Fiqh Siyasah. NU blends Islamic principles with

Indonesia's cultural diversity, advocating for a governance model that is neither strictly secular nor theocratic. It views Islam as providing foundational values adaptable to Indonesia's unique societal and historical context (Anonymous 2019).

Since 1983, NU has officially recognized Pancasila as its guiding doctrine, aligning with Indonesia's national philosophy. During the Reformasi era, NU leaders engaged in political activities, including forming the PKB political party. However, political pragmatism and allegations of corruption among some members raised concerns. The slogan NKRI harga mati (patriotism to the death) has been used in NU-affiliated groups, though some critics argue it serves political interests more than genuine national unity.

NU's national engagement is guided by the Islamic principle of *Rahmatan lil 'Alamin* (mercy to the world), emphasizing moderation (*tawassuth*), balance (*tawazun*), and tolerance (*tasamuh*). It encourages members to identify as Indonesians who are Muslim, integrating religious beliefs with national identity rather than separating the two. NU strongly supports *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity) and interprets Pancasila's first principle, "Belief in One Supreme God," as aligning with Islamic monotheism (Anonymous 2019).

Other training sessions focus on practical skills to participate in Indonesian discourse in a constructive way including seminars on social media and critical thinking, conflict resolution, and how to respond to overt criticism of NU. The training on conflict management and resolution explores conflict resolution by examining the nature of conflict, its causes, and strategies for managing and resolving disputes. It categorizes conflicts into distinct types—ranging from hidden tensions to open hostilities—and identifies various levels, from global wars to personal disagreements. The training document we examined outlines key factors that trigger, escalate, or sustain conflicts and presents five approaches to resolution, including prevention, settlement, management, resolution, and transformation. It also discusses several conflict resolution theories, such as the impact of identity, human needs, and cultural misunderstandings. Finally, it distinguishes between negative peace (absence of violence) and positive peace (a just and harmonious society). The document emphasizes education, dialogue, and tolerance as essential for sustaining peace, particularly in Indonesia (Basori 2019).

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Kebal *and Mystical Training*

A common element of Banser training includes a sense of being able to accomplish impressive feats or sense of self confidence and camaraderie. This starts with mundane "military" like marches, mud crawls, and other physical challenges. There are also opportunities to engage in more impressive feats that involved mind over matter and sometimes spiritual power (kebal). Th line between mystical power training (*kebal)* and mind over material is sometime(deliberately) blurry. Kebal training, always includes doa, dziker, and sholawat. After invoking divine protection, participants in invited to join in apparently dangerous actions with stated belief that the kebal training will protect them. One training involved pouring *air keras* (acid) into a porcelain bowl with coins inside; at once the combination started to smoke. Those participants who so desired, came up and rubbed the same acid (from a different container) on their face and hands. After a few moments, they rinse off. The belief is that their faith and kebal keeps them safe. At other times and places such training can include being impervious to being cut by long knives or parang.

On one weekend, in Tegal, Central Java, a fire-walk was conducted. Prior to the fire-walk there was training on tahlilan (a prayer for the dead) and a short practice of it. This spiritual preparation possibly aimed to create a harmonious state of mind and a sense of belonging before engaging in the act of fire walking. This ritual, though unconventional, reflected a symbolic act of testing one's trust in faith as a shield against physical harm. The evening fire walking session diverged from the Kebal training's spiritual depth, focusing more on technique and physical practice. The lack of *kebal* involvement and emphasis on technique highlighted a pragmatic approach. The explanation of thoroughly wetting one's feet before walking and stepping firmly with the whole foot highlighted a practical aspect aimed at successfully completing the fire walk. Despite that it was not as heavily spiritualized, many people think of this as a real demonstration of spiritual power. In fact, because the first author participated in fire-walk, his friends and acquaintances outside of Banser said that it was proof of his *sakti* (spiritual power).

Kebal training and even the fire-walk is an important part of the militancy part of Banser training. It empowers members to take risks and be brave in the face of danger. Coupled with beliefs in martyrdom (*shahid*) and a promise of eternal reward in case the protections of

kebal are not enough, members are willing to put their lives on the line to advance the causes of the organization. It also strengthens their commitment to NU in general, which culminates in the oath taking ceremony.

Graduation and Oath Taking

The closing ceremony begins with a military-like presentation of the graduating class to a "training inspector." This aspect sets a formal tone and adds a sense of discipline to the event. As part of this process, a statement is read aloud, emphasizing the commitments of Banser. However, it is important to note that this is not yet the official oath. Following this, representatives from the graduating class have their participant badges removed by the training inspector. This symbolic act marks a separation from their role as trainees, indicating that they are not yet full-fledged members of the organization. This liminal phase begins with the participants taking the oath. After the oath-taking, each trainee is called forward to participate in another event where they drink something bitter. The leaders explain that this drink has been prayed over, suggesting a spiritual element to the ceremony. This act may symbolize the challenges and sacrifices they may encounter as they embark on their journey as members of Banser. Finally, the trainees salute the training inspector, showing respect and gratitude for their guidance and mentorship throughout the training process. This act acknowledges the authority and experience of the inspector, further solidifying the hierarchical structure within the organization, while the bitter drink and salute to the training inspector added spiritual and hierarchical elements to the ceremony. Overall, this event served as a significant rite of passage (cf. Turner 1987) for the participants, intertwining tradition, spirituality, and commitment within the context of their affiliation with Banser. The core of the oath is as follows,

"In the name of Allah, as a cadre and leader of GP Ansor, I pledge:

1. To remain faithful in upholding and defending the teachings of Islam according to Ahlusunnah wal Jamaah.
2. To remain loyal in preserving and defending the ideology of Pancasila and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.
3. To be ready, with all my heart and soul, to face enemies and traitors against Islam Aswaja, the NU organization, and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia based on Pancasila and the 1945 Constitution.

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4. To be prepared to uphold and honor the dignity of the scholars (*kiai*) and the organization, as well as to respect and dignify NU members.
5. To be ready to follow the path of struggle and obey the directives of Nahdlatul Ulama and the leadership of Gerakan Pemuda Ansor.

Testing the "Change"

On October 23, 2018, the first author woke to see that his Facebook notifications had exploded. The day before, on National Santri Day, Banser members in the village of Garut, West Java, captured a black flag with Arabic writing stating, "There is no God, but God," the first part of the Muslim confession of faith. This flag had been used by the recently banned, Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia, a chapter of an international movement committed to the establishment of a global Caliphate. In the days and week which followed there were street protests and calls for Banser to be disbanded and banned for its allegedly intolerant and anti-Islamic behavior. Part of the reason for this reaction is the ways that the burned flag was framed. Obviously, those protesting Banser did not frame this flag as the symbol of a movement committed to the destruction of the Indonesian republic and its absorption into a global Caliphate. Rather it was held that it was the Flag of Islam — that Banser had burned the core symbol Islam, the *kalimat tauhid*, or the sentence "God is one". Iqbal Daryono argued that it was not the official flag of HTI, but it could not be because HTI had been officially banned in 2017 (Daryono 2018).

In the days that followed the event, there was discussion and theories that some had planned this, that they paid someone to raise this flag in the middle of an NU event, it hopes that it would garner exactly the reaction that it did. The scuttlebutt in the weeks that followed was that thousands of these flags had beenstored for use in the immediate counter protests.

One East Java *kiai*, KH Fauzi acknowledged that Banser members took down the flag and that it was the duty of the police to remove this display because it did not have permits and was encroaching on another groups event. He further argued that because there are laws that call for the disbanding of any civil organization that takes on governmental duties, the flags were raised to bait Banser into breaking that law (interview November 2018). This event made some people think that Banser would be ready to "go 1965" again. There are number of changes

in organization and training that make this highly unlikely and many of these changes played out in the aftermath of the flag burning. In the context of Garut, it therefore makes sense that Banser emphasized that this was done only on the local level, and that in the time following this events, Gus Yaqut stressed the importance of chain of command.

At an event shortly after the Garut incident, the leaders present moved to the host's residence, where Gus Yaqut voiced his perspectives regarding this incident, which stirred a contentious debate among regional leaders. This altercation led to the exclusion of those formerly part of the leadership, prompting a closed discussion among a select few. The subsequent announcement regarding the issuance of an apology was not specifically for burning the flag but for causing a disturbance.

The media portrayal of the flag-burning incident painted Banser as a group of roughnecks who impulsively undertook the act, detached from the broader context. Even leaders in other areas attributed the occurrence to the lack of comprehensive ideological training in Ansor/NU principles, emphasizing only the paramilitary aspects of their training.

In a gathering focused on regional training, Gus Yaqut[5], then the Head of Ansor, orchestrated a significant moment by inviting all local leaders on stage with him. This display not only created powerful optics but also conveyed a critical message: the actions of the members reflect on their leaders, and ultimately, on Gus Yaqut himself. He made it explicit that responsibility for any actions, such as the recent Garut flag burning incident, falls on the leadership, absolving the individual members from direct blame.

Moreover, Yaqut emphasized a profound perspective: any endeavor to transform the state into a Shariah state is akin to disrespecting the *Kiai* of the past. The *Kiai*, regarded as the founding figures of Indonesia as a non-Sharia state, hold a pivotal place in the nation's history and identity.

Underlining the importance of a structured hierarchy, Yaqut stressed the significance of the "garis commando," asserting that Banser members cannot act independently but must adhere to the chain of command. This obedience to a structured order is integral to preserving the values and existence of the nation and the revered *pewarisan kiai* (inheritance of the *kiai*).

Underlying the complexity of NU's youth movement is the pivotal

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role of training programs. These distinct programs cater to both the paramilitary and non-paramilitary arms of the organization. The intrinsic dedication to pluralism found in the movement stems from rigorous training sessions. The engagement with trainers revealed the fundamental outlines of these programs, unveiling a unique commitment to fostering pluralism and tolerance.

Banser: a Paradoxical Pluralism?

The case of Banser within Ansor presents a compelling example of how militant-style training can be harnessed for the promotion of tolerance. As the paper illustrates, Banser operates within the broader framework of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, which has been perceived as a champion a pluralistic and non-shariah state This aligns with NU's broader diplomatic role in promoting interreligious harmony through platforms like the G20 Religion Forum and ASEAN Inter-cultural and Inter-religious Dialogue Conference (IIDC). The training that Banser members undergo is unique in that it blends discipline, loyalty, and preparedness with a deep commitment to protecting religious pluralism.

The training programs emphasize not only physical preparedness but also ideological reinforcement, ensuring that members internalize the principles of Pancasila, Indonesia's foundational philosophy of unity in diversity. This ideological grounding is essential in distinguishing Banser from radical Islamic groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), which employs similar paramilitary tactics but with an exclusionary and often violent agenda. The ability of Banser to act as a counterforce to extremism is demonstrated in its defense of churches, liberal Muslims, and other groups targeted by other organizations. The recreations of basic organizational and ideological lessons suggests their importance and the need for leadership to be committed to them.

A particularly illuminating aspect of Banser's role is its response to crisis situations. The story of Riyanto, the Banser member who sacrificed his life to prevent a church bombing, exemplifies the organization's ethos. His heroism not only solidified Banser's reputation as defenders of pluralism but also reinforced the idea that militant training can be redirected towards peacekeeping rather than aggression. Moreover, Banser's handling of symbolic provocations, such as the burning of other groups' insignias, further demonstrates their capacity for restraint

and disciplined response, distinguishing them from groups driven by reactionary violence.

To provide a counterpoint, we might examine pluralism and militancy training in a different framework—specifically, their compatibility and outcomes during the latter phase of Jokowi's presidency (2020-2024). This period revealed opportunistic or pragmatic maneuvers among NU elites, particularly in the rivalry between PKB and PBNU, reflecting broader power dynamics at the national level. Historically, pluralism in Indonesia has been instrumentalized for political control, as seen under Suharto, who employed it to suppress democratic forces and reinforce a divide-and-rule strategy (Porter 2013). Like the New Order, the Jokowi's period also used the issue of *moderasi beragama* (moderation in religion) to bolster popularity and control the Islamic discourse in Indonesian politics (Reza 2024). NU and Muhammadiyah in general, and Banser in particular, should be seen as part of this discourse. It is no secret that NU elites and Jokowi had close relations.

The case of Banser thus also raises the question of whether pluralism can be effectively promoted through militant mobilization. An ontological and epistemological inquiry might examine whether pre-existing plurality is reinforced or undermined by such methods. This approach to pluralism risks becoming a political instrument, enabling elites to enhance their bargaining power in the absence of institutional checks and balances. Concurrently, the internal dynamics of Indonesian Islam—particularly within NU and Banser—continue to evolve. In this context, pluralism may be strategically leveraged by elites to strengthen their public negotiation position.

Pluralism should extend beyond mere ontological coexistence to encompass methodological and strategic dimensions. The adoption of militant approaches by elites risks democratic backsliding, creating tension between such methods and liberal democratic principles emphasizing individual freedoms. Post-2024 election dynamics further substantiate this paradox, revealing how elites instrumentalize pluralism for political manipulation. A robust conception of pluralism must incorporate moral frameworks alongside ontological foundations, particularly in policy formulation. This is especially relevant in Indonesia's competitive religious landscape, evident both in NU-Muhammadiyah rivalries and internal NU factionalism.

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Conclusion

The use of military methods to promote tolerance and pluralism presents a fundamental contradiction. Liberal democracy conceptualizes pluralism through principles of individual freedom, rational discourse, equality, and justice (Fenwick 2018)—values incompatible with militaristic approaches. Yet, for grassroots movements like Banser and NU, pluralism must be operationalized in accessible terms, often translating into mobilization efforts. Banser's role as a security force creates further tension, as it competes both within NU and against external groups perceived as intolerant, paradoxically mirroring the very counter-pluralism it claims to oppose, not to mention internal fraction within NU.

This raises critical questions: If pluralism presupposes coexistence amid difference, how should it engage with intolerance itself? Does a top-down, enforcement-based approach to intolerance inadvertently replicate the intolerance it seeks to combat? Such tensions escalate both within and beyond NU. While Banser's paramilitary function may bolster NU's public image, elite political manoeuvres of these structures risks authoritarian misuse—imposing obedience without dialogue. Grassroots pluralism may function pragmatically, but elite co-optation undermines civil society and democratic norms. Alternatively, this may reflect a constrained form of pluralism—illiberal, communally bounded, and religiously particularized—where coexistence operates within predefined doctrinal limits rather than universal democratic principles?

Banser's model of militant tolerance offers valuable insights into how paramilitary structures can be repurposed for peaceful ends. In an era where extremism continues to pose a global threat, Banser provides a case study of how religious organizations can counter radical narratives from within, rather than relying solely on state intervention. The training mechanisms, ideological education, and real-world applications discussed in this paper demonstrate that militant discipline can coexist with pluralistic values when properly guided.

While Banser has largely succeeded in positioning itself as a guardian of Indonesia's pluralism, its legitimacy will depend on its ability to navigate the fine line between militarization and moderation. Future research could explore the long-term impacts of Banser's model on other paramilitary groups and its potential applicability in other regions facing similar ideological conflicts.

Endnotes

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1. To call Ansor a youth movement follows the organization's own nomenclature despite officially allowing an age range of 18-40.
2. The flexibility in age often extends to senior leadership who can be in their late 40s and early 50s. In recent years, women have also joined Banser or women's detachments associated with it. A fuller discussion of this is the subject of another paper.
3. The irony is not lost on us that we need to obscure this person's identity.
4. Those who wished to defame Banser, wrongfully denied that HTI even had a flag and claimed that this flag was the same as the one used the Prophet. In fact, the flag had been used by HTI. Further, both al-Qaeda and ISIS used a variation of this flag — a black flag with the tauhid statement. It is accepted that the Prophet used such a flag, but that the black flag was explicitly the war banner. In times of peace, the prophet used a white flag with the same declaration. Using the war banner is in and of itself a statement that this is the battlefield, and those who oppose it are the military opponents of the faith. When used by Caliphate organization, it can be interpreted as a declaration of war against the Indonesian State. The reason for tearing and destroying seems well within reason from this point of view.
5. He later served as the Minister of Religious Affairs from 2020 to 2024 under Joko Widodo.

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6. Ms. *Undhang-Undhang Banten*, L.Or.5598, Leiden University.
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