The Relationship between Existential Anxiety, Political Efficacy, Extrinsic Religiosity and Support for Violent Extremism in Indonesia

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Abstract

Young people’s involvement in violent extremism remains a concern in many countries, including Indonesia. This study examined direct and indirect relationships between indicators of existential anxiety, political efficacy, extrinsic religiosity, and support for violent extremism. Two hundred and ten young Indonesians were recruited to the study and all completed an anonymous online survey containing the measures of interest. The findings suggest that indicators of existential anxiety are related to greater support for violent extremism, but this relationship may be dependent on perceptions of political efficacy and religious orientation. Future research could explore whether support for violent extremism can be reduced by enhancing young people’s sense of control and political efficacy.

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The March 2021 terrorist attacks outside of a church in Makassar and the attack on a police station in Jakarta, Indonesia, are a reminder that violent extremism continues to be a threat in Indonesia. These attacks are the latest in a string of attacks that include the 2002 Bali bombings. Radicalization and support for violent extremism continue to demand an increasing focus of governments and security services globally, with concerns that homegrown extremists are operating, not only in their home country, but also in other conflict zones. For example, an estimated 500 Indonesians have traveled to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State, while thousands of individuals from EU member states have also made the journey.¹

Despite a continuing problem with violent extremism, there is a paucity of empirical research examining the psychological antecedents of why people may support violent extremism.² Most of the work seeking to understand radicalization toward violent extremism has been theoretical and/or descriptive in nature with little empirical testing of factors posited to be related to violent extremism.³ However, this work has identified a number of plausible indicators of existential anxiety, such as death anxiety, search for meaning, loneliness, and lack of control, that may increase a sense of existential anxiety and underpin extremism and extremist violence.⁴ It has been suggested that in trying to overcome existential anxiety individuals can turn to violent extremism when they perceive that politicians/governments will not be responsive to their needs (i.e. external political efficacy).⁵ These theories also argue that people’s extrinsic religiosity and associated religious justifications (e.g. that their religion is the only way to fix society’s problems) can be exploited to help achieve political goals and justify support for extremist groups such as Islamic State, and associated violent extremist acts.⁶ Despite the lack of empirical testing, prior research in Indonesia and around the world have provided disparate evidence that support the above theories. For example, recent research in Indonesia found that indicators of existential anxiety such as death anxiety, feelings of alienation, and search for meaning, are indeed associated with greater support for extremism and violent extremism.⁷

There is also evidence that suggests a desire for control over one’s life is linked to religious fundamentalism.⁸ Previous research in Europe has also shown that low political efficacy is linked to non-normative political behavior such as violent demonstrations and participation in groups aiming to overthrow the government.⁹
Indonesia, disapproval of the domestic political situation was found to be linked to support for attacks against U.S. civilians.\textsuperscript{10} Similarly, prior research shows that support for terrorism in Indonesia is predicted by greater support of religious leaders playing a role in politics,\textsuperscript{11} and that participation or willingness to participate in violent extremist acts is linked to a belief that violence is justified in religion.\textsuperscript{12}

However, there has been no research that shows whether the various indicators of existential anxiety (death anxiety, search for meaning, loneliness, and lack of control) are linked to either political efficacy or extrinsic religiosity, and if this is in turn linked to support for violent extremism. This present study aims to address this gap in research by examining whether there is a direct relationship between the various constructs of existential anxiety and support for violent extremism, or if this relationship goes through political efficacy and/or extrinsic religiosity. Based on previous research and theory we expect there to be significant relationships between existential anxiety and support for violent extremism. We also expect that greater extrinsic religiosity will be linked to higher support for violent extremism, while lower political efficacy will be linked to higher support for extremism and violent extremism.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Two hundred and ten young Muslim Indonesians aged between 18 and 24 years ($M = 21.47$, $SD = 1.88$; women 50%) participated in the study. Sixty-one percent of participants had completed high school, and 38% have completed a graduate degree. Only 1% have completed a post-graduate degree.

**Measures**

Participants were asked to answer demographic questions: age, gender (men = 1, women = 0), and education level (1 = completed high school, 2 = completed graduate degree, 3 = completed postgraduate degree). They were also given measures of indicators of existential anxiety (search for meaning, loneliness, and lack of control), extrinsic religiosity, external political efficacy, and support for violent extremism. Participants were also asked to denote their social and political orientation (1 = very conservative, 5 = very progressive), and how religious they view themselves to be (1 = not at all religious, 5 = very religious).
**Existential Anxiety**

**Search for Meaning.** Search for meaning was assessed by the five-item Search for Meaning subscale of the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (e.g. “I am looking for something that makes my life meaningful”).\(^{13}\) Items are scored on a 1–5 scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was .85.

**Lack of Control.** To assess lack of control, participants completed the eight-item Perceived Constraints subscale of the Sense of Control measure (e.g. “I have little control over the things that happen to me.”\(^{14}\) Items are scored on a 1–5 scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was .84.

**Loneliness.** To assess loneliness, participants were given the eight-item uCLA Loneliness Scale.\(^{15}\) An example item is “I feel isolated from others.” Items are scored on a 1–5 scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Cronbach’s alpha was α=.87.

**Extrinsic Religiosity**

To measure extrinsic religiosity participants were given the single question assessing Social Extrinsic Religiosity from the short Religious Orientation Scale.\(^{16}\) Items are scored on a 1–5 scale (1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree).

**Political Efficacy**

**External Political Efficacy.** The six-item regime-Based External Efficacy scale also from the nES pilot study by Craig and colleagues\(^{17}\) was used to assess participants’ external political efficacy. Items are scored using a 5-point scale with higher scores indicating stronger agreement with the item. Cronbach’s alpha for this scale was .62.

**Outcome Variables**

**Support for and Violent Extremist Action.** There are no well validated measures of support for violent extremism. Consistent with previous research,\(^{18}\) participants were given four statements assessing support for violent extremist action (violent extremism) against religious groups and government bodies in Indonesia (e.g. “The killing of national police members is justifiable, they are the puppets of an illegitimate government”). The items were designed to be relevant to Indonesia’s Muslim national identity, with each statement presented to participants as supposedly representing real statements made by a fellow Indonesian Muslim. Items were scored using a 5-point scale and summed with
higher scores indicating stronger agreement with the item. The composite measure of violent extremism had good reliability ($\alpha = .79$).

**Procedure**

The study was conducted using Qualtrics’ panel management service according to our sampling requirements of young Indonesian Muslims (18–24 years) with equal proportion and of men and women. The survey was advertised as being interested in opinions of young Indonesians on a variety of social and political issues rather than violent extremism *per se*. This helped reduce self-selection bias whereby participants may wish to avoid participating in studies of a sensitive nature. Participants were directed to an anonymous online questionnaire hosted by Qualtrics, and were paid for their participation. All written instructions and materials were presented in Indonesian (double translated back and forth). Demographic questions were presented first, followed by existential anxiety measures, measures of extrinsic religiosity, political efficacy, and support for violent extremism. Respondents provided consent for participation and were debriefed upon completion of the study. Ethics approval was sought and granted from Monash University Human Ethics Panel.

**Statistical Analysis**

We calculated and report means, standard deviations (SD), and correlations for all variables. Path analysis was conducted to examine direct and indirect pathways between the facets of existential anxiety, extrinsic religiosity, external political efficacy, and support for violent extremism. The Lavaan package\textsuperscript{19} for the R software environment\textsuperscript{20} was used for path analysis, and simultaneously tested relationships between all variables. We report coefficients for the respective paths in the path analysis. The adequacy of the structural model was tested using model fit indices and are reported.

**Results**

Table 1 displays means, standard deviations, and correlations for all variables in the study. There were significant negative correlations between lack of control and external political efficacy. Additionally, there were significant positive correlations between lack of control, loneliness, and religious orientation, and between search for meaning and support for violent extremism.

The results of the path analysis are presented in Table 2, for simplicity and clarity Figure 1 only displays significant paths within the path analysis.
Table 1. means, standard deviation and correlations for all variables.

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* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
Table 2. Standardized coefficients for path analysis.

<table>
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<td>-.24†</td>
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<td>-.27**</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>external political efficacy &lt;- Search for meaning</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>external political efficacy &lt;- loneliness</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Variances

| Violent extremism                                                        | .68*** | .07   |
| extrinsic religiosity                                                    | 1.49*** | .15   |
| internal efficacy                                                        | .92***  | .09   |

† p < .1, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.
Figure 1. Standardized coefficients for all significant relationships in the path analysis.* $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$, *** $p<.001$, \( \chi^2(3, \, N=210) = 2.51, \, p = .47, \, Cfi = 1.00, \, Gfi = .99, \, \text{rmSeA} < .05. \)

The path model has a good fit, \( \chi^2(3, \, N=210) = 2.51, \, p = .47, \, CFI = 1.00, \, GFI = .99, \, RMSEA < .05. \) Figure 1 indicates that search for meaning has a direct relationship to support for violent extremism. Lack of control was linked to external political efficacy and extrinsic religiosity, which in turn were linked to support for violent extremism. The \( R^2 \) indicates that 11% of the variance in support for violent extremism is explained by this model.

Discussion

This study examined hypothesized, but largely unexplored, empirical relationships between existential anxiety and support for extremist violence in the Indonesian context. Specifically, we examined whether there were direct and indirect relationship between indicators of existential anxiety, extrinsic religiosity, external political efficacy, and support for violent extremism in young Indonesian Muslims. There was a direct relationship between greater search for meaning and greater support for violent extremism in young Indonesian Muslims. And there was an indirect relationship between perceived lack of control and support for violent extremism, through external political efficacy and extrinsic religiosity. The findings of this study provide support for prior research conducted in the field.

For example, the links between search for meaning and lack of control with support for violent extremism, supports the findings of research conducted in Australia, Morocco, and Sri Lanka that suggests facets of existential anxiety, such as alienation and search for meaning, is an important factor of why people support extremism and violent extremism.\(^{21}\) The observed relationship between external political efficacy and support for violent extremism, reinforces suggestions that acts of violent extremism could be used as tools by people who think their governments are not responsive to their needs.\(^{22}\) These findings are supportive of research in general political science outside of terrorism studies conducted in America, which suggests that high political efficacy is linked to normative political action, while low political efficacy is linked to non-normative political action.\(^{23}\) The present results also suggest that the link between political efficacy and violent extremism may be driven by one’s sense of control, or lack
thereof, over one’s own life. We also found that extrinsic religiosity is linked to support for violent extremism, which lends support to the argument that violent extremist groups may co-opt religion to achieve non-religious goals.\textsuperscript{24} The results also suggest that adopting a utilitarian approach to religion (i.e. using religion to obtain non-religious goals) can be driven by feelings of existential anxiety such as whether or not an individual feels like they have control over their life. These findings support the results of earlier research conducted in America that found higher extrinsic religiosity scores are linked to negative outgroup attitudes and actions such as ethnocentrism, racial conservatism, and symbolic racism.\textsuperscript{25} There are limitations to the present research. Although we adopted a sampling and recruitment approach that might reduce selection bias and was constrained to the population of interest (Muslims aged 18–24, with a 50% men/women), we did not use a representative probability sample, and accordingly, the results may not be generalizable to other young Indonesian Muslims. The cross-sectional nature of the study precludes conclusions regarding causation. Future work could manipulate factors such as sense of loneliness through bogus group manipulations that build sense of belonging to see if it reduces support for violent extremism. Finally, it is important that the relationship examined here are explored in other countries where radicalization and violent extremism remain an issue.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study provides new preliminary evidence for the posited relationships between existential anxiety, extrinsic religiosity, political efficacy, and violent extremism in young Indonesian Muslims. It is of course important to understand whether such relationships exist in other populations, and more importantly to test where support for violent extremism could be reduced by manipulating sense of meaning, loneliness, and political efficacy. Preliminary research from other areas has found that meaning making\textsuperscript{26} and programs designed to increase sense of control\textsuperscript{27} can be effective in health-related interventions and may show similar utility in countering violent extremism.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Notes


