

Tafsir and Politics in Indonesia During the New Order Era: The Dialectic of Religious Texts and Power in an Authoritarian Regime

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the dialectical relationship between Qur'anic exegesis and political authority during the New Order era in Indonesia. Studies on Qur'anic exegesis in Indonesia have largely highlighted the influence of the socio-political context on the interpretive process. However, systematic studies that map the diverse responses of exegetical works to political power within a specific authoritarian regime remain relatively limited. Using a qualitative library research method with a descriptive-analytical approach, the study analyzes three representative Indonesian commentaries: *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya*, published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs, *Al-Huda* by Bakri Syahid, and *Dalam Cahaya Al-Qur'an* by Syu'bah Asa. The analysis employs Islah Gusmian's typology of tafsir: silent tafsir, cosmetic tafsir, and critical tafsir combined with two analytical paradigms: the instrumentalization of tafsir and the actualization of divine values. The findings show that Qur'anic interpretation during the New Order reflects a spectrum of responses to political power, ranging from the depoliticization of Qur'anic verses that support political stability, the incorporation of state ideological language into religious discourse, to the articulation of ethical criticism toward authoritarian practices. These patterns demonstrate that tafsir functions as a contested discursive arena where religious meaning is negotiated within structures of power. Theoretically, this article extends Gusmian's typology by proposing a relational and hybrid perspective of political tafsir, highlighting that Qur'anic interpretation may simultaneously accommodate and critique power depending on the socio-political position of the exegete. This study contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by offering a conceptual framework for understanding tafsir as a dynamic practice shaped by ongoing negotiations between revelation, authority, and socio-political context in modern Muslim societies.

Keywords: *New Order, Political power, Qur'anic exegesis, Tafsir typology*

Abstrak:

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji hubungan dialektis antara tafsir al-Qur'an dan otoritas politik pada masa Orde Baru di Indonesia. Kajian tentang tafsir al-Qur'an di Indonesia telah banyak menyoroti pengaruh konteks sosial-politik terhadap proses penafsiran. Namun, kajian yang secara sistematis memetakan beragam respons karya tafsir terhadap kekuasaan politik dalam satu rezim otoritarian tertentu masih relatif terbatas. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dengan pendekatan deskriptif-analitis terhadap tiga karya tafsir representatif, yaitu *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* terbitan Kementerian Agama, *Al-Huda* karya Bakri Syahid, dan *Dalam Cahaya Al-Qur'an* karya Syu'bah Asa. Analisis dilakukan dengan menggunakan tipologi tafsir Islah Gusmian yakni tafsir bungkam, tafsir gincu, dan tafsir kritis yang dipadukan dengan dua paradigma analitis: instrumentalisasi tafsir dan aktualisasi nilai-nilai ilahiah. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa penafsiran al-Qur'an pada masa Orde Baru merefleksikan spektrum respons yang beragam terhadap kekuasaan politik, mulai dari depolitisasi ayat yang mendukung stabilitas politik, integrasi bahasa

ideologis negara ke dalam wacana keagamaan, hingga artikulasi kritik etis terhadap praktik otoritarianisme. Temuan ini memperlihatkan bahwa tafsir berfungsi sebagai arena diskursif yang diperebutkan, di mana makna keagamaan dinegosiasikan dalam struktur relasi kekuasaan. Secara teoretis, artikel ini memperluas tipologi tafsir politik yang dikemukakan oleh Islah Gusmian dengan mengajukan perspektif relasional dan hibrida dalam memahami tafsir politik, yakni bahwa penafsiran al-Qur'an dapat sekaligus bersifat akomodatif dan kritis terhadap kekuasaan, bergantung pada posisi sosial dan konteks politik penafsir. Penelitian ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan studi al-Qur'an kontemporer dengan menawarkan kerangka konseptual untuk memahami tafsir sebagai praktik diskursif yang dinamis dalam negosiasi antara wahyu, otoritas, dan konteks sosial-politik dalam masyarakat Muslim modern.

Kata Kunci: *Kekuasaan politik, Orde Baru, Tafsir al-Qur'an, Tipologi tafsir*

Introduction

The discourse on Qur'anic exegesis is always situated within a dynamic interplay between the sacred text and the social reality surrounding the exegete. Exegesis does not merely serve to explain the normative meaning of verses, but also functions as a medium through which Muslims respond to the changing times, social challenges, and political dynamics. Therefore, exegesis never exists in a vacuum; it is always shaped by the social, cultural, and political contexts that determine the orientation, methods, and religious messages articulated.¹ From this perspective, exegesis is understood as both an intellectual and social product that reflects the negotiation between divine revelation and historical reality. Furthermore, religious knowledge is part of broader power relations, where language, ideology, and authority intertwine in shaping public discourse and the direction of social policy.²

Politics is one of the most significant determinants in the production of interpretation. Politics is not merely understood as a struggle for power, but as a process of shaping policies, discourses, and structures of authority that govern public life.³ When religion functions as a source of moral legitimacy, Qur'anic interpretation is often invoked to evaluate, support, or correct the exercise of power. However, this relationship is dialectical: on the one hand, interpretation can serve as an instrument of ethical critique, while on the other hand, political authorities have the ability to control or instrumentalize religious discourse for specific hegemonic interests.⁴

¹ Irsyadunnas Nurmahni, "Rekonstruksi Tafsir Al-Qur'an Kontemporer (Studi Analisis Sumber Dan Metode Tafsir)," *Substantia* 22, no. April (2020): 21–36.

² Ramadhan Safrudin, "Language Education, Politics and Technology in South Asia: Shaping Inclusive Societies, Identities, and Futures, by Pradhan, U. & Gupta, M. (Eds.). (2025)," *Journal of Language, Identity & Education*, 2025, 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15348458.2025.2561709>.

³ Ramadhan Safrudin, "Bhuiyan, Md Jahid Hossain, and Ann Black (Eds.). Freedom of Religion and Religious Diversity: State Accommodation of Religious Minorities. ICLARS Series on Law and Religion. Routledge, 2025. 368 Pages. Hardcover, 210.00 USD. ISBN: 9781003458128.," *Law, Religion and State* 13, no. 1 (2025): 118–23, <https://doi.org/10.5117/JLRS2025.1.005.SAFR>.

⁴ Nurmahni; Irsyadunnas, "Interaksi Agama Dan Politik Dalam Konteks Tafsir Kontemporer Dimas," *Reslaj: Religion Education Social Laa Roiba Jurnal* 6 (2024): 5867–78, <https://doi.org/10.47476/reslaj.v6i8.4324>.

Several previous studies have confirmed the close connection between Qur'anic interpretation and the socio-political context in Indonesia. Research by Howard M. Federspiel, for example, shows that engagement with political issues drives the development of the *adab ijtimai*⁵ style of interpretation. In line with this, Islah Gusmian asserts that the social position and political locus of the exegete fundamentally influence the character of the resulting message.⁶ Meanwhile, Faizin et al. reveal that interpretation is often utilized as an instrument for legitimizing power and fostering ideological support.⁷ Although these studies have enriched the literature, most remain general in nature and have not yet specifically mapped the typology of interpretive responses to power mechanisms within a specific political regime.

In Indonesia, the New Order presented a unique discursive field for the production of Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir). This regime was marked by hegemonic political control and strong state dominance over religious discourse.⁸ However, the tafsir produced during this period was not monolithic. Rather, it exhibited a range of positions—from accommodative and neutral to those that employed tafsir as a medium of ethical critique against authoritarianism. To date, studies that systematically classify these variations within a framework of power relations remain limited. This gap constitutes the novelty of this article, which seeks to analyze New Order-era Qur'anic exegesis as an arena of dialectics between the legitimation of power and the actualization of divine values through an examination of three representative works.

Based on this background, this study aims to address how the relationship between Qur'anic exegesis and political power functioned during the New Order, and how tafsir operated as a medium of legitimation, negotiation, or critique. This qualitative research employs a descriptive-analytical approach to three major works: *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* (published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs) as a representation of the state's voice; *Al-Huda* by Bakri Syahid, characterized by its strong local-bureaucratic nuances; and *Dalam Cahaya Al-Qur'an* by Syu'bah Asa, representing a critical-intellectual perspective. By applying Islah Gusmian's typology—silent tafsir, cosmetic tafsir, and critical tafsir—this article seeks to uncover the complex patterns of interaction between the text, the exegete, and the structures of power during the New Order era.

⁵ Eni Zulaiha, Kartini Fujiyanti Agustin, and Nida Al Rahman, "Pengaruh Sosial Politik Pada Metodologi Penafsiran Di Indonesia (Orde Lama, Orde Baru Dan Reformasi)," *Hanifiya: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 5, no. 1 (2022): 25–34, <https://doi.org/10.15575/hanifiya.v5i1.15538>.

⁶ Islah Gusmian, "Tafsir Al-Qur'an Di Indonesia: Sejarah Dan Dinamika," *Nun: Jurnal Studi Alquran Dan Tafsir Di Nusantara* 1, no. 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.32495/nun.v1i1.8>.

⁷ Nur Faizin et al., "The Translation of Ittaḥāza Awliya and the Rights of Non-Muslims as Leaders in Indonesia," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 80, no. 1 (2024): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v80i1.9488>.

⁸ Mark T Berger, "Old state and new empire in Indonesia: Debating the rise and decline of Suharto's New Order," *Third World Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1997), 321–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436599714975>.

This study employs a qualitative approach using a library research method.⁹ The analytical approach applied is descriptive-analytical, aiming to systematically examine Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) texts as intellectual products emerging from the interaction between religious texts and specific socio-political contexts. The research procedure is carried out in several stages. *First*, the researcher identifies and collects Qur'anic exegesis works written and published during the New Order, selected based on their relevance to the political context of the regime. *Second*, the selected tafsir texts are examined through intensive close reading to identify interpretive passages related to themes of power, the state, ideology, and religion–politics relations. *Third*, the relevant textual data are classified and analyzed thematically to uncover patterns of interaction between Qur'anic interpretation and the surrounding political context.

The unit of analysis in this study is interpretive discourse, which includes: explicit statements by exegetes regarding the state, power, and political ideology; discursive strategies employed by exegetes in responding to political issues, whether through avoidance, affirmation, or critique; and the frameworks of meaning constructed in the interpretation of Qur'anic verses with social and political implications. Thus, the focus of analysis is not merely the Qur'anic verses themselves, but how these verses are interpreted within specific historical contexts. Textual interpretation is conducted by positioning Qur'anic exegesis as a product of dialectics between text and context. The analysis is directed at the reciprocal relationship between the normative message of the Qur'an and the political conditions of the New Order as an authoritarian regime. For this purpose, the study employs the typological framework of Isiah Gusmian, namely silent tafsir, cosmetic tafsir, and critical tafsir. This typology functions as an analytical tool to categorize interpretive tendencies without imposing normative judgments on the correctness or incorrectness of the exegetes' views.

The validity of the analysis is maintained through several strategies. *First*, consistency in textual reading is ensured by comparing interpretations across different tafsir works from the same period. *Second*, textual interpretation is closely linked to the historical-political context of the New Order to avoid ahistorical readings. *Third*, the use of an established typological framework in contemporary tafsir studies serves as a theoretical control to minimize subjectivity in the analysis. Through these strategies, the study seeks to ensure that its findings are argumentative, transparent, and academically accountable.

Results and Discussion

Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) is not merely a neutral and ahistorical intellectual activity. Rather, it constitutes a dynamic arena in which the interpretation of sacred texts is often shaped by—and in turn shapes—the surrounding social and political dynamics. In this sense, interpretation does not only reflect an understanding of textual meaning, but also bears the imprint of the social, ideological, and power structures that influence its production.¹⁰ The

⁹ Sugiyono, *Metodologi Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif Dan R&D* (Bandung: Alfabeta, 2013).

¹⁰ Gusmian, "Tafsir Al-Qur'an Di Indonesia: Sejarah Dan Dinamika."

encounter between the revealed text and its context unfolds within a relational dynamic in which tafsir and politics form a dialectical relationship, mutually influencing one another. On the one hand, structures of power can shape the direction, boundaries, and emphases of meaning in Qur'anic interpretation.¹¹ On the other hand, tafsir has the potential to shape the political consciousness of the community, whether through legitimizing authority or offering ethical critique of political practices that deviate from divine values. Thus, tafsir may function as a medium of affirmation, adaptation, or resistance toward power.

This dialectical relationship underscores that Qur'anic interpretation is never detached from the arena of power. It can operate as a tool of ideological justification that reinforces the status quo, while simultaneously serving as a source of public ethics that challenges inequality and the abuse of power.¹² This diversity of roles indicates that tafsir operates within a complex spectrum of political relations, influenced by the social position of the exegete, the intended audience, and the political pressures they encounter. Therefore, this study considers it essential to apply an analytical framework capable of systematically disentangling the varied responses of tafsir toward power. Such an approach is necessary to avoid a reductive understanding of the relationship between tafsir and politics as merely affirmative or oppositional, and instead to view it as a dynamic process of negotiating meaning. This analytical framework will be elaborated in the following section through two major paradigms for understanding political exegesis.

The Dialectical Relationship between Tafsir and Politics: The Paradigms of Instrumentalization vs. Actualization

To examine the relationship between Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) and politics more systematically, this study employs two main analytical paradigms: the paradigm of instrumentalization of tafsir and the paradigm of the actualization of divine values. These paradigms function as a conceptual framework for understanding how tafsir can operate either as a tool of political legitimation or as a source of public ethics.

The first paradigm is the instrumentalization of tafsir, namely the tendency to employ the Qur'an—through particular interpretations—as a tool to legitimize political interests. In this sense, tafsir no longer functions as a space for moral critique, but rather as a means of ideological justification for existing power structures. Qur'anic verses are reduced to sources of symbolic legitimacy that reinforce the status quo.¹³ Within this framework, verses that potentially challenge authority are not necessarily rejected outright; instead, they are

¹¹ Muhammad Izzul Haq Zain and Muhamad Imam Mutaqin, "Membela Sistem Nasional; Analisis Wacana Moderasi Islam (Tafsir Al-Qur'an Tematik) Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia," *An-Nida'* 46, no. 2 (2022): 209, <https://doi.org/10.24014/an-nida.v46i2.20862>.

¹² Subi Nur Isnaini, "Tafsir Ayat-Ayat Teologis Dalam Al-Muharrar Al-Wajiz: Studi Kritis Atas Tuduhan Pital Terhadap Ibnu Athiyah," *Jurnal Online Studi Al-Qur'an* 17, no. 02 (2021): 207–31, <https://doi.org/10.21009/jsq.017.2.03>.

¹³ Ihsan Nursidik, "Tafsir Indonesia Di Rezim Otoritarianisme," *Jurnal Iman Dan Spiritualitas* 1, no. 2 (2021): 198–203, <https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v1i2.12072>; M Komarudin et al., "Ketika Tafsir Menjadi Alat Kekuasaan: Studi Atas Ayat-Ayat Politik," *Ojs.Unublitar.Ac.Id* 3, no. 1 (2025): 17–23.

neutralized through selective discourse or interpreted in ways that shield, normalize, or obscure ethically problematic political policies. As a result, universal Qur'anic values such as justice, protection of the vulnerable, and the prohibition of oppression are not critically contextualized within prevailing political practices. Through such interpretations, the Qur'an loses its critical and transformative force, as it is oriented toward aligning with political interests or maintaining political stability.

The second paradigm is the actualization of divine values, which refers to efforts to position the Qur'an as a source of public ethics for evaluating, correcting, and guiding political practices. This paradigm holds that Qur'anic messages such as justice (*'adl*), trustworthiness (*amānah*), consultation (*shūrā*), and the prohibition of oppression—must be actualized contextually within the socio-political sphere as a form of moral control over power.¹⁴ In this view, the normative values of the Qur'an should not remain abstract ideals but must be realized in concrete social and political life. Thus, the relationship between tafsir and politics is understood as a medium for ethical critique of power when it deviates from divine principles.

These two paradigms serve as analytical categories and interpretive lenses for understanding the dynamics of Qur'anic exegesis in the context of power—whether in the form of exegetical works, religious discourse, or contemporary interpretive practices. Through this framework, exegesis can be understood as a dialectical arena between divine messages and the realities of political power.¹⁵

This study finds that Islah Gusmian's theory of "silent" (*tafsir bungkam*) and "cosmetic" (*tafsir gincu*) exegesis often overlaps in empirical reality. In *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* (published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs), the phenomenon of "silence" is not merely the absence of critique, but rather a strategy of depoliticizing Qur'anic verses. In interpreting QS. al-Nisā' [4]: 59, the Kemenag team simplifies the meaning of *ulī al-amr* as formal governmental authority without articulating strict ethical conditions for those in power. This constitutes a crucial finding: the state utilizes tafsir to construct a form of "theology of obedience" that is absolute in nature in order to support national stability.

By contrast, *Al-Huda* by Bakri Syahid demonstrates a more nuanced variation. While Gusmian categorizes it as "cosmetic tafsir," a deeper textual analysis of Syahid's diction reveals what may be termed the "inculturation of New Order ideology." Syahid employs terms such as "Development" (*Pembangunan*) and "Just and Prosperous Welfare" (*Kesejahteraan Adil Makmur*), which are political slogans associated with Soeharto, as equivalents to Qur'anic values. In this case, tafsir does not merely silence critical potential but actively becomes an instrument of the regime's political language (political linguistics).

¹⁴ Islah Gusmian, *Tafsir Al-Qur'an & Kekuasaan Di Indonesia* 32 (2021).

¹⁵ Saifuddin Herlambang, Syamsul Kurniawan, "Hegemony of Involvement of Tafsir in Political Identity," *ESENSIA: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Ushuluddin* 19, no. 1 (2018): 83–96. <https://doi.org/10.14421/esensia.v19i1.1489>.

Typology of the Relationship between Tafsir and Power: Social Position and the Spectrum of Exegetical Responses

The diversity of exegetical responses to political power during the New Order was significantly influenced by the social position of the exegete within structures of power and religious discourse. Exegetes engage not only with the Qur'anic text as a normative source, but also with social audiences, religious institutions, and political configurations that shape their hermeneutical horizons. Thus, tafsir cannot be understood merely as an individual intellectual product, but rather as the outcome of complex negotiations between text, context, and surrounding interests.

The findings indicate that institutional affiliation is a key factor in determining the orientation of tafsir. Exegetes positioned within state institutions or closely aligned with centers of power tend to produce interpretations that are accommodative and legitimative of government policies. In such contexts, tafsir functions as a symbolic apparatus to reinforce political stability and to frame state policies within a moral-religious narrative. This is evident, for instance, in official state-sponsored exegesis that emphasizes obedience to leaders, social harmony, and national stability, while minimizing the potential for confrontational interpretations.¹⁶ Such tafsir aligns with what is termed “silent” or “cosmetic” exegesis, interpretations that avoid substantive critique of power or address social issues only in normative and symbolic terms.

However, this study also finds that non-governmental positioning does not automatically produce critical tafsir. Some exegetes operating outside formal state structures still present interpretations aligned with the regime's political interests, whether due to political pressure, risk calculation, or ideological alignment with those in power. This condition suggests that the relationship between tafsir and power is not determined solely by formal affiliation, but also by the internalization of dominant discourse and the adaptive strategies employed by exegetes in navigating a repressive political environment.

Conversely, exegetes who are relatively independent or occupy more marginal social positions tend to utilize tafsir as a medium for articulating ethical critique of power. In such interpretations, Qur'anic values—such as justice, trustworthiness, and advocacy for the marginalized—are actualized to highlight deviations of political practice from Islamic principles. This critique is not always expressed explicitly; rather, it is often conveyed through symbolic, reflective, and moral language to mitigate political risk.¹⁷ This pattern illustrates how critical tafsir functions as a space of cultural and moral resistance within a political context that constrains freedom of expression.

Differences in the social positions of exegetes help explain why, within the same historical period, Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) can function paradoxically: both as an instrument

¹⁶ Darlis, “Urgensi Kekuatan Politik Dalam Penafsiran Al-Qur'an,” n.d.; Bambang Husni Nugroho, Ahmad Mustaniruddin, and Ahmad Taufik, “Ideological Contestation on the Production of Gender Exegesis within Institutional Quranic Interpretation in Indonesia,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 25, no. 2 (2024): 346–69, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v25i2.5388>.

¹⁷ Syamsul Wathani, “Tafsir Alquran Dan Kekuasaan Politik Di Indonesia (Perspektif Analisis Wacana Dan Dialektika),” *Nun* 2, no. 1 (2016): 266120.

of political legitimation and as a medium of social critique. Tafsir thus becomes an arena of contestation over meaning, where divine values are negotiated in relation to worldly interests and dominant power structures.¹⁸ Therefore, analyzing the social position of the exegete is crucial for understanding the dynamics of the relationship between the sacred text, interpretive practices, and political interests within a particular historical context.¹⁹ This finding underscores that tafsir is not merely a reflection of the Qur’anic text, but also a mirror of power configurations and the ethical choices made by exegetes in responding to their socio-political realities.

The diversity of responses to power is largely determined by the locus of authority and the social position of the exegete within the structure of religious discourse.²⁰ Analysis of the selected works reveals a spectrum of positions more complex than a simple binary opposition between the state and society. To map these findings, the study constructs the following comparative typology:

No	Exegetical Works	Focus on Textual Analysis	Gusmian Typology	Analytical Findings (Discovery)
1	Ministry of Religious Affairs (<i>Al-Qur’an & Tafsirnya</i>)	Obedience to Those in Authority	Tafsir Bungkam	Depoliticization of Verses: Simplifying the meaning of authority for the sake of stability.
2	Bakri Syahid (<i>Al-Huda</i>)	The “Development” Slogan	Tafsir Gincu	Political Linguistics: The inculturation of state ideology into theological discourse.
3	Syu’bah Asa (<i>Dalam Cahaya Al-Qur’an</i>)	Criticism of Authoritarianism	Tafsir Kritis	Subversive Hermeneutics: Using divine punishment as a metaphor for social failure.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Tafsir Responses to Power during the New Order

This study reveals that Islah Gusmian’s conceptualization of “silent” (*tafsir bungkam*) and “cosmetic” (*tafsir gincu*) exegesis frequently overlaps within the empirical context of the New Order. Through in-depth textual analysis, two dominant patterns emerge as key scientific findings. *First*, the strategy of depoliticizing Qur’anic verses—as reflected in *Al-Qur’an dan Tafsirnya* (Ministry of Religious Affairs). The phenomenon of “silent tafsir” in this official state-sponsored work is not merely characterized by the absence of critique, but rather by a systematic effort to depoliticize the text. In the interpretation of QS. al-Nisā’ [4]: 59, the exegetical team reduces the meaning of *ulī al-amr* to formal governmental authority

¹⁸ Ruth Wodak, “Complex texts: Analysing, understanding, explaining and interpreting meanings”, *Discourse studies* 13, no. 5 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445611412745>.

¹⁹ Dadan Rusmana and Fajar Hamdani Akbar, “Dari Literasi Hingga Ideologi: Kajian Tafsir Al-Quran Para Aktivis Ormas Persatuan Islam,” *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al-Qur’an Dan Tafsir* 6, no. 2 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.15575/al-bayan.v6i2.16926>; M. Solahudin, “Pendekatan Tekstual Dan Kontekstual Dalam Penafsiran Alquran,” *Al-Bayan* 2, no. Desember (2016): 115–30.

²⁰ Johan Degenaar, “Religious discourse, power and the public”, *Neotestamentica* 31, no. 1 (1997), https://hdl.handle.net/10520/AJA2548356_593.

without articulating stringent ethical conditions for those in power. This finding demonstrates how the state constructs an “absolute theology of obedience” to mitigate the potential for civil resistance framed in religious terms.

Second, the inculturation of ideology and political linguistics—as evident in *Al-Huda* by Bakri Syahid. In contrast to the silent pattern, *Al-Huda* reflects a more active form of “cosmetic tafsir” through the process of ideological inculturation. Bakri Syahid incorporates New Order political jargon—such as “Development” (*Pembangunan*) and “Just and Prosperous Welfare” (*Kesejahteraan Adil-Makmur*)—as synonymous with Qur’anic values. In this context, tafsir operates through mechanisms of political linguistics, whereby religious language is appropriated to normalize regime discourse, ultimately endowing state policies with theological legitimacy in the eyes of society.

The Dynamics of Qur’anic Exegesis in the New Order Era: Between Hegemony and Resistance

To concretely understand the dialectic between tafsir and power, the New Order period provides a relevant and compelling context for analysis. In a political situation that prioritized national stability, uniformity of discourse, and control over public expression,²¹ the production of Qur’anic exegesis cannot be separated from the structural pressures that accompanied it.

The instrumentalization of tafsir is clearly evident in the production of exegetical works by state institutions during the New Order era, particularly *Al-Qur’an dan Tafsirnya* published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia.²² This tafsir emerged within a political context that emphasized national stability, social harmony, and the reinforcement of development ideology as the dominant state narrative. Within this framework, the interpretation of verses related to leadership, obedience, and social order was directed toward affirming the urgency of stability and compliance with authority, thereby positioning tafsir as a means of framing state–citizen relations within a moral horizon aligned with the interests of power. This is reflected in the tendency of the official state Qur’an translation committee to support government interests, as long as such interpretations remained within the acceptable boundaries of the tafsir tradition.²³ This not only reflects a response to the political conditions of the time, but also demonstrates how tafsir can function as a hegemonic instrument to shape public consciousness in accordance with the interests of power.²⁴

²¹ M. Sa’ad Alfanny et al., “Persinggungan Politik Islam Dan Islam Politik: Genealogi Dan Perkembangan Islam Di Era Orde Baru,” *Journal of Politics and Policy* 7, no. 1 (2025): 60–77, <https://doi.org/10.21776/ub.jppol.2025.7.1.4>.

²² Ramadhan Safrudin, “Ibn ‘Arabī’s Religious Pluralism: Levels of Inclusivity: By Faris Abdel-Hadi, New York, Routledge, 2025, 280 Pp., £108.00 (Hardback), ISBN 9781032776408,” *Sikh Formations*, 2026, 1–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17448727.2025.2609511>.

²³ Fadhli Lukman, *The Official Indonesian Qur’an Translation, The Official Indonesian Qur’an Translation: The History and Politics of Al-Qur’an Dan Terjemahnya*, vol. 1, 2022.

²⁴ Saifuddin Herlambang, “Hegemony of Involvement of Tafsir in Political Identity” 6 (2025): 83–96.

In the terminology of Islah Gusmian, this tendency reflects the pattern of *tafsir bungkam* (silent exegesis), in which it does not explicitly legitimize state political practices and policies, yet avoids issues of power and structural injustice. In doing so, it performs a “silencing” function—limiting the critical capacity of the Qur’an within the public sphere.²⁵ Such a condition indicates that tafsir produced by government institutions tends to adopt an accommodative approach, placing political stability above the prophetic function of the Qur’an as a guide for social justice and as a mechanism for holding power accountable.²⁶

Tafsir *bungkam* (*silent tafsir*) appears when exegetes avoid interpretations that could potentially criticize political injustice or structures of power. During the New Order, the process of interpretation was often shaped by the demands of social stability and the dominance of political discourse, so that verses such as QS. al-Nisā’ [4]: 135 on justice or QS. al-Mā’idah [5]: 8 on social justice were reduced to individual moral advice without structural critique of power. Empirical studies of tafsir produced during this period indicate that state institutional exegesis, as well as interpretations influenced by the regime’s need for legitimacy, tended to suppress political criticism—an identifying feature consistent with the category of *silent tafsir*.²⁷

In addition, Islah Gusmian introduces the term *cosmetic tafsir* (*tafsir ginca*), which tends to present Qur’anic moral values in a decorative manner. It does not directly promote state policies, but functions to normalize power discourse by framing political reality as already aligned with religious values, thereby rendering critical voices toward state policies irrelevant or even unnecessary. These two patterns of interpretation—*silent tafsir* and *cosmetic tafsir*—operate within a hegemonic framework of power that seeks to neutralize the Qur’an’s critical potential toward unjust political structures.

A clear example can be seen in the interpretation of QS. al-Nisā’ [4]:59, which commands obedience to God, the Prophet, and *uli al-amr*:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأُولَى الْأَمْرِ مِنْكُمْ فَإِن تَنَزَعْتُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ فَرُدُّوهُ إِلَى اللَّهِ
وَالرَّسُولِ إِن كُنتُمْ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ ذَلِكَ خَيْرٌ وَأَحْسَنُ تَأْوِيلًا

“O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. Then if you dispute over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you truly believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is better and more suitable for final determination.”

In official state tafsir, *uli al-amr* is interpreted as legitimate holders of governmental authority who must be obeyed in order to maintain social order. This interpretation emphasizes the urgency of obedience and loyalty of citizens toward the government as the

²⁵ Gusmian, “Tafsir Al-Qur’an Di Indonesia: Sejarah Dan Dinamika.”

²⁶ Achmad Lutfi, “Dimensi Lokalitas Penafsiran: Bentuk Dan Karakter Lokal Dalam Kitab Tafsir Resmi Pemerintah Orde Baru Republik Indonesia,” *Diya Al-Afkar: Jurnal Studi Al-Quran Dan Al-Hadis* 11, no. 1 (2023): 142, <https://doi.org/10.24235/diyaafkar.v11i1.15006>.

²⁷ Ahmad Yafik Mursyid, Muhammad Dzilfikri Al-Baihaqi, and Alvy Ra’Isatul Murtafi’ah, “Politics and Pluralism: Analyzing State Official Tafsir and Interfaith Discourse in Indonesia,” *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur’an Dan Hadis* 25, no. 1 (2024): 57–76, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.v25i1.5379>.

foundation of national stability. Meanwhile, the phrase “*fa in tanāza‘tum fī shay’in faruddūhu ilā Allāh wa al-Rasūl*” is not treated as a sharp corrective mechanism toward power, but rather understood as a call to avoid conflict and division that could threaten stability.²⁸ Similarly, in *Al-Huda* by Bakri Syahid, the concept of *ulū al-amr* in QS. al-Nisā’ [4]:59 is constructed as leadership that guarantees a stable socio-political order and “just and prosperous welfare,” while calling for obedience insofar as it aligns with public interest and national development—an interpretation closely aligned with the New Order regime’s politics of legitimacy.²⁹

In contrast, tafsir that explicitly actualizes divine values undertakes a reinterpretation of Qur’anic verses within the framework of social justice and the enforcement of human rights. This approach is driven by socio-political analysis and the historical consciousness of the exegete, enabling tafsir to function as a space for critiquing regime power. Exegetes who adopt this perspective often argue that the Qur’an inherently promotes justice, freedom, and accountability of rulers; thus, opposing oppression becomes an integral part of Islamic teachings. In terms of Islah Gusmian’s typology, this tendency intersects with the category of *critical tafsir*. However, in this article, critical tafsir is understood as a concrete manifestation of the paradigm of actualizing divine values, rather than as an independent analytical framework.

The most representative example of critical tafsir during the New Order is the interpretation of Syu‘bah Asa in *Dalam Cahaya Al-Qur’an*. In interpreting QS. al-An‘ām [6]: 65:

قُلْ هُوَ الْقَادِرُ عَلَىٰ أَنْ يَبْعَثَ عَلَيْكُمْ عَذَابًا مِّنْ فَوْقِكُمْ أَوْ مِنْ تَحْتِ أَرْجُلِكُمْ أَوْ يَلْبَسَكُمْ شِيعًا وَيُذِيقَ بَعْضَكُمْ بَأْسَ بَعْضٍ أَنْظُرْ كَيْفَ نُصَرِّفُ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَفْقَهُونَ

Say (O Muhammad), “It is He who has the power to send punishment upon you—from above or from beneath your feet—or to divide you into factions and let some of you taste the violence of others.” Observe how We explain Our signs repeatedly so that they may understand.

Asa does not merely discuss divine punishment in theological terms, but connects it to social injustice, human rights violations, and the authoritarian practices of Soeharto’s regime—a direct critique of the political structure of his time. This interpretation demonstrates how the Qur’an is employed to correct power that deviates from Qur’anic ethical values.

Empirical analysis of *Al-Qur’an dan Tafsirnya* (Ministry of Religious Affairs) reveals that Islah Gusmian’s category of *silent tafsir* operates through a mechanism of depoliticizing Qur’anic verses. This is clearly evident in the interpretation of QS. al-Nisā’ [4]: 59, where the Kemenag team reduces the meaning of *ulī al-amr* to formal governmental authority without including strict ethical-normative prerequisites for those in power. This strategy effectively

²⁸ Lukman, *The Official Indonesian Qur’an Translation*.

²⁹ Bakri Syahid, *Tafsir al-Huda: Tafsir Quran Basa Jawi*, (Yogyakarta: Bagfus Arafah, 1979).

constructs an “absolute theology of obedience,” functioning as a pillar of national stability under the hegemony of the New Order.

On the other hand, *Al-Huda* by Bakri Syahid presents a phenomenon that goes beyond the category of *cosmetic tafsir*. This study finds the presence of political linguistics practices, in which the exegete extensively incorporates New Order ideology into the exegetical text. The use of terms such as “Development” (*Pembangunan*) and “Just and Prosperous Welfare” (*Kesejahteraan Adil-Makmur*)—central slogans of Soeharto’s regime—as equivalents of Qur’anic values indicates that tafsir is not merely passive (*silent*), but actively functions as an instrument of the regime’s political language. This finding confirms that during the New Order era, the authority of the Qur’anic text was deliberately drawn into the orbit of bureaucracy to normalize power discourse at the local level.

Beyond Gusmian’s Typology: Hybrid Paradigms and the Negotiation of Meaning in Political Tafsir

The typology of political tafsir formulated by Islah Gusmian—which maps interpretive tendencies along an accommodative spectrum (*tafsir bungkam/gincu*), critical, and resistive—provides an important foundation for understanding the relationship between tafsir and power in Indonesia, particularly during the New Order.³⁰ This framework successfully demonstrates that tafsir is never free from socio-political interests, and that the production of religious meaning is always embedded within networks of power relations.³¹ However, epistemologically, this typology still operates within a relatively static classificatory logic, in which a tafsir work tends to be placed within a single dominant category. While useful for initial classification, this model is insufficient to explain the practical dynamics of tafsir, which are situational, adaptive, and discursively layered.

The findings of this study indicate that the relationship between tafsir and politics does not always move linearly within a single, consistent ideological position. Instead, it reflects what may be termed a hybrid paradigm—a situation in which a single actor, institution, or exegetical tradition may articulate ethical critique of the state on certain issues (such as structural injustice, corruption, or human rights violations), while simultaneously adopting an accommodative stance toward the state on other issues (such as national stability, religious moderation, or development agendas). This pattern suggests that political tafsir operates through mechanisms of issue selection and contextual differentiation, rather than through total opposition or complete legitimation.

Theoretically, this finding aligns with the relational approach to power developed by Michel Foucault, who conceptualizes power not as a singular possession, but as a productive

³⁰ Islah Gusmian, *Khazanah Tafsir Indonesia: Dari Hermeneutika Hingga Ideologi* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2013); Islah Gusmian, “Tafsir Al-Qur’an Dan Kekuasaan Di Indonesia: Peneguhan Politik Identitas Di Ruang Publik Virtual,” *Maghza: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur’an Dan Tafsir* 4, no. 1 (2019): 17, <https://doi.org/10.24090/maghza.v4i1.2754>.

³¹ Taryudi Taryudi, Tatan Setiawan, “Tafsir dan Politik Kekuasaan di Indonesia”, *Jurnal Iman dan Spiritualitas* 1, no. 1 (2021), 63-70. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jis.v1i1.11483>.

and dispersed network of relations.³² Within this framework, tafsir functions not only as a tool of legitimation or resistance, but also as a site of discursive production that is continuously negotiated. Similarly, from the perspective of hegemony articulated by Antonio Gramsci, political dominance operates through cultural consensus and moral-intellectual articulation.³³ Political tafsir, in this sense, can be understood as a field of hegemonic articulation as well as a potential site of counter-hegemony, depending on the surrounding social configuration.

Furthermore, the concept of hybridity intersects with the idea of “multiple modernities”³⁴ in contemporary Islamic studies and with approaches to fluid religious authority within the Muslim public sphere.³⁵ In the Indonesian context—as a democratic Muslim-majority nation outside the Middle East—tafsir does not operate within a binary opposition between a secular state and religious authority, but rather within a more complex space of negotiation, where religious actors participate in the co-production of national discourse and public morality.

Thus, the hybridity of tafsir identified in this study should not be reduced to theological inconsistency or opportunistic pragmatism. Rather, it reflects a negotiation of meaning, a process in which the sacred text, socio-political interests, historical memory, and the ethical considerations of the exegete interact to produce contextually grounded positions. In this framework, political tafsir is not a fixed ideological stance, but a discursive practice that moves within a spectrum of strategic adaptation.

The main contribution of this article lies in shifting the paradigm from a normative-static typology toward a relational-dynamic approach in the study of political tafsir. While Gusman’s typology helps map general tendencies within a particular period, the hybrid-negotiative approach proposed here explains how a single tafsir work or actor can move across categories depending on the issue, context, and political pressures encountered. Thus, this article does not merely confirm Gusman’s framework, but extends it through internal differentiation and analysis of discursive strategies.

More broadly, this finding enriches the global scholarship on tafsir and politics, traditionally focused on Middle Eastern contexts,³⁶ by offering Indonesia as an important laboratory for examining the interaction between Islam, democracy, and the modern nation-state. Political tafsir in Indonesia demonstrates that the relationship between religion and the state does not always operate through ideological antagonism, but rather through dynamic

³² Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

³³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

³⁴ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities,” *Daedalus*, 2000, 29.

³⁵ Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson, *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia*, ed. Princeton University Press (Princeton, 2011).

³⁶ Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2021); Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity’s Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

patterns of coexistence and negotiation. It is here that the empirical novelty of this article lies: political tafsir is not only an arena of legitimation or resistance, but also a space of hybridization of meaning within ever-evolving configurations of power.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the relationship between Qur'anic exegesis (tafsir) and political power during the New Order cannot be simply understood as either affirmative or oppositional. Analysis of *Al-Qur'an dan Tafsirnya* (Ministry of Religious Affairs), *Al-Huda* by Bakri Syahid, and *Dalam Cahaya Al-Qur'an* by Syu'bah Asa reveals that tafsir operates across a spectrum of responses to power, ranging from strategies of depoliticizing Qur'anic verses that support political stability, the inculturation of state ideological language into religious discourse, to the articulation of ethical critiques of authoritarian practices. These findings affirm that tafsir constitutes a discursive arena in which the normative message of the Qur'an interacts with the social position of the exegete, institutional relations with the state, and structural pressures that shape the hermeneutical horizon within a particular historical period.

Theoretically, this study extends the typology of political tafsir proposed by Islah Gusmian by demonstrating that exegetical practices within repressive political contexts are often hybrid and negotiative in nature. Thus, tafsir is more appropriately understood as a discursive practice that operates within dynamic networks of power relations, rather than as a fixed ideological position. These findings carry methodological implications for contemporary tafsir studies, particularly the importance of integrating textual analysis with contextual approaches that take into account historical factors, power structures, and the social position of the exegete within the religious public sphere. Through such an approach, tafsir can be understood not only as an activity of textual interpretation, but also as a social practice that contributes to the formation of legitimation, negotiation, and critique of power.

For future research, studies on political tafsir in Indonesia may be further developed by expanding the scope of analysis to include works from diverse intellectual traditions, conducting comparative studies between tafsir of the New Order era and the Reformasi period, and examining the production and contestation of tafsir within the digital public sphere. Such efforts are expected to enrich the development of Qur'anic studies in a more interdisciplinary direction by situating tafsir within the dynamic relationship between revelation, knowledge, and power in contemporary Muslim societies.

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