DISRUPTIVE RELIGION AND ETHICAL OPPOSITION: THE FORCE OF MORAL AUTHORITY IN INDONESIA'S DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

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ABSTRACT. This article argues that democratic consolidation in Indonesia cannot be explained solely through the performance of formal institutions. By foregrounding ethical opposition as a missing variable in dominant consolidation theories, it shows that democracy has also been sustained by a normative infrastructure that legitimizes critique beyond institutional arenas. Based on qualitative historical analysis of Abdurrahman Wahid's and Ahmad Syafii Maarif's oppositional practices under the New Order and in the post-Reformasi period, the article finds that moral authority enabled non-institutional opposition to constrain state power, normalize dissent, and protect democratic quality. While both figures articulated a corrective and non-subversive mode of opposition, they operated through different mechanisms: Wahid's opposition was embedded in organizational networks that generated more direct institutional effects, whereas Syafii Maarif's opposition worked primarily through discursive and normative interventions shaping the moral boundaries of democratic politics. Using the lens of disruptive religion, the article shows that religion functioned not as a political ideology but as a source of moral legitimacy compatible with democratic stability

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia's political experience suggests that opposition to power has not always been articulated through formal state institutions (Feillard, 1999; Hefner and Bagir, eds., 2021). During Suharto's New Order, when parliamentary opposition was curtailed and political parties were tightly regulated, critical voices against the state were more likely to emerge from civil society, expressed through moral, religious, and cultural idioms rather than institutional channels (Feillard, 1999; Hefner, 2000). In such a context, opposition was not conceived as electoral rivalry or a direct struggle for political office, but as an ethical corrective aimed at restraining a state that demanded loyalty and conformity (Smith, 1996; O'Donnell, 1998; Levitsky and Way, 2024). This mode of opposition generated a durable tradition of non-institutional critique that outlived the authoritarian regime itself.

Yet much of the existing literature treats this form of opposition primarily as a historically contingent response to authoritarian constraints, rather than as a constitutive element of democratic consolidation itself. As a result, the analytical focus remains skewed toward institutional performance, while the normative and ethical foundations that sustain democratic restraint beyond formal arenas remain under-theorized. This analytical bias becomes especially visible when examining Indonesia's post-authoritarian trajectory, where democratic institutions expanded but meaningful opposition did not necessarily follow the same path.

Following the democratic transition of 1998, Indonesia achieved notable progress in procedural terms, yet institutionalized opposition did not automatically consolidate (Slater, 2018). The prevalence of oversized governing coalitions, the pragmatic orientation of political parties, and the declining effectiveness of parliamentary oversight have once again displaced critical engagement with power beyond formal state arenas. In this setting, the earlier tradition of non-institutional critique did not disappear; instead, it reasserted itself as formal mechanisms of opposition weakened. This condition produces a familiar democratic paradox: elections function regularly, but mechanisms of democratic correction remain weak. Under these circumstances, normative opposition—rooted in moral authority, social legitimacy, and ethical critique—re-emerges as an important, if often overlooked, pillar of democratic resilience (Smith, 1996).

Much of the literature on democratic consolidation in Indonesia prioritizes institutional indicators, including competitive elections, party system institutionalization, and the presence of parliamentary opposition (Levitsky and Way, 2010; Ishiyama, 2021; Bernhard et al., 2019). This emphasis reflects a broader trend in democratic studies that views consolidation primarily as the stabilization of democratic rules and political competition. While analytically useful, such an approach tends to

understate the normative and cultural foundations upon which democratic practices ultimately rest—especially in post-authoritarian societies where civil society may be comparatively vibrant, but political institutions remain fragile (Almond and Verba, 1963; Inglehart, 1997; Norris and Inglehart, 2004). As a result, the persistence of ethical, norm-based opposition—shaped under authoritarian constraints and instrumental in cultivating democratic dispositions—has received insufficient analytical attention. Consequently, the persistence of ethical, norm-based opposition—shaped under authoritarian constraints and reactivated in the post-transition period—has received insufficient analytical attention. The contribution of civil society actors in sustaining norms of criticism toward power thus remains only partially incorporated into prevailing accounts of democratic consolidation.

This article addresses the central question, how does ethical opposition grounded in moral and religious authority contribute to democratic consolidation in Indonesia when institutional opposition weakens? This article advances the argument that ethical opposition constitutes a crucial, though often neglected, component of democratic consolidation in Indonesia, both before and after the 1998 transition. By tracing the practices of moral critique articulated by Abdurrahman Wahid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif from the late New Order period through the post-Reformasi era, the article shows how non-institutional opposition can operate as a non-subversive mechanism of democratic correction. Rather than destabilizing the political order, ethical opposition helps normalize dissent, constrain executive overreach, and embed substantive democratic values within Indonesia's public sphere (Feillard, 1999; Smith, 1999; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019).

Within this analytical framework, Abdurrahman Wahid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif are treated less as Islamic political theorists than as civil society actors who consistently practiced ethical opposition across different political regimes. From the New Order to the post-Reformasi period, both figures occupied a distinctive public role, mobilizing moral authority, religious legitimacy, and ethical language to critique power without falling into either political loyalism or overtly confrontational opposition. Their interventions were not intended to displace regimes or capture state power, but to limit political absolutism, normalize dissent, and reaffirm the moral accountability of rulers within a democratic setting.

Wahid and Maarif are selected as critical cases for examining the role of ethical opposition in democratic consolidation because they illuminate a causal mechanism that remains underexplored in institutionalist accounts of democracy. They represent the two major currents of Indonesian Islam—traditionalism and modernism—each anchored in broad social constituencies and endowed with relatively autonomous moral authority outside the state. This positioning allowed both figures to articulate sustained criticism of power without reliance on electoral competition or formal political office, thereby highlighting how ethical opposition can persist even when institutional channels are constrained or co-opted.

At the same time, Wahid and Maarif also function as typical cases of ethical opposition operating through moral authority and religious legitimacy in a Muslim-majority society. Their practices exemplify a broader pattern in which civil society actors deploy religious and ethical idioms to sustain criticism toward power without challenging the democratic order itself. The analytical leverage of focusing on these two cases lies not in empirical generalization to all forms of opposition in Indonesia, but in conceptual generalization: namely, in demonstrating how ethical opposition can operate as a durable normative infrastructure that undergirds democratic consolidation across different political contexts.

The continuity of Wahid's and Maarif's critical engagement across regimes—from authoritarianism to democracy—is particularly significant in this regard. It allows ethical opposition to be analyzed not merely as a reactive response to procedural democratization, but as a normative tradition that precedes, accompanies, and sustains democratic consolidation. In this sense, the two figures are treated not simply as individual actors, but as analytically representative cases of civil society-based ethical opposition under shifting political conditions.

By centering on the practices of ethical opposition advanced by these two actors, this article offers an alternative perspective on democratic consolidation in Indonesia. Consolidation is approached not only as the stable functioning of democratic institutions, but also as a process of normative internalization through which criticism of power remains legitimate, socially accepted, and insulated from being framed as a threat to the political system. Within this framework, ethical opposition functions as a form of democratic normative infrastructure, sustaining democratic governance in contexts where institutional opposition is weakened or co-opted.

Finally, this article contributes to the literature on democratic consolidation by conceptualizing

ethical opposition as a normative infrastructure that has received limited attention in studies of Indonesian politics. By positioning ethical opposition as an integral component of democratic consolidation, the article challenges assumptions that draw a sharp boundary between religion and democracy, demonstrating instead how religious authority can serve as a source of critical legitimacy that strengthens, rather than undermines, democratic practice.

METHOD

This article adopts a qualitative approach using an interpretive case study design to examine the role of ethical opposition in Indonesia's process of democratic consolidation. This approach is appropriate because the analysis does not seek to measure institutional indicators of democracy, but rather to trace the practices, meanings, and functions of moral critique directed at power by civil society actors across political regimes (George and Bennett, 2005; Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2014). A qualitative design allows for closer engagement with the normative and cultural dimensions of opposition that are often overlooked by quantitative or institutionalist approaches to democracy (Habermas, 1997; O'Donnell, 1994; Linz and Stepan, 1996).

The empirical material is drawn from a wide range of documentary sources, including archival records, primary texts, and secondary materials related to the public criticism articulated by Abdurrahman Wahid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif. The primary sources consist of writings, speeches, interviews, public statements, and political positions taken by both figures on issues of state power from the New Order period through the post-Reformasi era. These materials are supplemented by media coverage and scholarly literature to situate their practices of ethical opposition within broader political contexts (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003).

Case selection follows an analytical rather than a statistically representative logic. Abdurrahman Wahid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif are treated as critical cases that also display typical features of non-institutional ethical opposition in Indonesia, allowing for conceptual rather than empirical generalization (George and Bennett, 2005). As civil society actors endowed with strong moral authority and religious legitimacy, their practices of critique provide analytically salient material for examining how ethics-based opposition can function as a mechanism of democratic correction under conditions in which institutional opposition is constrained or co-opted.

Data analysis proceeds through a thematic and interpretive reading of the empirical materials, with particular attention to the political contexts in which critiques were articulated, the normative justifications invoked, and the practical effects of these interventions in constraining power and normalizing dissent within democratic life (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Yanow, 2000). Ethical opposition is identified not merely on the basis of rhetorical expression, but as a patterned set of practices that recur across time and political settings. These practices include sustained public critique directed at state authority, the use of moral and religious reasoning to legitimate dissent, deliberate avoidance of power-seeking or regime-delegitimating strategies, and continuity of critical engagement across regime changes.

To address counter-evidence, the analysis systematically considers instances in which Wahid's and Maarif's interventions appeared ambiguous, conciliatory, or aligned with political authority. Such instances are examined alongside moments of explicit critique in order to assess variation in their oppositional practices and to avoid selective inference. Rather than treating ethical opposition as a constant or uniform stance, the analysis evaluates how and under what conditions moral critique was activated, muted, or recalibrated, thereby strengthening the interpretive robustness of the findings.

Within this framework, ethical opposition is treated as an analytical category rather than as a normative doctrine or theological concept. To sharpen this conceptualization, the article draws on Christian Smith's notion of disruptive religion, which understands religion as a moral force capable of unsettling established social and political arrangements through ethical critique of injustice and abuse of power (Smith, 1996). This perspective allows the article to conceptualize religion and morality not as ideological variables or sources of political stabilization, but as sources of corrective legitimacy within the broader process of democratic consolidation (Casanova, 1994; Tilly, 2007).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Ethical Opposition in Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation is commonly understood as a condition in which democracy not only endures procedurally but is also widely accepted as the sole legitimate framework for political life. In such a condition, no significant political actor seeks to replace the democratic system with a non-democratic alternative, while core institutions—such as elections, political parties, legislatures, and

the judiciary—operate in a stable and predictable manner (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Diamond, 1999). Consolidation, therefore, is not limited to the continuity of electoral procedures, but also entails the normative acceptance of democracy as the shared rules of the political game.

However, procedural endurance does not automatically generate effective mechanisms of democratic correction. In post-authoritarian democracies such as Indonesia, oversized governing coalitions and pervasive party pragmatism often weaken parliamentary opposition and dilute formal oversight. Under these conditions, democratic consolidation cannot rely exclusively on institutional checks embedded within the state, but also depends on society's capacity to sustain norms of criticism toward power beyond the electoral arena (O'Donnell, 1994; Diamond and Morlino, 2005). Opposition, therefore, should not be narrowly equated with party competition in parliament, but understood more broadly as encompassing non-institutional practices that function as societal constraints on political authority.

When formal mechanisms of accountability deteriorate, non-institutional opposition articulated by civil society actors can operate as a corrective force rather than a competitive one. Through public criticism, moral argumentation, and normative pressure, such opposition asserts limits on the exercise of power without seeking regime displacement or institutional capture (O'Donnell, 1998; Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006; Tilly, 2007). In this sense, ethical opposition contributes to democratic consolidation through a sequential causal process: **by** normalizing dissent as a legitimate social practice**,** it encourages restraint in the exercise of political power, which in turn fosters democratic habituation**,** whereby both rulers and citizens internalize ethical and normative constraints as an ordinary part of democratic life.

From this perspective, consolidation is not achieved merely because democratic rules are formally observed, but because criticism of power becomes socially recognized as legitimate, necessary, and non-threatening to the political system itself (Habermas, 1996; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Ethical opposition thus operates as a guardian of democratic norms, reinforcing the internalization of accountability, pluralism, and restraint beyond formal institutional arenas.

Within this process, religion can function as a source of moral legitimacy for ethical opposition without being positioned as an ideology of power or an alternative political system. Religious authority provides ethical language and social resonance that allow critiques of injustice and abuse of power to circulate widely, particularly in religious societies (Casanova, 1994; Calhoun et al., 2011). Rather than competing with democracy, religion expands the normative foundations through which democratic critique is articulated and sustained.

This understanding is consistent with the concept of *disruptive religion*, which views religion as a moral force capable of unsettling established political arrangements through ethical criticism of domination and injustice (Smith, 1996). Such disruption is neither revolutionary nor subversive, but corrective and normative, insofar as it affirms that political power remains subject to publicly defensible moral limits (Smith, 1996; Tilly, 2007).

Accordingly, democratic consolidation is best understood as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction between formal institutions and non-institutional ethical opposition. Operating through moral authority and social legitimacy, ethical opposition functions as a form of democratic normative infrastructure—one that sustains democratic governance by ensuring that the exercise of power remains continuously exposed to legitimate criticism. Within this framework, Islamic thought and tradition are not treated as alternative political models, but as sources of moral legitimacy that enable ethical opposition to operate effectively within Indonesia's public sphere.

Ethical Opposition in Political Practice
Abdurrahman Wahid: Traditionalist Opposition in Democratic Practice

In Indonesia's political history, Abdurrahman Wahid stands out as a civil society actor who consistently practiced ethical opposition across shifting configurations of power (Feillard, 1999; Barton, 1999; Latif, 2017). Under Suharto's New Order, when the state demanded political loyalty and sharply constrained open criticism, Wahid maintained a critical distance from the regime by rejecting political absolutism without resorting to direct confrontation. This stance was reflected in his sustained critiques of ideological homogenization, restrictions on civil liberties, and the state's tendency to co-opt social and religious organizations (Feillard, 1999). Analytically, this positioning illustrates a core mechanism of ethical opposition: sustaining moral distance from power while preserving social legitimacy and avoiding open regime confrontation.

One important arena of Wahid's ethical opposition concerned state–society relations involving Muslim communities and strategic public policies. His rejection of the Indonesian Association

of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI), widely perceived as closely aligned with the New Order regime, reflected his concern over the instrumentalization of religion by the state (Ridwan, 2010). Wahid viewed the symbolic proximity between Islam and political power as a threat to civil society autonomy and to religion's capacity to function as a source of moral critique. This position was not rooted in theological disagreement, but in ethical and political considerations regarding the need to preserve a critical boundary between religion and state authority. This episode illustrates ethical opposition as a mechanism for protecting the autonomy of moral authority, preventing religion from being absorbed into regime legitimation and thereby preserving its corrective function.

A similar pattern emerged in Wahid's criticism of the Muria nuclear power plant project. Here, he foregrounded humanitarian concerns, public safety, and social justice, questioning a policy-making process that marginalized public participation and underestimated social risk (Wahid, 2006). Importantly, his critique did not aim to delegitimize the state as an institution, but to correct a decision-making process that violated ethical standards of accountability and inclusion. The Muria case demonstrates ethical opposition as policy-oriented moral correction—one that constrains state action through normative reasoning rather than electoral competition or power-seeking mobilization.

Across these interventions, Wahid consistently rejected the logic of state absolutism—the assumption that political stability and development justify the suppression of criticism and civil liberties. Yet this rejection did not take the form of destructive or subversive opposition. Instead, Wahid articulated a humanistic mode of critique grounded in dialogue, tolerance, and pluralism. The recurrent mechanism across cases is the normalization of dissent as a legitimate and necessary component of democratic life, rather than as a threat to political order.

Islamic ideas and symbols in Wahid's oppositional practice functioned primarily as sources of moral legitimacy rather than as foundations for an Islamic political project. Values such as humanity, justice, and respect for human dignity were mobilized to justify ethical scrutiny of power, not to propose an alternative model of the state (Wahid, 1983, 1992, 1995, 2006**).** In this sense, Islam operated as a language of public ethics that enabled criticism of power to resonate socially while remaining insulated from accusations of political subversion.

Through these practices of ethical opposition, Wahid contributed to democratic consolidation by institutionalizing a non-institutional norm: that state power must remain open to moral evaluation from society. His trajectory demonstrates that opposition can restrain political absolutism and normalize democratic dissent without destabilizing the political order, thereby anchoring democratic consolidation in ethical practices beyond formal institutions.

Ahmad Syafii Maarif: Moral Opposition and Civic Ethics

Unlike Abdurrahman Wahid, whose intellectual roots were grounded in Islamic traditionalism, Ahmad Syafii Maarif emerged as a practitioner of ethical opposition from within Indonesia's modernist Islamic milieu. This difference in background, however, did not translate into an ideologically driven or programmatic form of opposition. Rather than articulating an alternative project of political power, Syafii Maarif consistently positioned himself as a moral critic of state conduct and elite behavior.

Across his public statements and political interventions, Syafii Maarif persistently criticized the abuse of power, political corruption, and the erosion of public ethics among political elites (Maarif, 1996, 2006, 2020). These critiques were directed not at democratic institutions per se, but at political practices that deviated from principles of justice, honesty, and moral responsibility. Analytically, this places Syafii Maarif's opposition within a corrective mode of critique—aimed at disciplining power—rather than a competitive or institutionalized opposition seeking electoral or organizational leverage.

The Islamic principle of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* served as an important ethical reference in Syafii Maarif's oppositional practice. However, it was deployed as a form of civic ethics rather than as a formal political doctrine or legalistic project (Maarif, 2020). Within this framework, religion functioned primarily as a source of moral legitimacy for critical citizenship, enabling public critique of power without advancing an agenda of state Islamization. This framing allowed Islamic moral discourse to circulate within democratic public debate while remaining detached from claims over formal political authority.

Importantly, Syafii Maarif's moral opposition was not confined to abstract commentary but was institutionalized through a set of civil-society initiatives. Through the establishment of the Pusat Studi Agama dan Peradaban (PSAP), the Maarif Institute, and his involvement in the Jaringan Intelektual Muda Muhammadiyah (JIMM), Syafii Maarif helped create organizational platforms that translated ethical critique into sustained discursive interventions. These institutions functioned as arenas for producing and disseminating narratives of liberal,

pluralist, and democratic Islam, thereby amplifying the discursive reach of his moral opposition beyond personal authority alone.

At the level of public contestation, Syafii Maarif played a visible role in opposing several high-profile political developments that he regarded as incompatible with democratic principles and religious freedom. He publicly led resistance to the proposed Blasphemy Bill (RUU Penistaan Agama) in 2003, arguing that it threatened freedom of religion and risked empowering moral majoritarianism. Similarly, during the 2016 mobilization surrounding the Aksi 212 protests, Syafii Maarif—together with Muhammadiyah—openly rejected the movement, framing it as a form of religious populism that endangered minority rights and risked normalizing coercive religious politics. These interventions, including formal press conferences and public statements, constituted deliberate efforts to counter dominant mobilizational narratives within the Muslim public sphere.

In this sense, the primary effects of Syafii Maarif's opposition were discursive rather than institutional. His critiques did not result in direct policy reversals or the establishment of new regulatory frameworks. However, they contributed to shaping public debates by legitimizing alternative interpretations of Islam that emphasized pluralism, restraint, and ethical accountability. His symbolic actions—such as publicly visiting and expressing solidarity with Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok) following his detention for blasphemy—also carried behavioral significance, signaling moral boundaries against the stigmatization of religious and ethnic minorities, even when such positions entailed social and political costs.

Syafii Maarif further reinforced this ethical stance through interfaith engagement, regularly convening and participating in dialogues with religious leaders from diverse traditions. These initiatives sought to normalize cooperation across religious boundaries and to reassert interreligious dialogue as a civic practice compatible with democratic citizenship. While these efforts did not fundamentally alter institutional power relations, they contributed to sustaining a counter-public committed to pluralism and non-violence.

Syafii Maarif also framed democracy as a moral responsibility of citizens, not merely as a procedural arrangement managed by political elites. For him, democracy required moral courage: the willingness to speak out, defend public integrity, and resist ethical compromises justified in the name of political pragmatism or stability (Maarif, 2020). Yet,

the impact of this stance remained uneven. Lacking a structured political vehicle, his moral authority depended heavily on persuasion, reputation, and symbolic leadership rather than on mechanisms capable of enforcing compliance or coordination among elites.

In this sense, Islamic thought in Syafii Maarif's oppositional practice did not crystallize into a coherent political theory or an alternative normative system to democracy. Instead, Islam functioned as an ethical resource for symbolically disciplining power and reaffirming moral boundaries in political life. The contribution of this moral opposition lies less in institutional transformation than in reinforcing democratic norms that conceptualize political authority as a trust (*amanah*) subject to ongoing public scrutiny.

Through this form of moral opposition and civic ethics, Syafii Maarif contributed to the normative consolidation of Indonesia's democracy by sustaining a critical public discourse on ethics, pluralism, and accountability. His trajectory illustrates both the potential and the limits of moral opposition: while it can generate significant discursive and symbolic effects—and occasionally shape civic behavior—it remains constrained in its capacity to produce durable institutional change without complementary political or organizational power.

Ethical Opposition as the Normative Infrastructure of Democratic Consolidation

Empirical findings from the oppositional practices of Abdurrahman Wahid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif suggest that opposition need not operate through formal state institutions to contribute meaningfully to democratic consolidation. In the Indonesian context—where parliamentary opposition is frequently weakened by oversized governing coalitions and elite pragmatism—ethical opposition functions as a mechanism of democratic correction outside institutional arenas. This form of opposition does not aim to capture state power or challenge the legitimacy of the democratic system, but rather to ensure that the exercise of power remains within publicly defensible normative boundaries (Linz and Stepan, 1996; Diamond, 2005).

Importantly, the cases of Wahid and Syafii reveal that ethical opposition does not operate through a single or uniform pathway. Instead, it is exercised through distinct and differentiated mechanisms shaped by actors' social locations, intellectual traditions, and modes of engagement with the public sphere. While both figures mobilized moral and religious authority to discipline power,

they did so through plural modalities of ethical opposition—ranging from dialogical critique and institutional boundary-setting to moral witnessing and public shaming—allowing for conceptual generalization without assuming empirical uniformity.

Ethical opposition operates as a balancing mechanism that guards democracy against two equally problematic extremes: uncritical political loyalism and destructive opposition. Excessive loyalism dulls corrective oversight and creates permissive conditions for electoral authoritarianism, while destructive opposition risks delegitimizing democratic institutions and generating political instability (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). Ethical opposition offers an alternative path by sustaining sharp criticism of abuses of power while simultaneously affirming democracy as the shared political framework (Tilly, 2007).

The significance of ethical opposition becomes particularly evident under conditions in which parliaments weaken, broad coalitions dominate political competition, and democracy is reduced to electoral procedures. In such settings, formal checks and balances often operate imperfectly, placing democratic consolidation at risk of normative stagnation despite procedural stability (Diamond, 2005; Levitsky and Way, 2010). Ethical opposition fills this gap by providing a source of critical legitimacy that does not depend on formal office or electoral competition, but on moral authority and social legitimacy rooted in civil society. In this sense, ethical opposition constitutes a form of societal accountability—mechanisms through which society holds the state accountable via normative pressure and public critique (O'Donnell, 1998; Peruzzotti and Smulovitz, 2006). Rather than substituting for institutional accountability, this form of opposition complements it, particularly when formal institutions are weakened or co-opted.

One of the central contributions of ethical opposition to democratic consolidation lies in its capacity to normalize criticism of power. Consistent practices of ethical opposition grounded in moral legitimacy help transform criticism from a perceived threat to stability into a socially accepted and necessary component of democratic life. Conceptually, this process operates through a sequential mechanism: the normalization of dissent fosters restraint on power, which in turn cultivates democratic habituation—habitual acceptance of critique as part of legitimate governance (Habermas, 1996; Diamond and Morlino, 2005; Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018).

Within this framework, Abdurrahman Wahid's—then a leading figure within Nahdlatul Ulama—interventions exemplify a dialogical and boundary-setting modality of ethical opposition. He ustained critique of *Dwifungsi ABRI* was normatively defensible in theory, yet consistently problematic in practice (Wahid, 1983, 1999). Wahid observed that military involvement extended far beyond security affairs into civilian domains, including local educational organizations such as the Parents–Teachers Association (*Persatuan Orang Tua Murid dan Guru*). In his view, such intrusion undermined grassroots initiative and discouraged civic participation, as communities came to perceive alternative forms of action as futile (Wahid, 1999). This critique exemplifies how ethical opposition operates not by rejecting state authority outright, but by identifying normative transgressions that erode democratic agency from below.

For Abdurrahman Wahid, the doctrine of *Dwifungsi ABRI* systematically marginalized the role of civil society. In his view, civil society possessed the capacity to address social problems without allowing them to become protracted, yet such capacity was eroded when military authority penetrated civilian domains. Wahid argued that a more balanced civil–military relationship could only be achieved if the military refrained from carrying its corporate identity into the civilian sphere. Drawing on comparative examples, he noted that in several countries civilian ministers do not seek approval from their military counterparts in making public decisions. Not all public affairs, he insisted, should be subordinated to military logic, as was the case under Soeharto's rule.

Wahid rejected the notion of any privileged status for the military, including in electoral politics. Former military officers, he argued, may legitimately enter parliament, but only by competing on equal footing with civilian candidates—mobilizing social and organizational resources rather than relying on institutional or symbolic advantages. Public offices outside the military sphere, in his formulation, constitute an open arena accessible to all citizens, provided they are contested through fair procedures and healthy competition (Wahid 1999).

Despite his sustained critique of *Dwifungsi ABRI*, Wahid did not dismiss the importance of the military in nation-building. On the contrary, he regarded the military as a vital component of state development, and therefore insisted that criticism of military dominance be carefully calibrated. He cautioned that some reformist demands—such as the removal of military officers from executive posts including director generals, governors, and

district heads—were often articulated in ways that inadvertently questioned broader development paradigms rather than targeting the specific problem of military overreach (Wahid 2000). This position reflects a distinctive strand of traditionalist Islamic thought in Wahid's intellectual outlook, one that favors incremental and gradual social change over radical rupture.

Beyond civil–military relations, Wahid consistently criticized what he viewed as unconstitutional practices in the state's instrumentalization of religion. Under the Soeharto regime, Islam—alongside the military—had become an unavoidable force in socio-political life. Yet state policies such as the expansion of religious courts and the broadcasting of Arabic-language programs on national television were, in Wahid's assessment, largely symbolic gestures designed to placate Muslim constituencies without addressing their substantive implications. While such measures might generate short-term satisfaction, Wahid argued that the privileging of Muslim judges within the religious court system raised discriminatory constitutional concerns. Similarly, he regarded Arabic-language television programs as devoid of meaningful substance in terms of religious or civic development (Wahid 2010).

Another recurring object of Wahid's critique was the formalization of religion through state-sponsored religious institutions, notably the Indonesian Council of Ulama (MUI) and, later, the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI). For Wahid, religion in processes of social change should function as a supplementary force, providing ethical resources rather than determining political trajectories. Social development, he maintained, follows its own worldly logic; religion exerts influence only insofar as society is receptive to it. When religion assumes a determinative role, it becomes worldly and detached from its moral essence. Such a process, Wahid warned, risks turning religion into a repressive force deployed to preserve its own authority (Wahid 2007).

Wahid's oppositional stance was articulated not only through his writings but also through public statements and concrete acts of dissent. His rejection of the Muria nuclear power plant project (*Kompas*, 1994) and his criticisms of state institutions such as the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) during the Reformasi period exemplify this pattern. These interventions illustrate how Wahid normalized public criticism at moments when political power sought to narrow the public sphere: criticism was framed not as a threat to the state, but as a necessary public correction to the abuse of power.

As a result, Wahid's ethical opposition often generated direct institutional and behavioral effects. His rejection of state-sponsored religious projects such as ICMI, as well as his criticism of major policy initiatives like the Muria nuclear power plant, did not merely shape public discourse but actively constrained policy options and reasserted the autonomy of civil society. Ethical opposition, in this configuration, operated as a corrective intervention within political structures, limiting state absolutism while avoiding systemic destabilization. Over time, these practices contributed to the normalization of non-institutional criticism as a legitimate and recurring component of democratic life.

More broadly, ethical opposition plays a crucial role in preventing the depoliticization of citizens. When representative institutions fail to perform their oversight functions effectively, citizens risk withdrawing from political life and perceiving democracy as an exclusive domain of political elites. This condition has been identified as a central challenge of electoral democracy in many post-transition contexts (O'Donnell, 1994; Tilly, 2007). Through practices of ethical opposition, civil society actors provide an ethical vocabulary and normative reference points that enable citizens to remain politically engaged—not through electoral mobilization, but through critical citizenship and moral participation in the public sphere (Peruzzotti & Smulovitz, 2006).

In this regard, Ahmad Syafii Maarif consistently articulated moral critiques with tangible public resonance against modern political elites. Maarif's ethical opposition operated primarily through a discursive–normative mechanism. Emerging from the modernist Islamic milieu and lacking direct control over mass organizations comparable to NU, Syafii exercised moral authority largely through public speech, symbolic gestures, and sustained discursive interventions. His critiques were articulated from outside the circuits of power, relying on personal credibility, intellectual authority, and ethical consistency rather than institutional leverage.

He openly criticized the inconsistency of elite support for the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), which he regarded as one of the clearest institutional legacies of the Reformasi era in terms of exercising oversight over state power. For Syafii, the weakening of the KPK by the state, the police, and parliament constituted a profound injury to public trust. In positioning himself as an independent religious authority, he attributed the deterioration of state institutions to the entrenchment of what he termed "mafias" operating within key sectors

of governance—ranging from mining and legal institutions to civil service recruitment and vehicle registration. As long as public institutions remain captured by such networks, he argued, they cannot function as vehicles of statesmanship or serve the public interest (Maarif, 2020).

Syafii extended his critique to members of parliament, whom he believed should meet basic standards of intellectual competence and moral sensitivity. Legislators who failed to meet these criteria he derisively labeled *politikus sumbu pendek*—short-fused politicians—whose impulsiveness and lack of reflection undermine democratic deliberation (Maarif, 2020). Yet Syafii remained cautiously optimistic, arguing that the consolidation of a robust democratic system need not take decades, provided political institutions are staffed by leaders who are both intellectually capable and ethically responsive. These critiques thus functioned not merely as expressions of moral concern, but as efforts to sustain public engagement with questions of democratic quality and state accountability beyond electoral competition.

This stance was reinforced by Syafii Maarif's sustained public interventions addressing the moral regression of Indonesia's reform trajectory, including his outspoken criticism of structural corruption, which he argued had gradually obscured the original aspirations of Reformasi. Such interventions constitute a form of moral witnessing aimed at preventing citizens from losing faith in democracy due to elite practices that systematically deviate from normative standards. In *Indonesia di Ambang Senja*, for example, Syafii depicted national decay as originating from the centers of power. He traced the roots of the 1997 crisis to the New Order's persistent concealment of corruption scandals, particularly within Pertamina, arguing that the normalization of impunity under Soeharto laid the groundwork for systemic collapse. During the Reformasi period, Syafii continued to direct sharp criticism at successive leaders, including Presidents B.J. Habibie and Abdurrahman Wahid. Habibie, in his assessment, exhibited an unwillingness to listen to dissenting views—an attitude incompatible with democratic leadership (Maarif, 2020).

Syafii's critiques consistently revolved around moral criteria as benchmarks for evaluating the exercise of power. Consequently, his interventions were explicit and uncompromising on issues such as the rule of law, democratization, clean and good governance, regional autonomy, and the repositioning of the military. He described the amoral condition of national leadership as a "legacy disease crystallized in the formula of corruption, collusion, and nepotism (KKN)" (Maarif, 2020). This pathology, which he likened to elite greed, did not dissipate with the fall of authoritarianism but instead diffused into various local contexts during the Reformasi era. For Syafii, therefore, Reformasi marked not the culmination, but merely one stage in an ongoing democratic struggle.

Syafii further emphasized that moral decay among political leaders produces long-lasting and cumulative damage. Under such conditions, he argued, Indonesia's political configuration would require considerable time to stabilize. He expressed deep skepticism toward the commitment of politicians who ought to function as statesmen capable of safeguarding the nation. In this sense, Syafii viewed Indonesia as a fragile polity in need of rescue—far removed from the ideal democratic state he envisioned. To move beyond this condition, he maintained, the government must actively facilitate freedom across multiple domains, including liberating academic institutions from the constraints of amoral political intervention.

Syafii's oppositional stance becomes especially clear in his typology of Indonesian leadership, which distinguishes between power-oriented (undesirable) and moral (ideal) leaders. He classified Sukarno and Soeharto as leaders driven primarily by power, whereas figures such as Mohammad Hatta and A.H. Nasution exemplified moral leadership. Power-oriented leadership, in his view, inevitably leads the nation toward disaster, marginalizing moral leaders through amoral practices. For this reason, Syafii insisted that political authority must rest upon firm moral foundations. Power devoid of moral restraint, he warned, is inherently destructive. The moral strength of the nation, he concluded, must never surrender to the machinery of power (Maarif, 2020).

The distinct mechanisms of ethical opposition among Wahid dan Maarif have important implications for democratic consolidation. Wahid's embedded opposition contributed to consolidation by fostering the habituation of dissent—the routinization of criticism as a socially accepted practice embedded in civil society institutions. Syafii's discursive opposition, by contrast, reinforced consolidation by setting moral boundaries for democratic politics, clarifying that the abuse of power, majoritarian intolerance, and ethical compromise are incompatible with democratic citizenship even when procedurally justified.

Taken together, these differentiated mechanisms demonstrate that ethical opposition contributes to democratic consolidation not through a single causal channel, but through plural and complementary

pathways**.** Whether exercised through dialogical critique, moral witnessing, or civic ethics, ethical opposition sustains democratic life by keeping power exposed to normative scrutiny and by habituating citizens to regard dissent as a legitimate—and necessary—feature of democracy.

Disruptive Religion: The Moral Legitimacy for Ethical Opposition

The role of religion in ethical opposition, as practiced by Abdurrahman Wahid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif, reinforces the normative dimension of this mechanism without transforming it into an ideological project. Religion functions primarily as a source of moral legitimacy that enables criticism of power to resonate broadly within society, particularly in religious contexts. This approach aligns with the conceptual frameworks of *public religion* and *disruptive religion*, which view religion as a moral force capable of interrupting established power structures through ethical critiques of injustice and political domination (Casanova, 1994; Smith, 1996). Within this framework, religion is understood not as a revolutionary force but as a corrective one—its disruptive capacity lies precisely in its contribution to the strengthening of democratic norms rather than their subversion (Smith, 1996).

The empirical findings of this study demonstrate that both Wahid and Maarif consistently employed moral-religious references to justify their critical engagement with the state and political elites. Importantly, such justifications were not directed toward the Islamization of public policy or the imposition of religious norms over state law. Instead, religion was mobilized to underscore the moral limits of political authority—asserting that political stability, economic development, or electoral legitimacy cannot justify the neglect of justice, human dignity, and public accountability. In this sense, religion operates as a medium of ethical correction rather than as a source of power claims.

In Abdurrahman Wahid's oppositional practice, religion was used to constrain absolutist claims of the state, particularly during the New Order period when stability and development served as dominant justifications for restricting criticism. One of the clearest illustrations is Wahid's opposition to the proposed nuclear power plant (PLTN) in Mount Muria. His rejection was not grounded in ideological hostility toward the state, but rather in arguments concerning public welfare (*maslahah 'ammah*) and legal sovereignty. Wahid insisted that state policies must be evaluated based on their implications for public safety, freedom of expression, and legal

justice, rather than solely on technocratic calculations of development (Wahid, 2006).

This stance illustrates how religion was operationalized as a source of legitimacy for critique that was disruptive yet fundamentally corrective. As a representative of Indonesia's traditionalist Muslim subculture and the broader *ulama* community, Wahid frequently grounded his arguments in the Qur'an, Hadith, and classical Islamic jurisprudence, while interpreting these sources contextually. For instance, in several of his writings, Wahid invoked Qur'an 2:208 (*udkhulū fī al-silm kāffah*—"enter into Islam [peace] wholly") to articulate his Islamic political position (Wahid, 1983, 2007). He explicitly rejected interpretations that equated this verse with the formalization of religion within the state. Wahid questioned why the Qur'an would mandate non-organizational religious obligations for Muslims if it simultaneously required the institutionalization of religion as a state system.

Wahid further elaborated five criteria for being a "good Muslim," including in the political sphere: adherence to the principles of faith, full observance of Islamic rituals, assistance to those in need (such as relatives, the poor, and orphans), commitment to professionalism, and patience in the face of hardship and adversity (Wahid, 2007). He framed these injunctions as a form of "professional fidelity," borrowing from Qur'an 2:177—*"those who fulfill their promises when they make them"* (*wa al-mūfūna bi 'ahdihim idzā 'āhadū*).

Drawing on this interpretation, Wahid pointed out that during the 1935 NU Congress in Banjarmasin, Indonesian *ulama* declared resistance against the non-Muslim Dutch colonial government as obligatory—not to establish an Islamic state, but to safeguard the freedom of Muslims to practice Islam in everyday life (Wahid, 1999). Because the core issue was not the formalization of religion, Wahid argued that it was unproblematic for Muslims to channel their political aspirations through a variety of institutions, including non-religious ones. His political position on Islam's role in society and the state was thus unambiguous: Muslims need not be confined to a single Islamic institution, but may articulate their aspirations through multiple organizational channels.

This line of thinking was clearly reflected in Wahid's establishment of the highly inclusive Forum Demokrasi, which emerged as a deliberate response to the creation of state-sponsored Islamic institutions such as the Association of Indonesian Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) under Soeharto's patronage. Rather than opposing religious expression in politics per se, Wahid sought to prevent the monopolization of

Islamic representation by state-aligned institutions—thereby preserving religion's role as a source of ethical critique rather than an extension of state power.

Abdurrahman Wahid also rejected a literal and absolutist reading of the well-known dictum on obedience to authority, *lā islām illā bi jamā'ah wa lā jamā'ata illā bi imārah wa lā imārata illā bi ṭā'ah* ("There is no Islam without community, no community without leadership, and no leadership without obedience"). In his view, many Muslims had misinterpreted this oft-cited statement attributed to 'Umar ibn al-Khattab by elevating it into a rigid political doctrine of unquestioned submission. Drawing on the intellectual tradition of Nahdlatul Ulama, Wahid traced the chain of transmission (*sanad*) of this dictum and identified its linkage to Tamīm al-Dārī. Through this exercise, he argued that 'Umar never intended the statement to function as a political injunction, but rather as a form of social safeguard.

According to Wahid, the dictum emerged in a specific historical context during 'Umar's caliphate, when displays of wealth, ostentatious housing construction, and social arrogance had begun to generate envy and social tension. These developments, Wahid argued, posed a threat to the fragile social order of the post-Islamic Arab community. The statement, therefore, was meant to prevent social fragmentation and moral decay, not to sanctify political authority or suppress dissent (Wahid, 1999).

On this basis, Wahid interpreted 'Umar's dictum as fundamentally concerned with the primacy of the rule of law and the principle of equal treatment of all citizens before the law. This interpretation deeply informed Wahid's political activism, including his opposition to the New Order government's plan to construct a nuclear power plant (PLTN) in Mount Muria, Central Java. In articulating his critique, Wahid frequently invoked the classical fiqh maxim *taṣarruf al-imām 'alā al-ra'iyyah manūṭun bi al-maṣlaḥah* ("the actions of a ruler toward his subjects are contingent upon their welfare") (Wahid, 2006).

For Wahid, *maṣlaḥah 'āmmah*—public welfare—constituted the normative benchmark against which all state actions should be evaluated. Leadership that failed to orient itself toward public welfare was, in his view, incompatible with Islamic ethical principles. Importantly, *maṣlaḥah* was not reduced to material prosperity or economic growth alone. It also encompassed freedom of expression and opinion, legal sovereignty and equality before the law, freedom of association, and the right of

citizens to seek justice. By articulating welfare in these expansive terms, Wahid positioned Islamic ethics as a moral framework for disciplining political power rather than legitimizing its domination.

By contrast, Ahmad Syafii Maarif—who represents the modernist Muslim subculture associated with Muhammadiyah—more frequently grounds his political reasoning in Qur'anic references as sources of moral inspiration. Central to his framework is Qur'an, Surah Luqman (31:17), which enjoins the observance of prayer, the practice of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*, and perseverance in the face of adversity (*min 'azmi al-umūr*). For Syafii, the phrase *min 'azmi al-umūr* signifies moral fortitude and psychological resilience, qualities that are indispensable for the ethical task of commanding what is right and forbidding what is wrong. He adopts a deliberately parsimonious definition of *amar ma'ruf* and *nahi munkar*: the former refers to what is prescribed by religion and affirmed by common sense, while the latter denotes what is prohibited by religion and rejected by rational judgment (Maarif, 2020).

This verse functions as a moral lens through which Syafii interprets Indonesia's socio-political realities. In his view, the absence of a clear moral framework leaves individuals ethically disoriented, with destructive consequences across religious, political, social, economic, legal, and cultural domains (Maarif, 2020). Syafii thus advances an understanding of religion that is fundamentally consonant with reason, within which knowledge and scientific inquiry can flourish. To reinforce this position, he invokes Qur'an, Surah al-'Ankabut (29:43), which he interprets as affirming Islam's respect for intellect and scholars (*ulama*). Conversely, ignorance finds no justification in Islam; Syafii illustrates this point through Surah al-Ma'idah (5:58), which depicts mockery of faith as a manifestation of intellectual failure rather than moral superiority (Maarif, 2020).

Syafii explicitly links these moral injunctions to the exercise of political power. He draws on Qur'an, Surah al-Hajj (22:41), which frames authority as a divine trust bestowed upon humans to uphold *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*. Following Muhammad Asad's interpretation, Syafii emphasizes that, in historical terms, the power referenced in this verse encompasses both economic and political authority. He also cites the commentary of al-Shabuni, who interprets the verse as referring to those "granted strength, power, and ascendancy on earth (*sulṭānan fi al-arḍ wa tamallukan wa isti'l ā'*)" (Maarif, 2020).

For Syafii, the obligation to perform *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* constitutes a shared responsibility of individuals and governments alike. More importantly, as a divine mandate, this responsibility allows neither citizens nor rulers to lapse into moral complacency. It is in this context that Syafii articulates an Islamic framework of opposition grounded in the principle of *tawāṣī*—mutual exhortation and moral reminder. Drawing on Qur'an, Surah al-'Asr (103:3), he argues that society bears a collective duty to admonish rulers when they neglect their obligation to promote the good and prevent wrongdoing (Maarif, 2020). This responsibility, in Syafii's formulation, is historical in nature and demands sustained moral vigilance from the community.

To further consolidate this moral framing, Syafii turns to early Islamic history, particularly the Meccan period (610–622 CE), which he interprets through Qur'anic revelation. He argues that the ethical imperatives of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* were closely intertwined with resistance to the exploitative political and economic culture of Quraysh society. Many Meccan verses, he notes, address structural inequality and moral arrogance, as reflected, for instance, in Surah al-Inshirah (94:1–3). In Syafii's ideal vision, the purposes of political power must remain oriented toward transcendent ends, rather than toward hedonistic or materialistic pursuits (Maarif, 2020). He further invokes Surah al-Takathur (102:1–2), which condemns excess and competitive accumulation of wealth, status, and power. Within this framework, Syafii underscores the political significance of resilient moral minorities—drawing on the early Muslim community—as a counterweight to abuses of authority by dominant majorities (Maarif, 2020). The Prophet's success alongside such a principled minority, he argues, illustrates how entrenched *munkar* practices among ruling elites can be ethically challenged and transformed.

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that religion, in the oppositional practices of both Wahid and Maarif, operates as a disruptive yet corrective force. This disruption is not intended to dismantle the political order or replace it with an alternative system, but to interrupt processes of citizen depoliticization, state absolutism, and the co-optation of democratic institutions. In Christian Smith's terms, religion functions here as a moral challenger to established political domination, while simultaneously providing public legitimacy for ethical critique (Smith, 1996).

In this sense, the oppositional stances and practices of Abdurrahman Wahid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif—representing Indonesia's two major Muslim currents—can be understood as constituting a form of *normative infrastructure* for democratic consolidation. Neither offers a model of institutional opposition nor a political strategy aimed at capturing state power. Instead, they provide a repertoire of practices, values, and moral legitimations that enable criticism of power to operate in ways that are socially accepted, politically legitimate, and compatible with democratic stability. This normative infrastructure becomes especially vital in contexts where institutional opposition mechanisms weaken or are absorbed into dominant political coalitions.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that democratic consolidation in Indonesia cannot be understood solely through the stable functioning of formal institutions or the regularity of electoral competition. By examining the ethical opposition practiced by Abdurrahman Wahid and Ahmad Syafii Maarif across different political regimes, it shows that democracy also depends on a normative infrastructure that sustains legitimate criticism of power beyond institutional arenas. Under both the New Order and the post-Reformasi context, non-institutional opposition grounded in moral authority played a significant role in constraining state absolutism, normalizing dissent, and protecting the substantive quality of democracy.

The analysis indicates that Wahid and Maarif did not practice opposition as power contestation or as an effort to delegitimize the political system. Instead, their interventions functioned as corrective mechanisms aimed at disciplining power. Critiques directed at militarism, the instrumentalization of religion, the weakening of the rule of law, and the ethical decline of political elites operated through moral language and broad social legitimacy. This positioning allowed opposition to remain publicly acceptable while functioning as a non-institutional check on authority, particularly when parliamentary oversight was weak or ineffective.

The article also shows that ethical opposition operated through distinct mechanisms in the practices of Wahid and Maarif. Wahid's opposition functioned through an embedded–relational mechanism, rooted in dense organizational networks and institutional proximity, enabling his critiques to generate more direct institutional and behavioral effects. By contrast, Syafii Maarif's opposition operated primarily through a discursive–normative mechanism, relying on moral authority, public reasoning, and symbolic interventions to redefine ethical boundaries of

democratic politics. These contrasting modes demonstrate that ethical opposition contributes to democratic consolidation not through a single pathway, but through a plurality of mechanisms that normalize dissent and restrain power beyond formal institutions.

The article further shows that religion, in the practices of Wahid and Maarif, did not operate as a political ideology or as an alternative institutional order. Rather, it served as a source of moral legitimacy that delineated ethical limits on political action. Drawing on the concept of disruptive religion, religion appears here as a corrective force that interrupts the normalization of injustice and domination without encouraging subversive or destabilizing forms of opposition. In this sense, the findings challenge perspectives that treat religion and democracy as inherently incompatible.

Theoretically, this article contributes to the literature on democratic consolidation by shifting attention from institutional performance alone to the role of ethical opposition within civil society. Democratic durability, it argues, is also shaped by the social acceptance of dissent, the internalization of norms of critique, and the presence of actors capable of maintaining critical distance from power without sliding into political loyalism or destructive opposition. In contexts characterized by oversized governing coalitions and elite pragmatism, ethical opposition constitutes an important normative resource for democratic resilience.

The implications of this argument extend beyond Indonesia. In many post-authoritarian democracies, institutional opposition is weakened and elite power increasingly concentrated. Under such conditions, ethically grounded opposition rooted in civil society—often drawing on moral or religious authority—can help preserve democratic quality. Its effectiveness, however, depends on its capacity to remain autonomous from power and to avoid ideological mobilization that risks eroding democratic consensus.

Finally, this article opens avenues for further research on ethical opposition beyond prominent figures such as Wahid and Maarif. Future studies may explore how younger civil society actors, religious organizations, and moral movements sustain democratic critique under conditions of stagnation or democratic backsliding. Democratic consolidation, from this perspective, should be understood not as a fixed end-state, but as an ongoing process that continues to rely on the sustained practice of ethical criticism within the public sphere.

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