

**AN ANALYSIS OF ULIL ABSHAR ABDALLA'S "ENVIRONMENTAL WAHHABI" CONCEPT IN THE CONTEXT OF MINING ISSUES ON SOCIAL MEDIA
(A NORMAN FAIRCLOUGH PERSPECTIVE)**

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Abstract : This study investigates how the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi,' introduced by prominent Indonesian Muslim intellectual Ulil Abshar Abdalla, functions as a discursive mechanism to delegitimize environmental activism amid the nickel mining controversy in Raja Ampat. Drawing on Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, the study examines a post published on the X (Twitter) platform on June 10, 2025, alongside Ulil's verbal statements during the ROSI KompasTV debate on June 12, 2025. Three interlocking analytical dimensions are applied: textual, discursive practice, and social practice. Findings reveal that at the textual level, the phrase operates through semantic borrowing from religious discourse, the application of layered delegitimization rhetoric, and a naturalizing analogy that reframes ecological debate as a matter of activist character rather than environmental substance. At the discursive practice level, the term spread virally across digital platforms but was predominantly met with public rejection. At the social practice level, the phrase structurally aligns with Indonesia's dominant developmentalist ideology, amplified by Ulil's considerable symbolic capital as a Nahdlatul Ulama intellectual. Ultimately, the study concludes that 'Environmental Wahhabi' functions as an instrument of discursive hegemony that normalizes mining acceptance as the rational and moderate position while stigmatizing its critics as fanatics.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Environmental Wahhabi; Environmental Discourse; Social Media; Discursive Hegemony

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Introduction

Environmental crises in the contemporary era are never purely ecological phenomena. Their social significance emerges through the symbolic processes of language, framing, and media representation. The way mining, deforestation, or ecosystem degradation is spoken about shapes how societies respond to these challenges (Rosadha et al., 2025). In this context, social media has transcended its role as a mere information conduit. It has become the primary arena where environmental issues are contested, narrated, and assigned meaning by actors holding divergent ideological commitments. The power to label, to categorize, and to stigmatize has become, in many respects, as consequential as the power to legislate.

This study examines a discursive event originating in early June 2025, when Indonesian Muslim intellectual and Chair of Lakpesdam PBNU, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, publicly described environmental organizations Greenpeace Indonesia and WALHI as 'Environmental Wahhabis.' The phrase first circulated through a quote shared by the @MurtadhoRoy account on June 9, 2025. The following day, Ulil formally acknowledged and expanded the terminology on his own X (Twitter) account, adding the labels 'wokism' and 'global alarmism' to further characterize the environmental activism he was critiquing. The episode escalated when the phrase became the subject of a nationally televised debate on the ROSI program of KompasTV on June 12, 2025, where Ulil defended his characterization in direct discussion with Iqbal Damanik, a Greenpeace Indonesia representative.



Figure 1. X (Twitter) posts by Ulil Abshar Abdalla and @MurtadhoRoy
(Source: X Twitter accounts @ulil and @MurtadhoRoy)

The emergence of the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi' is not reducible to mere provocation or rhetorical excess. Rather, it represents the convergence of three distinct discursive fields: the contentious debate over nickel mining and ecological sustainability in Indonesia; the ongoing competition for symbolic authority between public intellectuals and civil society organizations; and the dynamics of meaning production in the digital public sphere. These intersections occur against the backdrop

of intense public controversy regarding nickel extraction in Raja Ampat, widely recognized as one of the world's richest centers of marine biodiversity. While environmental organizations demand the revocation of mining permits they consider ecologically destructive, state and corporate actors position nickel processing as indispensable to Indonesia's downstream industrial strategy, particularly within global electric vehicle supply chains. This tension transforms language itself into a site of power contestation (Hutagalung et al., 2025).

Ulil Abshar Abdalla occupies a distinctive position in Indonesia's intellectual landscape. His founding role in the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) beginning in 2001, his sustained engagement with Nahdlatul Ulama institutions, and his capacity to navigate intense public controversy, demonstrated most visibly by a death fatwa issued against him in 2003 following his article 'Refreshing Our Understanding of Islam' in Kompas, endow him with what Pierre Bourdieu calls symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). This capital ensures that his utterances carry authority and consequence that extend far beyond ordinary commentary. When such a figure applies a politically charged religious label to environmental activists, the discursive effects reverberate across the public sphere in ways that merit systematic scholarly scrutiny.

Prior scholarship on environmental discourse in Indonesian media has tended to focus on three distinct trajectories. One body of research examines how mainstream media representations of environmental issues typically reinforce state and corporate narratives while sidelining the perspectives of affected communities (Rosadha et al., 2025). A second trajectory analyzes state policy discourse around mining and resource extraction, exploring how these narratives construct legitimacy through appeals to national interest and development imperatives (Cosmas, Haryono, & Sos, n.d.). A third body of work examines identity labeling within Indonesian Muslim public discourse, such as the stigmatizing deployment of terms like 'Radical Islam,' 'Islamist,' and 'kadrun' as tools for political differentiation and opposition propaganda (Hayat & Nurhakki, 2022; Pangestu, 2021). The analysis of religious moderation discourse has also illuminated how certain groups are marked as acceptable or unacceptable within Indonesia's political-religious field (Martalia, Ashadi, & Susilawati, 2024).

However, existing scholarship has not yet examined the specific intersection at which religious labeling is deployed strategically to delegitimize environmental criticism in the digital public sphere. This analytical gap is precisely what this study seeks to address. The phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi' represents an unusually rich case through which to examine how religious discourse, ecological discourse, and relations of power converge in social media communication. Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework is particularly suited to this investigation because its three-dimensional architecture encompasses text, discursive practice, and social practice, enabling a layered reading that captures the phrase's function as a simultaneous linguistic, communicative, and socio-political event (Fairclough, 1992).

This study pursues three interrelated aims. First, it seeks to analyze the linguistic mechanisms and labeling strategies embedded within the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi' at the textual level. Second, it traces the production, distribution, and public reception of these statements within the social media ecosystem. Third, it situates the discourse within broader structures of power, development ideology, and the legitimation boundaries of environmental criticism in Indonesia's digital public sphere. By pursuing these aims, the study contributes to both communication studies and critical environmental humanities in the Indonesian context, offering a framework for understanding how symbolic authority and linguistic choice can shape the terms of ecological debate.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Fairclough's CDA is particularly valuable because it operates simultaneously across three interrelated analytical dimensions: textual analysis, which scrutinizes the linguistic properties of words, metaphors, and sentence structures; discursive practice analysis, which examines the social contexts and processes through which texts are produced, distributed, and received; and social practice analysis, which connects textual and communicative events to wider structures of ideology, power relations, and social norms (Fairclough, 1992). This three-dimensional approach is well-suited for investigating how the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi' functions as a discursive strategy and how it reflects and reproduces power relations within Indonesia's digital environmental debates.

The study is designed as library research supplemented by systematic digital data documentation. The primary analytical objects are: (1) Ulil Abshar Abdalla's posts on the X (Twitter) platform, particularly his June 10, 2025 statement formally adopting the 'Environmental Wahhabi' phrase; (2) transcripts of relevant segments from the ROSI KompasTV debate broadcast on June 12, 2025, accessed via the KompasTV YouTube channel; and (3) selected public responses from social media users reacting to the phrase across multiple digital platforms. Secondary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and credible news sources relevant to discourse analysis, environmental communication, and Indonesian socio-political contexts. The researcher occupies the role of a non-participant observer of digital documents, maintaining analytical distance from the subject under study.

The analytical procedure follows Fairclough's three dimensions sequentially. At the micro level (text), the study examines metaphorical structures and semantic borrowing mechanisms within Ulil's statements. At the meso level (discursive practice), the study traces the contextual production of the statements and maps patterns of public consumption through netizen responses. At the macro level (social practice), the findings from the preceding levels are interpreted in relation to Indonesia's dominant development ideology, the structural power relationships

between the state, corporations, and civil society, and Ulil's symbolic positioning within the national public sphere.

Results and Discussion

Textual Analysis: Linguistic Construction and Labeling Mechanisms

At the textual level, the analysis centers on Ulil Abshar Abdalla's post on X (Twitter) dated June 10, 2025, the moment when the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi' received its official public legitimization within the digital sphere, subsequently reinforced through his verbal statements on the ROSI KompasTV debate on June 12, 2025. Taken together, these two texts constitute a unified discursive event: Twitter serving as the arena of production and official inscription, while the television debate functions as the arena of amplification and reaffirmation. Linguistic analysis of these texts reveals three interlocking mechanisms operating simultaneously.

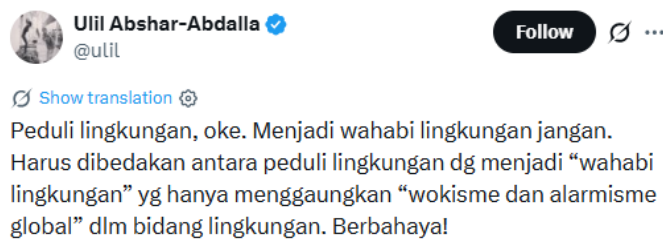


Figure 2. Ulil Abshar Abdalla's X (Twitter) post, June 10, 2025

(Source: X Twitter account @ulil)



Figure 3. KompasTV YouTube post ROSI debate, June 12, 2025

(Source: KompasTV YouTube channel)

The first mechanism is semantic transfer. Within the Indonesian public imagination, the word 'Wahhabi' is far from semantically neutral. It carries a dense cluster of connotations accumulated through historical and social processes: theological puritanism, doctrinal rigidity, hostility toward interpretive pluralism, and an anti-compromise stance toward local religious traditions (Kerwanto & Alfuruqiy, 2025). The historical roots of this connotative load trace back to the Padri War in Minangkabau, where scholars returning from the Arabian Peninsula introduced a

reform-oriented puritism that generated sustained social friction with local traditions (Affan, 2016). These tensions were subsequently institutionalized within the theological discourse of Nahdlatul Ulama, which positioned 'Wahhabism' as the antithesis of the Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah tradition and its integrative relationship with local Islamic practices (Topan, 2024).

By grafting the word 'Wahhabi' onto the environmental domain, Ulil enacts a process of semantic transfer that relocates this entire connotative network from the religious sphere into the ecological debate. The resulting phrase does not describe a theological position but invokes the full emotional and political weight associated with 'Wahhabism' as a social stigma. This is precisely the kind of intertextual practice Fairclough describes, where meaning is constructed by borrowing elements from one discourse and embedding them within another to produce ideological effects that neither discourse could achieve independently (Fairclough, 2001). As Qayyum (2019) demonstrates, intertextuality in media discourse operates by strategically extracting linguistic elements from pre-existing texts and positioning them within new discursive contexts to generate specific ideological orientations. The additional labels 'wokism' and 'global alarmism' extend this strategy: 'wokism' recontextualizes a concept originating in African-American minority rights discourse to discredit Indonesian environmentalists (Koffi, 2025), while 'global alarmism' deploys a rhetorical pattern associated with international climate skepticism to frame ecological concerns as irrational and irrelevant to national development priorities (Methmann & Rothe, 2012).

The second mechanism is a pattern of layered delegitimization, structured through what may be termed a 'concede-and-undermine' rhetorical strategy. Ulil partially acknowledges the legitimacy of environmental concerns, affirming that ecological damage is real and that certain mining practices are problematic. This initial concession functions to project an impression of balance and reasonableness. However, the pivot that follows is decisive: rather than engaging with whether mining damages the environment as an empirical question, the discourse shifts to interrogating the character of the activists themselves. Environmental advocates are reframed not as agents responding to verifiable ecological harm but as individuals possessed by a fanatic disposition structurally analogous to religious extremism. The target of criticism is no longer the argument but the arguer. This shift is rhetorically effective because it transforms a dispute over evidence into a dispute over temperament, where the accuser occupies the moral high ground of moderation by contrast.

The third mechanism is what may be called the naturalization effect through religious analogy. Religious labels in Indonesian public discourse carry an unusually strong naturalizing capacity: they function as if they were objective descriptions of observable social categories rather than politically motivated characterizations. When someone is designated a 'Wahhabi,' audiences frequently receive this designation as a straightforward factual description rather than a contestable interpretive claim. This naturalization allows the 'Environmental Wahhabi' label to exercise persuasive force

without requiring substantive refutation of the environmental arguments being made. The analogy effectively displaces the burden of proof from the one deploying the label to the one receiving it. Viewed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of symbolic power, this effect is inseparable from Ulil's social position as the speaker (Bourdieu, 1991). The authority to define whose positions are rational and whose are extreme derives not merely from the linguistic content of the label but from the accumulated symbolic capital that the speaker brings to the act of labeling, capital Ulil has accrued through decades of intellectual controversy, institutional engagement, and public visibility.

Considered collectively, these three mechanisms reveal that the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi' functions as a conceptual metaphor in the cognitive-linguistic sense elaborated by Lakoff and Johnson (2008): it does not merely describe ecological activism but actively shapes how that activism is understood, felt, and evaluated by audiences. The metaphor maps the conceptual domain of religious extremism onto the domain of environmental advocacy, rendering opposition to mining perceptually equivalent to theological fanaticism in the public imagination.

Analysis of Discursive Practices: Production, Distribution, and Reception on Social Media

Fairclough's second analytical dimension shifts attention from linguistic structure to the communicative processes through which texts are generated, circulated, and received. This level of analysis reveals that the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi' has a genealogy of layered production that precedes its formal inscription in Ulil's June 10, 2025 post. The phrase first entered digital circulation through @MurtadhoRoy's quote on June 9, 2025, attributing the label to Ulil. Ulil's subsequent response, which formally acknowledged and extended the terminology, can be interpreted as an act of discursive self-legitimization: by publicly claiming ownership of the phrase and expanding its conceptual scope, he transformed a secondhand attribution into an authoritative first-person declaration. The inclusion of the phrase as a debatable proposition on a nationally televised program on June 12, 2025, subsequently confirmed that it had achieved sufficient public salience to warrant formal national deliberation.

From a distribution standpoint, the phrase underwent the social media process of decontextualization and recontextualization that characterizes viral discourse (Eriyanto, 2001). Short video excerpts from the ROSI debate, stripped of the argumentative context within which the phrase was embedded, circulated independently across multiple platforms and reached audiences far broader than those who had followed the original exchange. In this process, the phrase detached from its discursive environment and began functioning as a standalone linguistic unit, open to commentary, critique, and reinterpretation. Pyle, Ellison, and Andalibi (2025) demonstrate that the affordances of social media platforms, including the ease of clipping, quoting, and sharing content, actively structure the political dynamics of

public discourse by enabling the decontextualized rapid spread of statements, often in ways that amplify their divisive potential.

The consumption dimension reveals an outcome that diverged substantially from the apparent delegitimizing intent behind the phrase. Public responses on social media were predominantly characterized by rejection, not of environmental activists, but of Ulil's framing itself.

Among the notable responses, one from @VonRofX on June 10, 2025, directly exposed the economic subtext concealed within Ulil's label, suggesting that the labeling strategy served to divert critical attention from corporate interests in the mining sector rather than to honestly evaluate environmental arguments.

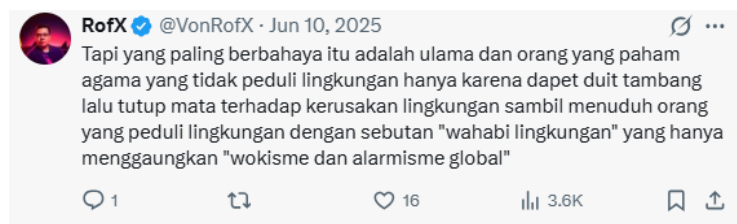


Figure 4. X (Twitter) post by @VonRofX, June 10, 2025
(Source: Twitter account @VonRofx)

A response from @ulil_a on the same date expressed moral dismay in Javanese, using the term 'ndereg' (shaken/grieved) while raising a rhetorical question about the reality of ecological destruction, indicating that the label was received as a form of disregard for the tangible suffering of affected ecosystems and communities rather than as substantive intellectual critique.

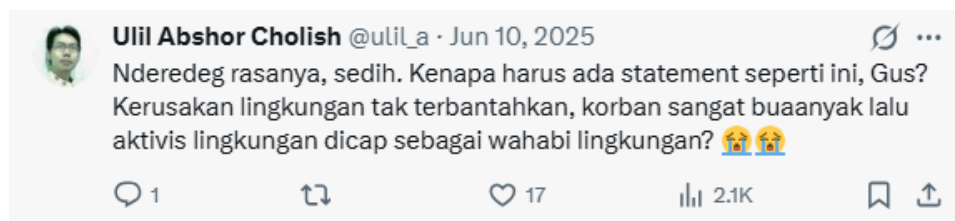


Figure 5. X (Twitter) post by @ulil_a, June 10, 2025
(Source: Twitter account @ulil_a)

Most remarkably, as late as November 2025, five months following the original exchange, the @joeyakarta account was still referencing the incident, indicating that the phrase had become what scholars of digital memory describe as a permanent discursive marker within Ulil's public record (Eriyanto, 2001).



Figure 6. X post by @joeyakarta, November 2025

(Source: X account @joeyakarta)

This persistence demonstrates that social media does not merely transmit discourse but continuously reproduces and revives it, sustaining consequences that extend far beyond the temporal context of the original utterance.

Analysis of Social Practices: Power Relations, Development Ideology, and the Structuring of Legitimate Debate

The third dimension of Fairclough's framework addresses the deepest layer of analysis: how discourse reflects and perpetuates social structures, power arrangements, and ideological formations. At this level, the central question is why the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi' functions as an effective delegitimization strategy, who it benefits, and what structural consequences follow from the reorientation of debate it enacts.

Indonesia's current political economy is marked by a productive tension between two ideological paradigms. The developmentalist paradigm, which holds primacy in state policy, treats the downstream processing of strategic minerals, including nickel, as an imperative of national economic development. Against this stands the ecological sustainability paradigm, which prioritizes the rights of ecosystems, indigenous communities, and future generations. These paradigms are not merely technically distinct; they articulate fundamentally different ontologies of the relationship between humans, nature, and the role of the state. The nickel mining controversy in Raja Ampat has become one of the most prominent arenas in which this ideological confrontation plays out in public discourse.

Ulil's framing, which characterizes categorical opposition to mining as a form of 'Wahhabi fanaticism,' structurally aligns his position with the dominant developmentalist paradigm. The argument that the real problem is 'bad mining' rather than mining per se, and that total rejection is an irrational extremist stance, functions ideologically to present a graduated acceptance of resource extraction as the only rational and moderate position available. This is precisely what Fairclough identifies as the ideological reproduction function of discourse, the capacity of specific linguistic choices to naturalize particular social arrangements by presenting them as common sense rather than contestable political positions (Haryatmoko, 2016). The process is not conspiratorial but structural: certain ways of speaking tend to advantage certain social positions, and those with the symbolic authority to establish the terms of debate exercise disproportionate influence over what counts as legitimate argument.

The irony embedded in Ulil's rhetorical strategy deserves explicit recognition. He deploys the 'Wahhabi' label, a term drawn from the internal vocabulary of Islamic religious controversy, to discredit environmental protection advocates, while the religious tradition that constitutes his primary intellectual and institutional affiliation, Nahdlatul Ulama, possesses a sophisticated eco-theological framework that might equally support the position he is critiquing. The NU Aswaja eco-theological tradition, grounded in the principles of *tawazun* (ecological balance), *ta'adul* (intergenerational justice), and *hifz al-bi'ah* (environmental protection as a component of *maqashid al-sharia*, the objectives of Islamic law), provides conceptual resources that are arguably more consonant with the environmental protection agenda than with an accommodationist stance toward extractive industry (Firnando, Setiawati, & Kunci, 2025). This irony reveals that the use of religious symbols in ecological debates does not necessarily reflect theological depth or consistency; religious vocabulary can function as a rhetorical resource whose effectiveness derives from its social associations rather than its theological coherence.

From a Gramscian perspective, the cultural and ideological dynamics at work here are interpretable as an exercise in hegemony through consent. Gramsci's hegemony concept, as applied to discourse theory, identifies how dominant social groups maintain their position not primarily through coercion but through the successful construction of their worldview as 'common sense' that transcends class or interest (Topan, 2024). When opposition to mining is labeled as 'Wahhabi', carrying connotations of fanaticism and irrationality, acceptance of mining, under the caveat of proper management, is simultaneously repositioned as the default rational and moderate stance. This framing does not merely attack individual activists; it structurally narrows the range of positions that can be advanced without social stigma, constraining the space of legitimate environmental critique within the digital public sphere.

Research consistently demonstrates that Indonesian mainstream media tends to amplify narratives originating from state and corporate actors while marginalizing community-based resistance voices (Rosadha et al., 2025). The discursive dynamics surrounding the 'Environmental Wahhabi' phrase replicate this structural asymmetry: Ulil's statements received extensive mainstream media coverage and were elevated to the agenda of nationally televised debate, while the empirical arguments advanced by environmental organizations received comparatively limited and less prominent treatment. This differential amplification is itself an exercise of discursive power, shaping public perception of whose arguments merit serious consideration and whose deserve to be labeled as extreme.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the phrase 'Environmental Wahhabi,' as deployed by Ulil Abshar Abdalla in the context of the Raja Ampat nickel mining controversy, operates as a carefully constructed and ideologically consequential

discursive strategy rather than as an innocent or neutral descriptive label. Through the application of Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the study has traced how this phrase functions simultaneously as a linguistic event, a communicative event, and a socio-political event, each dimension illuminating a distinct layer of its discursive work.

At the textual level, the phrase achieves its delegitimizing effects through three interlocking mechanisms: semantic transfer that borrows the dense connotative weight of 'Wahhabism' from religious controversy and maps it onto ecological activism; layered delegitimization rhetoric that redirects public attention from the empirical substance of environmental arguments toward a moral indictment of the character of advocates; and a naturalizing analogy that allows the label to function as if it were an objective description rather than a contested political characterization. These mechanisms collectively shift the debate from the question of ecological harm to the question of the rationality and temperament of those raising alarm.

At the discursive practice level, the phrase's rapid viral dissemination across digital platforms transformed it from a situated argument into a decontextualized linguistic meme, generating public debate that extended far beyond the original exchange. Crucially, public reception was dominated not by the delegitimization of environmental advocacy but by criticism of the labeling strategy itself, and the persistence of references to the incident five months after its occurrence confirms the distinctive capacity of social media to sustain discursive consequences across time through what scholars call digital memory.

At the social practice level, the study finds that the framing embedded in 'Environmental Wahhabi' structurally reinforces the dominant developmentalist ideology that undergirds state policy on resource extraction. Amplified by Ulil's symbolic capital as a figure of intellectual authority within the NU tradition, the phrase naturalizes graduated acceptance of mining as the rational and moderate position while pathologizing categorical opposition as fanatical. The deeper irony is that Nahdlatul Ulama's own eco-theological tradition, grounded in the values of *tawazun*, *ta'adul*, and *hifz al-bi'ah*, could provide a principled theological basis for environmental protection rather than its delegitimization.

Taken together, these findings contribute to scholarship on critical environmental communication and discourse studies in the Indonesian context. They illuminate how symbolic authority, linguistic innovation, and platform affordances interact to shape the permissible boundaries of ecological debate in the digital age. The study calls for sustained critical attention to labeling strategies deployed by intellectuals and symbolic authorities in public environmental discourse, and advocates for more nuanced media literacy that enables audiences to distinguish between arguments addressing the substance of ecological harm and rhetorical strategies that redirect attention toward the character of those raising concern. Future research would benefit from extending this framework to examine the regulatory and

policy effects of such discursive strategies, as well as their reception across different demographic communities within Indonesia's diverse digital public sphere.

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