



# Examining a Tuanku's Political Power in West Sumatra

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#### Abstract

This study examines the authority of a tuanku, a leader of the tarekat (mystical teaching) community in West Sumatra, Indonesia—a charismatic figure with a significant role in the region's sociopolitical landscape. He issues political statements or 'political fatwa' regarding a certain issue to help determine choices. As such, political leaders seek to win his favor for an advantage in political contests. Data were collected from in-depth interviews with teachers and congregational members of the tarekat community to examine a tuanku's charismatic authority in the socio-political dynamics. The study reveals that a tuanku's influence is strong, his understanding of politics is closely related to the religious understanding of the tarekat school, and his charisma impacts the political choices of the tarekat community. This study contributes to the literature by providing evidence of a religious figure's charismatic authority in West Sumatra's socio-political dynamics.

## **Keywords:**

Tuanku; charisma; authority; political behavior; the tarekat community

### Introduction

Tuanku is a term for a tarekat (mystical/ spiritual practices) teacher who also serves as a religious leader in Minangkabau society in West Sumatra, Indonesia. The title is conferred as a sign of respect from society for one's deep knowledge of the Islamic religion, usually to an ulama who has become a role model in society. As the discourses between religion and politics intersect, a tuanku's role expands to the socio-political domain (Azwar, 2015; Samad, 2003; Azra, 1992; Azra, 1994). The dual roles of a tuanku (in religion and politics) can be seen in his strategic position on the practical politics' stage in the past decades. This dual role has given rise to the need for informal political figures in society. They view a tuanku as a charismatic figure to provide guidance in their social life.

Studies of the sociopolitical roles of religious leaders have been carried out using various perspectives, such as sociology,

psychology, political science, and Islamic studies (see Faridl, 2007; Horikoshi, 1987; Jarbawi & Pearlman, 2007; Mukhlis, 2015; Burke, Kosloff & Landau, 2013; Conger & Kanungo, 1987). However, a sociological case study on the authority of tuanku in the political dynamics has not been conducted. The finding can reveal the possibilities for changes in the political perceptual framework, which forms the basis for understanding the dynamics and developments of contemporary politics (Kung, 2002; Noer, 1982), especially in the context of West Sumatra. For example, a tuanku's diverse religious understandings have generated certain interpretations, as shown in his attitudes and behavior in responding to the political realities. This will strongly influence the tarekat community and the sociocultural dynamics (Azwar, 2015; Azwar, 2018; Azra, 1992; Van-Bruinessen, 1992), which will then influence the wider society. Adhering to religious and traditional values, the tarekat community has



formed a distinctive local wisdom for the people of West Sumatra. Therefore, a strong influence on the *tarekat* students will affect the social and cultural life of the wider community too.

The *tarekat* community in West Sumatra contributes to various social, cultural, political, and economic processes, even in creating urban communities. The institutional strength built by the *tarekat* community is based on piety and collective obedience to teachers—a *mursyid* (student) devotion to a *tuanku* (teacher) (Azwar, 2018). They have developed a stable institutional network and played a role in strengthening collective ideas and shaping people's behavior structurally and culturally (Azra, 1992).

Studies on the socio-political dynamics of a religious group have previously been carried out using various perspectives (see Brug & Mughan, 2007; Burke, Kosloff & Landau, 2013; Faridl, 2007; Isaacs, 2015; Mukhlis, 2015; Sholichin, 2009; Tohari & Jacky, 2015). Previous research on the political behavior of the tarekat community is relevant to the role and position of a tuanku as a charismatic figure influencing the political behavior of worshipers or society. In general, the findings have shown that religious leaders play a significant role in influencing the political dynamics of society, determining the political choices of society with their political behaviors (see Mukhlis, 2015; Sang & Rowatt, 2007; Sholichin, 2009; Tohari & Jacky, 2015).

The socio-political behavior of religious leaders is influenced by at least two factors, namely, the religious leaders' position in the community and personal power (charisma). The social position of a religious leader can mobilize the power of change in society. A *tuanku* is considered a source of official statements or 'fatwa' in the case of political dilemmas (Faridl, 2007; Horikoshi, 1987; Mukhlis, 2015). Geertz (1983) argued that an Islamic figure (kyai) is a cultural broker, stating

that the influence of *kyai* lies in the intermediary function. Politically, a *kyai* is categorized as a layperson with no professional experience and ability, but socially, they can bridge various social interests.

Examining changes in the socio-political and religious landscape is important as it continues to develop along with changing life patterns. Underlying these changes are various ideological and pragmatic interests. For example, social relations among religious groups are not only related to sociocultural factors but are also influenced by religious leaders who become the community's role models. This study focuses on the causal relationship between these two factors, analyzing the role of personal power or charisma and theological perceptions in influencing the social-political behavior of a tarekat community in West Sumatra. As a leader, a tuanku has both cultural and structural dimensions. Culturally, he is seen as an important part of the value system that regulates the community's traditions and social behavior. In the social structure, he is positioned formally equivalent to traditional (tribal) leaders.

The religious culture of the tarekat community in West Sumatra is built on two main pillars: Islam and Minangkabau. The interaction between the religious and traditional dimensions results in an environment that is humanist, inclusive, civilized, and socioreligious (Azwar, 2018). The people of West Sumatra, known as Minangkabau, tend to be egalitarian and tolerant of differences. The combination of Islamic and customary values has formed the characteristics of Minangkabau-Islam, who live in peaceful social-religious traditions. The questions that arise are: (1) how these values are understood and practiced by the tarekat community in West Sumatra in the existing socio-political dynamics; (2) how a tuanku's charismatic authority influences the political dynamics; and (3) how it influences the political choices of the tarekat group. This



study answers these questions to explain the socio-religious and political dynamics in West Sumatra in relation to the tuanku's charismatic authority.

## Literature Review

Charisma is the Greek for 'grace,' which refers to a power that cannot be logically explained. It is a combination of charm and personal attraction that contributes to an extraordinary ability to make people follow one's ideas, attitudes, and behavior voluntarily (Truskie, 2002). Its existence makes a leader looks superhuman (Weber, 1978). When a charismatic leader moves or dies, leadership succession may end up in a crisis because finding another extraordinary leader will be challenging. The influence of charismatic leaders may even continue after they die, which is called a routinization of charisma (Weber, 1978; Taylor, 2012; Isaacs, 2015).

Other scholars agreeing with Weber's ideas assume that charisma is a gift, fascination, charm, or a 'celebrity' status (Taylor, 2012). It gives an 'authority' outside the traditional or rational-legal processes as it depends on personal qualities associated with divinity (Smith, 1998). Exercising charismatic power attracts obedience (Taylor, 2012; Scharf, 1995). It often prompts social change, creating new situations different from those with nonexistent charisma (Abdullah, 1997).

Weber further argued that charismatic authority lies in the devotion to purity, heroism, or exemplary characters and the leader's expressed normative patterns (Weber, 1978). He defines charisma as certain qualities of an individual that are supernatural, superhuman, or at least extraordinarily special. These 'divine' qualities are inaccessible to ordinary people (Weber, 1978). These charismatic qualities are often found in exemplary people, such as heroic war leaders, prophets, saints, or wise men.

According to Weber, five factors that come with charismatic power are extraordinary talent, a social crisis, radical ideas to solve the crisis, extraordinary transcendental and supernatural abilities, and great success. A charismatic leader has the motivation, commitment, and emotional identity in their vision, philosophy, and style (Ivancevich, Konopaske, & Matteson, 2007), which are looked up to by their followers.

An ideal charisma of a religious leader is shown in their social patterns as they live among the members of society. Weber also explained the three authority or belief systems that validate societal relationships: rationallegal domination, traditional (established) authority, and the charismatic leader. The power dominance is based on politicalsociological factors, so it is relatively more unstable than the traditional authority. People submit to power more easily if it has a legal basis (Turner, 1974). Weber distinguishes power into two types: domination over people to influence their interests and domination over people to govern them (Wrong, 2003; Lindahl, 2008; Yukl, 2005).

Studies have been conducted in various countries to show the significant influence of the charisma of political leaders on the dynamics of state politics and people's political choices (Suhelmi, 2004; Sholichin, 2009; Suryana, 2011). The strength of a charismatic state or political leaders can also give the spirit of nationalism. For example, Yasir Arafat used his charisma to build the spirit of nationalism and optimism of the Palestinians (Jarbawi & Pearlman, 2007). The charismatic power of a political leader is often used to influence political choices, such as in elections and other types of political contestation. In Bulgaria, charisma-based campaigns drastically changed voters' perceptions and expectations of political actions, making them more open to charismabased and populist appeals (Gurov & Zankina, 2013). A study by Brug and Mughan (2007) in the Netherlands shows that a leader's charisma can defeat the power of an established political party. In Afghanistan and Iraq (Williams, Pillai, Lowe, Jung, & Herst, 2009), as well as in India (Rai, 2019), charisma is an important instrument to increase the electability of a political figure and significantly influences people's political choices.

Conger and Kanungo (1987) stated that charismatic leadership is natural. A leader's charisma is almost as important as the members' perception of charisma. Charismatic leaders can encourage change, motivate and inspire others to take certain actions, and even make sacrifices to achieve it. A charismatic can accommodate and direct people because they respect and adore them.

Studies above focus on the charismatic aspects of political or party leaders in their democratic contestation and their influence on people's political choices. Meanwhile, a charismatic community leader who does not participate in the contest can influence political dynamics and people's choices. This area remains under-researched, especially the charisma of a religious figure in a broader context, such as the influence on political behavior and culture.

Political behavior encompasses political actors' and citizens' concrete manifestations, which shape the political culture (see Burke, Kosloff, & Landau, 2013; Gerber et al., 2010). Political culture influences citizens' attitudes, responses, and activities toward the existing political system, which refers to society's values, norms, beliefs, and political behavior. In this context, political culture shapes people's attitudes, responses, and activities toward the existing political system. The community responses can either support or reject the existing political system. For example, in a political culture that tends to value opposition and dissent, people's responses will be critical and proactive.

Similarly, Carr (in Efriza, 2012) states that political behavior is human actions in political situations. Pomper (in Irtanto, 2014) observes that the political preferences of charismatic religious figures can shape people's attitudes, perceptions, and orientations, which dictate the preferences in political choices. Franklin (in Asfar, 2006) agrees with the theory, stating that sociological ties affect a person's political choices. This means that theoreticalsociological ties are influential to voting behavior. Understanding social groupings, whether formal, such as religious groups, professional organizations, or informal such as family, friendship, or other small groups, can shape a person's attitudes, perceptions, and orientations significantly, which determines political choices.

## Methods

This research offers a case study to analyze a tuanku's charismatic authority in the Minangkabau community in West Sumatra. The case study focuses on how far a tuanku's religious teachings influence the community's socio-political behavior. First, we conducted interviews to discover key information about the charismatic authority and political attitudes in the tarekat group. These interviews involved both a tuanku and the jamaah (congregation), conducted separately to avoid bias, especially with the jamaah. The observations of the tarekat political behavior focus on their participation or responses to the political dynamics, such as the political stance taken by the tuanku. Such observations scrutinize the jamaah's responses to the tuanku's involvement in political activities. And observation of the response of the congregation who attended tuanku's recitation who distanced themselves from political activities. Observations were conducted to enhance information on some of the data obtained through interviews, both with a tuanku and the jamaah, to obtain a complete understanding of the political realities of the tarekat.

Informants were selected using a snowball technique by considering the relevance to the



research objectives, the accessibility, and the level of trust and good relations. The information obtained from the key informants becomes the basis for determining other figures or informants to provide further information. The selection of key informants is based on the depth and breadth of their knowledge and their ability to provide clues for the next informants needed for research. The process of obtaining information using this snowball technique continues until the saturation point, i.e., when no more new information is present, and repetition appears. Observations were made to corroborate information obtained through interviews with the tuanku and the jamaah to understand the tarekat community's political dynamics.

#### Results

As a charismatic figure in society, especially in the tarekat community, a tuanku significantly influences the political dynamics in West Sumatra. In fact, some of them are directly involved in practical politics as members of political parties. Some run for the election of the legislators in the House of Representatives (DPR), provincial Regional House of Representatives (DPRD), or district/ municipal DPRD. One of the motivations to be involved in practical politics is to influence policymaking, as expressed by Buya Riswandi:

> "...that my involvement in practical politics as a DPRD of Payakumbuh City member for two periods is to influence public policies, especially the budget policies to favor the tarekat groups. When many buya (leaders) became members of DPR, many surau suluak (places of worship) received aid from the government. The face of surau suluak changed from being neglected, isolated, far from transportation facilities, and unreachable by vehicles to being paved, reachable, and functional in helping those without assistance. Therefore, it is better for these buya

to be not anti-political. The power must be taken, if it is not, it will be difficult to change and to improve the society in accordance with religious guidance. It is impossible to shout from outside only. We have to be involved in the political structure."

A tuanku is a community leader with a strong influence in society, especially among the tarekat groups, due to the teacher-student traditional relationship. The presence of a tuanku in practical politics creates excitement and hope. Their presence is expected to change the political landscape and the negative image of political activities. Often perceived as 'dirty' practices, politics and the House of Representatives are expected to become an 'honorable' place of service in the community.

In the context of West Sumatra, the influence of a tuanku is providing support for the government's development programs and their support for regional political figures during the political contestation. This can be seen in political leaders' meeting with a tuanku to ask for his blessing or political support. Besides, many tuankus are visited by candidates in order to request blessing or support during the electoral process. For example, during the election of Regent and Deputy Regent of Limapuluh Kota, Zedriwarman was the figure in the tarekat community who was frequently visited by candidates. However, he tried to keep his distance from the governing political officials, including those now in power, after asking for his blessing, support, or advice. He stated:

> "...if I am involved in politics, I am not interested in being actively involved. Alhamdulillah, until now, I am not affected by their 'temptations,' in various ways to invite me. I am not affected. If I want, many officials want to assist my surau (place of worship), but I do not want to. Let it be like this, reot (dilapidated). Because I doubt

where the money comes from, I'm afraid of *syubhat* (questionable), if not to call it *haram* (forbidden). I was once offered to be a council member in 1985, but I did not want, and I just answered, 'I forbid becoming a member of DPR."

What was revealed by Buya M. Nur reflected how he had felt a strong political temptation. As he explained:

I have been involved in politics for a while. At that time, I was encouraged and invited by Ibnu Abbas. I was invited to Jakarta, brought here and there, and joined to PKB party. Indeed, I finally felt that politics was not in accordance with my instincts. Moreover, it was contrary to the kaji (teaching) of tarekat. And at that time, I felt abandoned by the congregation and students I had been developing and who had studied with me. They conveyed various reasons. Some stated they moved because I rarely came to surau (place of worship). They came from a distant region to mengaji (study) and met the teacher, but I was not there. Another reason is that I deviated from my teaching (kaji). I was dragged into the bad reputation of politics. Because they thought the politics were dirty, deceitful, and so on. At the time, I withdrew from direct involvement in politics until now. However, it cannot be completely avoided because many people come to surau, especially political actors, to ask for political advice and support.

Tuanku Ismet Ismail is a tarekat teacher actively involved in practical politics. He had been a member of DPRD of Agam regency, and even West Sumatra, for a long time in the New Order era. From his explanation, it seems like he is comfortable with his involvement in the political activities as both legislative and executive. For Tuanku Ismet, the waning of influence and social authority is apparent among the people. He is known only by a small group of Syattariyah elites because of his lineage in the tarekat that he is the grandson of great figure ulama Syattariyah in Koto Tuo.

The charismatic authority a *tuanku* possesses becomes a strong appeal for political actors in their contestation. It can help political actors seize power because of their political *'fatwa'* to gain the votes of their students or congregation. One of the *jamaah* expressed it as follows:

"...teachers never encourage and command their students to join political parties or direct a political choice to a certain group. Most tarekat teachers showed a neutral attitude. Even though we know he has his own political choice, but he does not impose his choices on their students. However, the jamaah or student usually, and in general, will follow where their buya goes, even though their buya never told them to join. Because it is a kind of student's ethics to their teacher."

When a *tuanku*'s authority is applied in the realm of religion, it significantly impacts the mindset of the *tarekat* group in West Sumatra, both positively and negatively. Because a *tuanku* has a strong charismatic power, the students obey him. Teachers teach and guide their students in various aspects of life, both religious and worldly. A *tuanku* is always used as a 'reference' in all aspects of student activities. His teachings are followed, his *pituah* (advice) is followed, and his command is obeyed.

The charisma has four impacts on the political behavior of the closest congregation in West Sumatra. The first is providing emotional support for various political interests. The second is providing a frame of reference for attitudes and actions, including in an atmosphere of conflict and differences of opinion. A *tuanku*, in this case, serves as a guardian of stability, public order, and the socio-political system. The third is instilling the value of *jamaah* (congregation) by prioritizing common interests above personal ones. Thus, a *tuanku* strengthens the legitimacy of social



values and systems and maintains the sanctity of social and political norms and systems that control interaction, thereby helping to create public order and social stability. Fourth, a *tuanku* instills the value of optimism and hope for changes in life for the better. The teaching includes simplicity and the nature of life because optimism means discouraging consumptive and capitalistic behavior. This aligns with Weber's explanation of the 'Protestant ethic,' which teaches about the importance of political participation to change life based on the value of inner peace, shaped by the doctrine of *barakah* (blessing).

Somewhat different from Weber's argument, a *tuanku*'s religious charisma is incompatible with his political charisma. His egalitarian attitude shapes the rational attitude of his congregation, which contributes to maintaining the society's political values and morals. In other words, a *tuanku* is not only concerned with religious issues but also plays a role in improving the social system, including political behavior to accord with Islamic teachings. Interestingly, their political movement is not a resistance to the existing system but a cultural-inclusive movement, carried out through the existing social system and communal structure.

#### Discussion

In the context of a society in West Sumatra, the presence of a *tuanku* has laid the foundation for forming the community's character and mentality. Using the analysis of Ajid Thohir (2002), a *tuanku* plays a role in building a strong social system in the Minangkabau society, with three main pillars, namely exemplary, openness (egalitarian), and humanitarian (Thohir, 2002). The religious figure is not only believed to have deep religious knowledge but also many students and *jamaah*. The more students a *tuanku* has, the higher his position/status in the *tarekat* group and the community's social life. As such, the large number of *santri* and

*jamaah* creates the charisma of a *tuanku*, which strongly influences society (Azwar, 2015). In other words, a *tuanku* plays a social role in the political dynamics in West Sumatra. The figure is part of the elite society, i.e., the *tarekat* and political communities simultaneously (Azwar, 2015).

From a sociological perspective, the socio-political system is understood as a series of subsystems of a social system that forms a series of social units. Political dynamics from a 'systems perspective' can be seen from various angles, including political culture or people's political behavior. Several components that must exist in the political system are (a) a society that becomes a source of support and demands for other subsystems, (b) political institutions that formulate and implement public policies, and (c) political processes used in political structures (Setiadi & Kolip, 2015; Tohari & Jacky, 2015).

Sociologically, the involvement of ulama in the practical political arena is one of the powers that can influence the political process outside the circle of political rulers (Setiadi & Kolip, 2015). The position of tuanku is important in the political reality of West Sumatra because they are role models for his followers, including society in general. Many community members seek references from a tuanku, including in the election. They ask for a statement or fatwa to guide their decision-making. The role of a tuanku goes beyond personal or traditional matters, such as determining a wedding day or other activities (hari baiak kutiko elok). The people's loyalty to a tuanku as a religious figure is motivated by the confidence that their attitudes and behavior are right, especially as spiritual support.

Vifredo Pareto maintains that a *tuanku* is an elite with the best personal qualities needed to reach the center of political power. Pareto further argues that elites succeed in and can occupy high positions in social stratification. In this context, Pareto classifies society into two

classes: (1) the upper class (elite) and (2) the lower class (non-elite). The elite class is divided into two groups: (a) the governing elite and (b) the non-governing elite (Setiadi & Kolip, 2015). Meanwhile, Mosca introduced the concept of sub-elite, which is the middle-class civil servants, industrial managers, scientists, and students. This middle class is a vital element in society's structure, determining the society's socio-political (Amir, 2003; Setiadi & Kolip, 2015; Arkoun, 1994).

Regarding the political role of the governing and non-governing elites, Pareto believes that these two groups always fight over the opportunity to gain power so that elite circulation occurs. The governing elites can only survive if they continuously get support from the lower class. In this situation, a tuanku's position as a non-governing elite is important in the struggle of political dynamics in West Sumatra. As an elite group, they have a strong relationship with the spiritual and emotional aspects of the lower class, i.e., the students and congregation. In the tarekat tradition and teachings, obedience to the teacher is sacred and must not be denied or tainted by worldly affairs. The teacher-student emotional relationship is bound by the obedience pledge at the time of bai'at (covenant) (Setiadi & Kolip, 2015).

The changes in Indonesia's political system and behavior, including in West Sumatra, influence the political attitude of a tuanku. The Indonesian democratic system has begun to destabilize the social position of the tuankus as they join the grandeur of the political world. Many tuankus have sold their charismatic crowns for practical politics. Political figures are eager to utilize a tuanku's social position and charismatic authority to secure votes and political support from society, especially students and congregations. This comes with promises of an improvement in facilities and political power. Moreover, some tuankus become members and cadres of

political parties, arguing that it is for the sake of society and the congregation.

Tuankus play a role in providing deep meaning in implementing Islamic teachings in socio-political life. They have succeeded in forming people's resilience against the negative influence of practical politics, which has damaged the people's social relations (Hariantati, 2003). This is what Durkheim calls social facts—behavioral beliefs and rules institutionalized by society (Ritzer, 1996; Turner, 2012; Veeger, 1990).

The influence of charismatic leadership on political behavior cannot be separated from the leaders per se. This phenomenon can also be viewed from the psychological perspective with a religious orientation to understand the diversity of experiences. The religious orientation theory states two contradictory patterns of religious orientation. The first is an intrinsic religious orientation, a religious attitude based on the purpose of religious teachings. The second is extrinsic religion, which makes religion an instrument to fulfill personal needs. Individual behavior can be identified through the intrinsic-extrinsic mentality as a tool of analysis to describe the underlying motivation of the action (Allport & Ross, 1967; Sang & Rowatt, 2007; Spilka, 2003; Paloutzian, 1996; Crappas, 1993; Hale, 2005; Herek, 1987).

This theory sees the orientation of a charismatic leader, whether or not they emphasize the public interest given and whether they concern more with personal interests. Geertz (1983) argues that the role played by *tuankus* in West Sumatra can be regarded as a cultural broker. The influence of a *tuanku* lies in implementing this broker's function. Even politically, *Tuanku* is categorized as a layperson without professional experience or ability. Socially, they can bridge the interests of the many. With personal strength (charisma), a *tuanku* holds certain power in his society, including mobilizing people and directing their

political choices. A tuanku is not a politician, yet his political calculations are often considered a guideline to be followed (Geertz, 1983; Budiarjo, 2008; Eisenstadt, 1968; Burke et al., 2013).

A tuanku, as a charismatic leader, can be intrinsically oriented if he is more concerned with public interests or social power. The emphasis is on the internalization of values rather than personal identification. They instill loyalty, delegate authority, share information openly, encourage participation in decisionmaking, and use rewards to strengthen behavior consistent with the organization's mission and objectives. The result is that their leadership is more beneficial for followers.

## Conclusion

A tuanku is a charismatic figure who plays a significant social role in influencing the political choices of the people of West Sumatra. He is still considered the source of a political fatwa. Their political charisma in West Sumatra can be seen from the attitudes and political choices of the people, which may even support them to become the main figures of political parties. Various philosophies of life based on the tarekat teachings that guide people's behavior show a strong influence on the political dynamics in West Sumatra. At the same time, charisma forms dynamic and tolerant political attitudes and behavior. These leaders can influence people's political culture by rejecting political attitudes and behaviors contrary to cultural and moral values and akhlak (morality).

A tuanku's charismatic authority is obtained by self-service based on his altruism, heroism, and exemplary and personal qualities. Charismatic authority influences others through personal characteristics, such as extraordinary ethical, heroic, or religious skills. Tuankus, as a charismatic leader, is obeyed because people feel a strong emotional bond with them. The charisma is strengthened by the depth of their religious knowledge and the synchronization of knowledge with social behavior (morals). Religious charisma is also closely related to people's belief in supernatural powers based on religion, such as the power of prayer and medication.

Charismatic political authority works best among the elites, i.e., the tarekat community, highlighting elegance in their attitude. Their political attitudes and behavior are far from protests, anarchism, or revolutionary movement. Humanist evolutionary and political attitudes influence sociocultural life with dignity. The socio-political movement not only creates social change but can also be interpreted as an ability to maintain local political and cultural identity. It protects the people from the influence of a political culture that can damage socio-political life and people's lifestyles. It also protects the religious values of the people's political life from secularism and liberalism, which erode the values of philosophy in society, such as mutual respect and assistance, peace, and nationalism.

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