

Religious Leaders and Moral Disengagement: An Examination of Followers' Authoritarian Attitudes

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Abstract / Abstrak

Religious leaders often hold revered positions and shape moral norms within their communities. However, obedience to such figures may become problematic when followers fail to question unethical behavior or the misuse of authority. This study investigates how dimensions of right-wing authoritarianism (submission, aggression, and conventionalism) and mechanisms of moral disengagement relate to perilous obedience toward religious authority. Drawing on data from 243 Indonesian participants across majority and minority religious groups, hierarchical regression analyses showed that authoritarian submission and moral disengagement - particularly advantageous comparison - were the strongest predictors of perilous obedience. Although authoritarian aggression initially predicted the outcome, its effect diminished once moral disengagement was entered into the model. Conventionalism, despite its theoretical importance, did not significantly predict obedience in this context. These findings highlight psychological factors associated with followers' willingness to tolerate or justify the misuse of authority in religious settings.

Tokoh agama sering kali menempati posisi yang sangat dihormati dan membentuk norma moral di dalam komunitas mereka. Namun, kepatuhan terhadap figur tersebut dapat menjadi masalah ketika para pengikut tidak mempertanyakan perilaku tidak etis atau penyalahgunaan wewenang. Studi ini mengkaji bagaimana dimensi otoritarianisme sayap kanan (right-wing authoritarianism meliputi ketundukan, agresi, dan konvensionalisme) serta mekanisme pelepasan moral (moral disengagement) berhubungan dengan kepatuhan yang membahayakan (perilous obedience) terhadap otoritas agama. Menggunakan data dari 243 partisipan Indonesia lintas kelompok agama mayoritas dan minoritas, analisis regresi hierarkis menunjukkan bahwa ketundukan otoritarian dan pelepasan moral—khususnya perbandingan yang menguntungkan (advantageous comparison)—merupakan prediktor terkuat dari kepatuhan yang membahayakan. Meskipun agresi otoritarian pada awalnya memprediksi hasil tersebut, efeknya melemah setelah pelepasan moral dimasukkan ke dalam model. Konvensionalisme, terlepas dari kepentingan teoretisnya, tidak memprediksi kepatuhan secara signifikan dalam konteks ini. Temuan ini menyoroti faktor-faktor psikologis yang terkait dengan kesediaan pengikut untuk menoleransi atau membenarkan penyalahgunaan wewenang dalam lingkup agama.

Keywords / Kata kunci

Authoritarianism;
Moral disengagement;
Obedience;
Religious leaders;
Perilous obedience;
Submission;
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*Tokoh agama;
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Introduction

The sovereign is called the tyrant who knows no laws but his caprice.

- Voltaire -

Since leadership requires an outlet to exercise influence, leadership inherently involves followers. As a group process, followers believe in their leaders' honor, competence, and group prototypes, enabling leaders to act in the group's

best interests. However, obedience itself should not necessarily be considered a key indicator of leadership, as it is often displayed merely to avoid disapproval, punishment, or fear rather than genuine internal acceptance (Levine, 2012). In contexts where leaders are perceived as charismatic and unfalsifiable, such as religious leadership, this perception can further facilitate obedience, particularly when leadership becomes romanticized (Carsten & Uhl-Bien, 2013). Extreme forms of obedience have historically

produced severe consequences, such as atrocities carried out in Nazi concentration camps. Such compliance with authority orders that are considered illegal or immoral by the broader community is referred to as crimes of obedience (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989), and similar dynamics have been observed in corporate scandals such as the collapse of Enron. Ethical failures may arise when leaders are perceived as powerful while followers feel unable to challenge unethical demands (Hollander, 1995). When leaders' authority is perceived as legitimate, followers may feel powerless and comply even with unethical orders (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989).

Within the context of Islamic psychology and culture, being a Muslim (or a follower) does not necessarily lead to ethical failure. For example, Zaim et al. (2024) demonstrated that Islamic leadership virtues (such as justice, wisdom, religiosity, and kindness) predict organizational commitment and job performance. In turn, job performance has been shown to align with ethical behavior (Bello, 2012). This suggests that Islamic values, or Muslim identity as grounded in moral principles within Islamic doctrine may correspond to more ethical behavior. However, it is also evident that some individuals invoke Islamic doctrine to justify actions that contradict ethical standards.

For instance, Frazer (2024) showed that propaganda messages from the Islamic State terrorist organization (IS/ISIS/ISIL/Daesh) contain clear mechanisms of moral disengagement. One example is moral justification, defined as framing harmful actions as serving a worthy purpose or greater good. As illustrated in the propaganda narrative: "They have deceived hordes of people, who follow them on the path to eternal Hellfire. As such, one should not downplay the importance of targeting and eliminating the imams of kufr [apostasy] in the West, doing so in support of Allah's religion" (p. 44, Frazer, 2024). Such narratives use religious framing to recruit followers, including Muslims more broadly to promote violence/unethical conduct. Taken together, these observations suggest that unethical behavior in group contexts is not primarily a function of religious identity or religious values per se, but rather of the extent to which individuals engage in moral disengagement. Leaders may deploy propaganda and provide justifications for unethical conduct, yet followers may respond differently (either disengaging their moral standards or adhering to their ethical principles) thereby determining

whether they comply or resist. Moral disengagement itself (Bandura, 2015; Frazer, 2024) is a universal psychological phenomenon that operates across cultural contexts, including both organizational settings and religious communities. Accordingly, conceptual debates regarding the relationship between religion and unethical behavior increasingly converge on the role of moral disengagement as a key explanatory mechanism (Hassan et al., 2023). Furthermore, unethical behavior tends to decrease as individuals develop a more intrinsic (spiritual) religious orientation, as they anticipate feelings of guilt when violating moral principles (Hassan & Rahman, 2024).

Religious leaders are highly trusted figures across many cultures and often shape community behaviors (e.g., Ali & Ushijima, 2005; Anshel & Smith, 2014; Orubuloye et al., 1993; Surur & Kaba, 2000). Their influence also extends to ideological settings (Butt, 2012; Kalmbach, 2012; Khadiagala, 2001). As moral authorities and role models, they are frequently sought for guidance and can influence followers beyond formal power through identity construction and group definitions (George, 2016; Reicher et al., 2005). However, despite the positive roles attributed to leaders, including the religious leaders, individuals remain susceptible to unethical behavior (Chell et al., 2016). Problems arise when unquestioning loyalty is directed toward leaders who are unethical or self-serving. In such situations, obedience may lead to exploitation, particularly when followers are manipulated to serve leaders' personal interests.

Recently, Ertaş Çapan and Uzunçarşılı (2022) conceptualize "peril" obedience as a construct that captures individuals' general tendency to comply with authority within hierarchical organizational relationships. Building on the social psychological literature on obedience, particularly Milgram's work, the authors conceptualize obedience as a behavioral tendency in which individuals comply with directives from authority figures, often transferring responsibility for their actions to those in higher positions. Authors frames, develop operationalization, and psychometrically test several forms of measures of perilous obedience that may emerge in authority-subordinate relationships in organizational context: (1) blind obedience (following authority without moral reflection), (2) coercive obedience (compliance driven by pressure or threats), (3) destructive obedience (executing directives that may harm

others), (4) crime of obedience (engaging in illegal or unethical acts under authority orders), and (5) unquestioned obedience (accepting directives without critical evaluation). These forms encapsulate how authority relationships may shape followers' willingness to comply even when such compliance conflicts with ethical norms or personal moral judgment. Building on the perspective of perilous obedience and findings from [Ertaş Çapan and Uzunçarşılı \(2022\)](#) in organizational leadership, we extend the concept by defining perilous obedience to religious authority as a form blind, coercive, destructive, criminal, and unquestioned obedience, to comply with directives from religious leaders in ways that may produce harmful, unethical, or socially problematic outcomes.

What characteristics of followers also tolerate the misuse of power by their religious leaders? What psychological mechanisms allow them to do that? We aim to focus on what individuals and how they process to justify their continued obedience to religious authority (even when their leader behaves unethically/perilously).

Authoritarianism components and perilous obedience toward religious authority

Answering who is more likely to engage in such perilous obedience leads to the concept of the authoritarian personality, commonly referred to as Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA; [Adorno et al., 1950](#)). [Altemeyer \(1988, 1996\)](#) conceptualized authoritarianism as a three-component construct consisting of authoritarian aggression (punitive hostility toward perceived threats), authoritarian submission (unquestioning obedience to authority), and conventionalism (adherence to societal traditions and norms). High authoritarianism has long been associated with ideological aggression, intergroup hostility, political intolerance ([Altemeyer, 1996; van Hiel et al., 2020](#)), and low openness ([Duckitt & Sibley, 2010](#)).

Previous studies, however, tend to treat authoritarianism as a unidimensional construct (e.g., [Jasko et al., 2022; van Hiel et al., 2020](#)). Empirical evidence suggests that the three components may exert differentiated effects on attitudes and behavior ([Passini, 2017, 2020](#)). Authoritarian submission and aggression have historically been regarded as primary drivers of authoritarian violence, with research linking them to punitive attitudes, coercive measures, and intolerance toward dissenters and marginalized groups ([Cohrs et al., 2005; Kunst et al., 2017;](#)

[Osborne et al., 2023](#)). [Oesterreich \(2005\)](#) argues that individuals high in authoritarian submission are not necessarily violent by disposition but may engage in violence when such actions are sanctioned or demanded by legitimate authority (see also [Duckitt & Sibley, 2010; Kunst et al., 2017; Osborne et al., 2023](#)). Meanwhile, individuals high in conventionalism may support submission and aggressive enforcement of norms when sacred traditions or religious identities are perceived to be under threat ([Gómez et al., 2024; Oesterreich, 2005](#)). In the context of religious authority, these distinctions become particularly relevant because religious leaders often occupy positions of strong moral legitimacy that may amplify followers' willingness to comply with their directives.

Moral disengagement

Existing studies on behavioral ethics exhibit a connection between moral disengagement and unethical behaviors ([Bandura et al., 1996; Detert et al., 2008; Moore et al., 2012; Shu et al., 2011](#)). Previous research highlighted mechanisms of moral disengagement in various contexts, such as war and among children in schools ([Moore, 2015](#)).

The body of knowledge suggests that when the self-regulation process fails, people will be morally disengaged from their actions. The absence of guilt is due to their cognitive removal of what is perceived as personal sanctions of unaccepted or bad behavior ([Bonner et al., 2016](#)). Drawing from Moral Disengagement Theory ([Bandura, 1991; Moore, 2015](#)), the mechanisms are defined as moral justification, euphemistic labelling, advantageous comparisons, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame. According to moral disengagement theory ([Bandura, 1986, 1991, 1999; Moore, 2015](#)), when people violate their own moral standards, they will experience personal discomfort and usually avoid discomfort through disengagement from the negative consequences of their actions. When there is a discrepancy between personal moral standards and actual behavior, the discomfort is encapsulated by cognitive dissonance ([Festinger, 1962](#)) that needs to be reduced and managed. Moral disengagement can contribute as a strategy to manage dissonance by justifying unethical behaviors.

The process of mitigating unethical behavior to make it appear acceptable includes moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and

advantageous comparison (Bonner et al., 2016). When the argument in place is that unethical behavior serves as a means to a moral end, moral justification is applied (Aquino et al., 2007). Euphemistic labeling exists when people downgrade the choice of language they use from what is considered as morally heavy into something more neutral and acceptable in effort to reduce moral implications, hence reducing discomfort when engaging in unethical behaviors. Advantageous comparison ensues when unethical behavior is being compared to behavior that is more harmful and making the unethical behavior perceived as relatively acceptable (Bandura, 1986). In summary, the first three mechanisms of moral disengagement function to increase the acceptability of unethical behaviors.

Since unethical behaviors create discomfort and dissonance, the consequences need to be masked to appear innocuous. Moral disengagement process then involves displacement of responsibility to establish belief that someone else is responsible for the detrimental results (Bandura, 1986, 1999). The Milgram experiment is an example of this particular mechanism. Next, diffusion of responsibility is established when there is a belief that the consequences of unethical behaviors are a shared responsibility. Along with distortion of consequences, all three mechanisms are in an effort to reduce individual's responsibility of conducting unethical behavior. The last two mechanisms function to minimize their identifications with victims of unethical behaviors. Dehumanization exists when victims' worth is degraded. According to moral disengagement theory, dehumanized victims are easier to become targets of unethical behavior as they are perceived as "less than human". In addition to that, attribution of blame happens when victims are blamed directly for their vulnerabilities (Treviño & Nelson, 2011). Both mechanisms are applied when people who conduct unethical behavior need to reduce discomfort by perceiving their victims as deserving harm.

In relation to authoritarianism, individuals high in authoritarian tendencies may employ mechanisms of moral disengagement, believing that violence is justified if it serves a higher good or compares favorably with worse alternatives (Bandura, 1999). Such individuals, often characterized by cognitive rigidity and dogmatism, are less likely to question authority, particularly when authority directives align with their worldview (Jost et al., 2003). The

relationship between authoritarian dispositions and perilous obedience may therefore operate through distinct psychological pathways involving moral disengagement. Authoritarian submission reflects a tendency to defer to legitimate authority, which may facilitate moral disengagement through mechanisms such as displacement of responsibility, whereby individuals attribute responsibility for harmful actions to authority figures and perceive themselves as merely following orders.

Authoritarian aggression, in contrast, reflects support for punitive actions against those perceived as norm violators, which may promote moral disengagement through moral justification and dehumanization, allowing individuals to frame harmful actions as legitimate enforcement of social order. However, such aggression may translate into harmful compliance primarily when authority explicitly demands it, suggesting that its influence on perilous obedience may be suppressed by (or operate indirectly through) moral disengagement. Conventionalism reflects strong adherence to traditional norms and sacred values endorsed by authority. Its effects are likely to depend on perceived threats to these traditions rather than authority directives per se, and may therefore be less directly related to perilous obedience, particularly when authority demands conflict with established traditional norms. Taken together, these distinct mechanisms suggest that the components of authoritarianism may differentially facilitate perilous obedience by motivating deference to authority and enabling cognitive justifications that reduce the moral costs of complying with problematic authority directives.

Three research gaps motivate the present study. First, little attention has been given to how moral disengagement operates among followers of religious leaders, particularly in explaining how followers justify or tolerate the misuse of power by those leaders, especially in the Indonesian context. Second, although authoritarianism has frequently been linked to obedience toward authority, most studies treat right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) as a unidimensional construct, overlooking the possibility that its components may exert differential effects on perilous obedience. Third, moral disengagement may not only mediate but also differentially shape or suppress the effects of these authoritarian components, as distinct dimensions of authoritarianism may rely on different cognitive mechanisms to justify obedience to problematic

authority behavior. Together, these gaps highlight the need to examine how authoritarian dispositions and moral disengagement jointly explain followers' willingness to engage in perilous obedience toward religious authority.

This study therefore examines whether followers' perilous obedience toward religious leaders can be predicted by authoritarianism (submission, aggression, and conventionalism) and by moral disengagement mechanisms. We hypothesize that (1) submission and aggression will significantly predict perilous obedience toward religious leaders, (2) conventionalism will play a weaker role, and (3) moral disengagement will further predict this outcome above and beyond authoritarianism components. Demographic variables, including age, sex, education, and religious group majority status, are statistically controlled.

Method

This study employed a cross-sectional design to examine whether different dimensions of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (submission, aggression, and conventionalism) and mechanisms of moral disengagement predict followers' blind obedience and acceptance of their religious leader's misuse of power. All subdimensions of RWA and moral disengagement were entered as predictors, while sex, age, education level, and religious group status (majority vs. minority) were statistically controlled to isolate their effects.

Participants

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.7 to estimate the required sample size for the hierarchical regression analysis. Assuming a small-to-moderate effect size ($f^2 = .05$; see Cohen, 1988), $\alpha = .05$, and power $(1 - \beta) = .80$, with one tested predictor and a total of eight predictors in the final model, the minimum required sample size was 160 participants.

Data were collected voluntarily between March 27 and April 21, 2024, without incentives. Participants were recruited using a non-probability convenience sampling approach through online survey distribution, with inclusion criteria of age ≥ 17 years. Participants ($N = 243$) ranged in age from 17 to 67 years ($M = 26.91$, $SD = 11.67$). The age distribution was positively skewed (skewness = 1.49) with moderate kurtosis (kurtosis = 1.27), indicating a greater representation of younger participants. This pattern should be considered when interpreting the generalizability of the findings across age groups. Most were female (64.6%) and identified as

Muslim (77.7%). Educational backgrounds varied, with 51.0% completing high school and 29.6% holding a bachelor's degree. The majority (77.4%) identified with the religious majority group (Muslim).

Data collection procedure

Data were collected online between March 27 and April 21, 2024. Participants were recruited voluntarily through social media and community networks without any form of compensation. Before beginning the survey, participants read an informed consent statement explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and data confidentiality. Those who agreed proceeded to complete a series of self-report questionnaires, including measures of perilous obedience, moral disengagement, and authoritarianism, as well as demographic questions. On average, completion of the survey took approximately 15–20 minutes. All procedures complied with APA7th ethical standards.

Instrument

Moral disengagement

Moral disengagement was measured using a shortened version of the Moral Disengagement Scale (Rubio-Garay et al., 2017), consisting of 16 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree, 7 = totally agree). The shortened version retained items representing all original subdimensions, including moral justification, euphemistic labeling, distortion of consequences, displacement and diffusion of responsibility, dehumanization, attribution of blame, and advantageous comparison. Sample items include: "It is okay to beat someone if they insult you," "Assaulting someone is just a game," and "A kid who only suggests breaking rules should not be blamed if other kids truly do it." In the current sample, the scale demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$), and as in prior research, was positively associated with physical aggression, verbal aggression, hostility, and anger, and negatively associated with interpersonal reactivity, perspective taking, and empathy. A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using the DWLS estimator to test a one-factor model of moral disengagement. The model showed acceptable fit, $\chi^2(98) = 256.28$, $p < .001$, CFI = .929, TLI = .913, RMSEA = .082 (90% CI [.070, .094]), and SRMR = .077. Standardized factor loadings ranged from .31 to .73, and all loadings were statistically significant. This

indicates that the items adequately represented the underlying construct.

Perilous obedience

Perilous obedience toward religious authority was measured using an adapted version of the Organizational Obedience Scale (Ertaş Çapan & Uzunçarşılı, 2022). The original scale consisted of 27 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). In the present study, 19 items were selected and tailored to reflect obedience toward religious leaders and were used to operationalize perilous obedience toward religious authority, defined as the tendency to comply with directives from religious leaders even when individuals do not fully understand, question, or personally agree with those directives. Sample items include: “I follow every instruction from the religious group leader when performing tasks that I don't fully understand,” “I do what is commanded in my place of worship; I am not involved,” and “I follow the instructions given by my religious group leader, even if it violates societal norms in general.” The original scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$). In the current sample, the adapted scale also showed excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .92$). A CFA using the DWLS estimator was conducted to test a one-factor model of perilous obedience. The model demonstrated acceptable incremental fit indices, $\chi^2(142) = 677.23$, $p < .001$, CFI = .935, TLI = .921, although the RMSEA was elevated (.125, 90% CI [.115, .134]); SRMR was .082. Standardized loadings ranged from .48 to .88 and were all significant.

Authoritarianism

Authoritarianism was assessed using selected items adapted from Passini's (2017) measure of authoritarian attitudes, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The scale included 12 items capturing three core dimensions: authoritarian submission (e.g., “Our country would be great if we did what the authorities tell us to do”), authoritarian aggression (e.g., “The recent growth in crime shows that we have to use extreme measures against delinquents”), and conventionalism (e.g., “The ‘old-fashioned way’ and ‘old-fashioned values’ still show the best way to live”). Initial reliability analyses indicated relatively low internal consistency for the authoritarianism subscales. The four-item submission subscale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of .51, the four-item aggression subscale .576, and the four-item conventionalism

subscale .66. Item analysis revealed that several reverse-worded items substantially reduced internal consistency.

The reverse-coded item “People should always have greater freedom to protest against the government for any reason” showed a very low corrected item–total correlation ($r = .19$) and was therefore removed. Similarly, the reverse-coded item “We should be more tolerant toward people who protest against the government” displayed a negative corrected item–total correlation even after reverse scoring ($r = -.14$) and was also removed. One conventionalism item (“The government should firmly prohibit marriage between gay and lesbian individuals”) appeared to reflect prejudice toward sexual minorities rather than adherence to general traditional values. After removing reverse-coded items (final N item = 9), the scale demonstrated improved internal consistency: $\alpha = .68$ for submission, $\alpha = .77$ for aggression, and $\alpha = .63$ for conventionalism. As a general guideline, Cronbach's alpha values between .60 and .70 are considered acceptable, particularly for scales with a small number of items, whereas values above .80 indicate strong internal consistency (Ursachi et al., 2015). The subdimensions were positively intercorrelated with small effect ($r = .19$ to .29, $p < .001$), indicating distinct components of authoritarianism. A CFA using the DWLS estimator supported a three-factor correlated model of RWA (submission, aggression, and conventionalism), $\chi^2(24) = 89.57$, $p < .001$, CFI = .935, TLI = .902, RMSEA = .106 (90% CI [.083, .130]), and SRMR = .062. Standardized loadings ranged from .50 to .77 (submission), .65 to .81 (aggression), and .53 to .76 (conventionalism), and were all significant.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations were computed using observed total scores (i.e., mean/sum of items) to provide an interpretable overview of central tendencies and score distributions. Prior to hypothesis testing, standard regression assumptions were evaluated. For hypothesis testing, factor scores derived from confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were used. Moral disengagement and perilous obedience were modeled as one-factor constructs, whereas right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) was represented by three correlated dimensions (submission, aggression, and conventionalism). All items were treated as ordinal indicators and estimated using the diagonally weighted least squ-

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and intercorrelation

Variable	M	SD	α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Age	26.91	11.67	-								
2. Sex	-	-	-	-.030							
3. Education	2.17	1.3	-	.610**	-.190**						
4. Majority Group	-	-	-	-.180**	-.110	.020					
5. Pobedience	2.62	.93	.920	-.370**	-.090	-.320**	.060				
6. MMDS	2.88	.82	.830	-.410**	-.190**	-.290**	.020	.480**			
7. Submission	3.51	1.07	.680	.010	-.040	-.090	-.200**	.320**	.190**		
8. Aggression	4.08	1.41	.770	-.250**	.030	-.240**	.050	.310**	.320**	.200**	
9. Conventionalism	4.87	1.04	.630	.030	.130*	-.090	.100	.140*	-.050	.190**	.290**

Notes. $N = 243$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. MMDS = Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale. Sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female). Majority Group (0 = religious minority group, 1 = religious majority group).

ares (DWLS) estimator (DiStefano & Morgan, 2014). Factor scores were extracted to account for item loadings and measurement error to provide more precise estimates of effect size(s) towards outcome. Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was then conducted using factor scores, with demographic variables entered in Step 1, RWA dimensions in Step 2, and moral disengagement in Step 3, to examine the incremental contribution of moral disengagement beyond prior predictors.

Results

We conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses to examine the predictive effects of right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) subdimensions and moral disengagement mechanisms on followers' blind obedience and acceptance of their religious leader's misuse of power. In Step 1, we entered demographic control variables, including sex, age, education level, and religious group status (majority vs. minority). In Step 2, we added the three RWA subdimensions as predictors. In Step 3, we included the global moral disengagement score.

Finally, an exploratory model was tested by replacing the global score with its eight subscales to assess the unique contribution of specific mechanisms. We examined the change in R^2 at each step and reported standardized beta coefficients to evaluate the relative strength of each predictor.

Table 1 preview mean, standard deviation, cronbach's alpha, and variables' intercorrelation. Blind obedience and tolerance toward a leader's misuse of power (perilous obedience) was significantly and positively correlated with all three dimensions of right-wing authoritarianism: Submission ($r = .32$, $p < .01$), Aggression ($r = .31$,

$p < .01$), and Conventionalism ($r = .14$, $p < .05$). Perilous obedience also showed a moderate positive correlation with moral disengagement ($r = .48$, $p < .01$). Notably, age was negatively correlated with perilous obedience ($r = -.37$, $p < .01$) and education level ($r = -.32$, $p < .01$), indicating younger participants with lower education level were more likely to demonstrate blind obedience.

Prior to the main analyses, several regression assumptions were examined, including multicollinearity, normality of residuals, and heteroscedasticity. Multicollinearity diagnostics indicated no problematic collinearity among the predictors. Tolerance values ranged from .521 to .874 and VIF values ranged from 1.14 to 1.92, both within recommended thresholds (Tolerance $> .10$; VIF < 10). The normality of residuals was assessed using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests. Both tests were non-significant ($D = .053$, $p = .094$; $W = .992$, $p = .253$). This indicates that the residuals were normally distributed. Heteroscedasticity was examined through visual inspection of the residual plot, which showed no systematic pattern and suggested relatively constant variance across predicted values. Consistent with this observation, the White test for heteroscedasticity was also non-significant, $\chi^2(42) = 55.42$, $p = .080$. This indicates that the assumption of homoscedasticity was not violated.

As seen on Table 2, a three-step hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive value of authoritarianism dimensions and moral disengagement on the outcome variable, controlling for demographic variables. In Step 1, age ($\beta = -.33$, $p < .01$), significantly predicted the outcome, accounting for 19% of the variance, $F(4, 238) = 13.53$, $p < .01$. In Step 2, the

Table 2

Hierarchical Regression Predicting Perilous Obedience from Demographics, Authoritarianism Dimensions, and Moral Disengagement

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
Age	-.330**	-.330**	-.180*
Sex (1 = Female)	-.110†	-.110	-.030
Education	-.150†	-.010	-.090
Majority Group	-.010	.020	.040
Submission		.240**	.190**
Aggression		.140*	.080
Conventionalism		.060	.090
MMDS			.340**
F	13.53**	13.00**	16.15**
R-sq	.190	.280	.360
R-sq change	.190**	.090**	.080**

Notes. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$. † $p < .10$. MMDS = Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement Scale. Sex (0 = Male, 1 = Female). Majority Group (0 = religious minority group, 1 = religious majority group).

authoritarianism subdimensions were added to the model. Authoritarian submission ($\beta = .24$, $p < .01$) and aggression ($\beta = .14$, $p < .05$) were significant predictors, whereas conventionalism was not. This step accounted for an additional 9% of the variance, $\Delta R^2 = .09$, $p < .01$, $F(7, 236) = 13.00$, $p < .01$. In Step 3, moral disengagement was included and emerged as a significant predictor ($\beta = .34$, $p < .01$), while the effects of aggression became nonsignificant. Submission remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .19$, $p < .01$). The final model explained 36% of the total variance, $F(8, 234) = 16.15$, $p < .01$, with a significant increase of 7.7% in explained variance, $\Delta R^2 = .077$, $p < .01$.

As an exploratory step, the global moral disengagement score was replaced with its eight subscales in the final model. Submission remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .23$, $p < .001$), while the other dimensions of authoritarianism were not significant. Among the moral disengagement mechanisms, advantageous comparison ($\beta = .18$, $p = .01$) and displacement of responsibility ($\beta = .13$, $p = .053$) emerged as significant predictors of the outcome. In contrast, the remaining subscales (moral justification, euphemistic labeling, diffusion of responsibility, distortion of consequences, dehumanization, & attribution of blame) were not significant (all $p > .05$).

Discussions

This study set out to understand how people end up justifying obedience even when their leaders cross ethical lines, particularly in religious contexts where authority tends to be moralized. Our findings confirmed that among the three

dimensions of Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA), submission and aggression significantly predicted blind obedience and tolerance of misuse of power. People high in submission are wired to follow, and those high in aggression may not necessarily seek violence, but when it is sanctioned by an authority figure (especially one they admire or believe to be sacred) they are more likely to condone it. These findings echo Oesterreich's (2005) argument that authoritarian aggression tends to manifest when people are instructed to act, rather than out of personal hostility alone. Interestingly, conventionalism did not predict blind obedience. This challenges the idea that conventionalism should be included within the authoritarianism scale just because of its ideological overtones. Rather, the result suggests that holding traditional values doesn't automatically translate into tolerating unethical behavior.

One of the results indicate that religious category (Muslim vs. non-Muslim) is not a significant predictor of perilous obedience. This suggests that religious identity, in itself, is not the central issue. Instead, the findings point toward psychological mechanisms (specifically blind submission to authority and moral disengagement) as the primary drivers. This interpretation is consistent with prior research showing that religiosity and religious identity (being Muslim) alone has small explanatory power in predicting the violent dimension of extremist mindset (Arifin et al., 2025). In this sense, we argue that the main problem does not lie in religion, spiritual values, or worldview per se, but in specific attitudes about

uncritical obedience and the suspension of moral self-regulation. The inclusion of moral disengagement in the model renders the previously significant effect of authoritarian aggression (i.e., punitive attitudes toward deviant or heretical others) non-significant. This suggests that aggressive tendencies, particularly those justified by religious authority, may operate through mechanisms of moral disengagement (the effect was suppressed when moral disengagement included on step 3). In other words, the willingness to harm perceived deviant others under religious instruction is encapsulated within followers' moral disengagement.

Previous research in Indonesia also suggests that mechanisms of moral disengagement that may promote intolerant attitudes and behaviors (both across religions and within religious sects) are aligned with findings related to the hijrah phenomenon (Wulandari et al., 2022). In this context, individuals undergoing a process of hijrah may experience a shift, or even a detachment, from previously internalized social norms in order to align themselves with a new group identity. This underscores that the critical factor is how individuals engage (or disengage) their moral standards in the process of adopting new identities, in the face of experienced self uncertainty, to achieve self certainty and significance restoration. Third, these findings align with research in Islamic psychology and organizational contexts, where spiritually grounded leadership, particularly leadership based on virtues, has been shown to enhance employee commitment and improve job performance (Zaim et al., 2024). This reinforces the argument that religion or religious values are not inherently predictive of unethical or counterproductive behavior.

Finally, it is important to consider the developmental antecedents of moral disengagement. Longitudinal research suggests that early empathy plays a critical role. For example, informant-rated empathy at age 12 has been found to be a robust predictor of moral disengagement at age 15 (Hyde et al., 2010). Lower levels of empathy are associated with adverse early environments, including rejecting parenting (characterized by cold, punitive, and unresponsive parent, child interactions during early childhood), interparental aggression, and neighborhood impoverishment (e.g., low education, low income, high unemployment, and limited public resources). Furthermore, individuals with lower levels of intrinsic religious

orientation, those who do not internalize religious values at a personal level, are more likely to exhibit higher moral disengagement (Hassan & Rahman, 2024). Taken together, these findings suggest that moral disengagement reflects a developmental vulnerability rooted in early relational and emotional experiences, rather than a function of religious identity itself. This reinforces the argument that the pathway to perilous obedience lies in disrupted moral development of individuals.

What stood out even more was the role of advantageous comparison as a mechanism of moral disengagement. Most prior work has emphasized mechanisms like diffusion or displacement of responsibility: people pass the blame upward, saying they were “just following orders.” But what we found here is something more conscious. Followers didn’t just deflect responsibility. They made cognitive comparisons. Thoughts like “yes, my leader is corrupt, but at least he’s not as bad as others,” or “better corrupt than dangerous,” reflect how people remain loyal by shifting the standard of what counts as unacceptable. We interpret this as a strategic reframing that lets followers preserve both their image of the leader and their moral comfort. And when religion is part of the equation, then this kind of moral comparison becomes harder to overcome precisely because it feels like defending the faith itself. This mechanism may help explain why followers can remain steadfast even in the face of evidence that their leaders are acting in self-interest or harming themselves.

This study highlights how follower psychology matters just as much as leadership when it comes to ethical dynamics. It shifts the lens from a purely leader-centered view to show that followers’ traits: like their authoritarian tendencies and how easily they morally disengage (Gatti et al., 2021). The study also expands the moral disengagement framework into a culturally specific and high-stakes context that hasn’t been explored much before.

Of course, these findings must be interpreted with some caution. First, the study is correlational. That means we cannot say for certain whether moral disengagement leads to obedience or if people become morally disengaged after choosing to obey. Second, all variables were measured through self-report, which may be subject to social desirability bias, particularly on sensitive topics related to religion and ethics. Future research could benefit from employing experimental designs, such as using vignettes of leaders making

ethically questionable requests, to more directly test causal pathways in a controlled environment. Lastly, the sample was drawn from a specific cultural and religious context in Indonesia. While this provides valuable non-Western data, the findings may not be generalizable to other religious groups or cultures with different power dynamics and traditions of authority. Comparative studies across different religious and national contexts would be a valuable next step. Finally, future research should aim to collect dyadic data, measuring the traits of both leaders and followers, to explore how the interaction between leader and follower characteristics influences these processes.

As noted by an anonymous reviewer, a limitation of this study lies in the measurement validity. While CFA results showed acceptable factor loadings and partial model fit, some indices (e.g., RMSEA, chi-square) were suboptimal, likely due to the small sample size. Thus, the findings should be interpreted with caution. Another limitation concerns the generalizability of the findings. Although the sample size was adequate for statistical estimation, the use of non-probability sampling inherently limits representativeness. Participants were recruited based on minimal inclusion criteria (age ≥ 17), resulting in a relatively wide age range (17–67 years) with a positively skewed distribution, where the majority were young adults. This distribution may restrict the generalizability of the findings across age groups. Future research should employ probability sampling techniques and more balanced age distributions to enhance the generalizability of findings across populations.

The findings offer a clear warning for religious groups. Encouraging absolute obedience might seem like a way to maintain unity, but it can backfire by making followers more prone to justify unethical behavior. When loyalty replaces personal moral judgment, the risk of moral disengagement increases. Religious communities would benefit from promoting critical reflection alongside faith, helping people stay morally grounded even while respecting authority. Educational efforts within these groups should focus not only on loyalty, but also on helping followers understand how and why people rationalize wrongdoing, especially when it comes from someone they admire.

Conclusion

This study shows that authoritarian submissions are linked to followers' willingness to tolerate a

leader's misuse of power. Rather than denying responsibility, many justify obedience through advantageous comparison moral disengagement: seeing their leader as "not as bad" as others. This suggests that moral disengagement can take more subtle, comparative forms, especially in religious contexts.

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