

## The Nahdliyin Phenomenon in Practical Politics in Indonesia

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### ABSTRACT

*Islamic politics began during the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad, when he was not only a religious leader but also a leader. Islam itself considers that politics is not merely a tool of legitimacy, but also a means of organizing human life. In Indonesia, one of the paradigms of Islamic politics is the paradigm described by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), one of the largest mass organizations in Indonesia, which has been involved in practical politics since before independence. The purpose of this study is to examine how NU currently practices politics, given that this mass organization is closely connected to society. This study uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach through articles, journals, books, and other sources related to the research topic. The results indicate that Nahdliyin's involvement in politics cannot be separated from the historical legacy of NU's relationship with power, but is also driven by ideological and pragmatic efforts to advance Islamic and national values.*

**Keywords:** Nahdliyin; Politic; Practical Politics; Indonesia

### INTRODUCTION

Islamic politics began during the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam. At that time, he was not only a religious leader but also a political leader, and Islamic politics also incorporated elements of fiqh. Islam itself considers that politics is not merely a tool of legitimacy, but also a means of organizing human life. The teachings of Islamic politics originated in the Arabian Peninsula and in the traditions of Muslims themselves, giving rise to issues concerning the exercise of power. The relationship between religion and politics (state power) has long been discussed by major thinkers such as Ibn Sina and others. In the history of Indonesian independence, Islamic

politics influenced many figures in the struggle for independence. Islamic politics was also one of the political currents in Indonesia, alongside Communism, Radical Nationalism, Javanese Traditionalism, and socialism. In its conception, Islam recognizes nationality and nationhood. During the sessions of the Investigating Committee for Preparatory Work for Indonesian Independence, Islamic leaders sat together with nationalist leaders; at that time, tensions intensified and unity nearly broke apart. Eventually, the foundations of Pancasila and the Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia were established. (Feith, 1988) This evidence shows that Islam had a highly transactional relationship with the state, despite the many disputes that occurred.

In Indonesia, one paradigm of Islamic politics is represented by Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), whose way of thinking takes a middle path between rationalism and spiritualism. This reference is drawn from several scholars, including Abu Hasan Al-Asy'ari and Abu Mansur Al-Maturidi in the field of theology. In the field of Sufism, NU developed the methods of Al-Ghazali and Junaid Al-Baghdadi, integrating Sufism with sharia, as well as drawing upon the sources of Islamic teachings, namely the Qur'an, as-Sunnah, al-ijma', and al-qiyas. (Mahatma, 2017) According to KH. Musthofa Bisri, commonly known as Gus Mus and a former Rais Aam of NU, love of the homeland is consistent with the declaration of Hadratus Syaikh KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, known as *hubbul wathan minal iman*. Furthermore, regarding the nation-state, he identifies at least three political perspectives. First is national politics, namely the view that Indonesia is a home for all groups; in principle, NU has been actively involved in Indonesian politics even long before independence. Second, according to Gus Mus, the relationship between NU and the nation-state involves people's politics. In his explanation, a people's representative or leader should think about the fate of the people and should even follow the example of the Prophet Muhammad. Third, according to Gus Mus, is power politics or practical politics. (Hakim, 2019)

NU is the largest Islamic mass organization in Indonesia. It is therefore not surprising that some of its members become involved in practical politics. In its development, NU participated in elections five times during the Old Order. Many of its members were also involved in practical politics, particularly through positions in the Ministry of Religious Affairs. NU's political involvement actually began long before independence, specifically during the Japanese occupation. It continued during the

independence period, including the PBNU proclamation to fight the Dutch and wage jihad fi sabilillah, known as the Resolution of Jihad. After independence, NU expressed its political aspirations through the Masyumi Party, continuing into the New Order period, when NU was forced to join the United Development Party (Ananda Bintang Purwaramdhona, 2023).

During the New Order period, NU was the first organization to accept Pancasila as the sole foundation, at a time when not many organizations were willing to accept it. This was declared at the 1983 National Conference of Ulama at Pondok Pesantren Salafiyah Syafiiyah Sukorejo, Asembagus, Situbondo, East Java, specifically on 16 Rabiul Awal 1404 H, corresponding to December 21, 1983. The first reason was that, since its establishment, NU had not specified an organizational foundation. Second, for NU, Islam is not an ideology because Islam is the religion of God, whereas ideology is a product of human thought. Third, an organizational foundation does not necessarily have to be religious but may be based on certain principles. (NF, 2022b)

Approaching the Reform era, Gus Dur called for Soeharto to step down from the presidency; Gus Dur even spoke before a forum and directly addressed Soeharto. (NF, 2022a) From this history, it can be seen that NU's political journey has taken place over a long period. Each period had its own role, from before independence to the period leading up to the Reform era. However, was NU the same after the Reform era up to the present? In reality, NU experienced a decline after the Reform era.

The involvement of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesian politics has taken place since the pre-independence era and continued throughout various periods of national history. NU has consistently demonstrated an active role in the country's political dynamics. However, in the post-Reform era, this involvement has often generated debate, particularly when NU has been perceived as being too focused on practical politics. This phenomenon became particularly evident during regional head elections (Pilkada), when various parties used their proximity to NU to gain political sympathy. This article is based on three main issues that are frequently criticized in relation to NU and practical politics: the background of Nahdliyin citizens' involvement in politics, the significance of NU as the largest Islamic mass organization in Indonesia, and the purpose and urgency of this study.

The purpose of this study is to explore and analyze the dynamics of NU politics in the contemporary era, particularly after the Reform era. This began with the establishment of the National Awakening Party (PKB), which was declared on July 23, 1998, with Gus Dur (Abdurrahman Wahid) as one of the driving figures behind the party, with the aim of addressing two major tendencies. This was intended as a solution whereby NU would accommodate PKB as a facility for NU citizens without interfering in politics. The emergence of this party brought new enthusiasm among Nahdliyin. However, because of this, NU was considered to have violated the 1926 Khittah. In this way, NU committed a constitutional violation. The outcome was determined through a congress, but rejecting the demands of the citizens constituted a denial of reality. Nevertheless, the step taken by the Central Executive Board (PB) of NU was strategic. The managers of the NU jam'iyyah maintained that NU would remain a jam'iyyah diniyah ijtimaiyah, not a political party, and would not establish a political party. Nevertheless, PBNU allowed Nahdhiyin citizens to establish a party provided that it was undertaken conceptually and with careful consideration (Mayrudin and Akbar 2019).

After the establishment of PKB, further dynamics occurred within the party, namely the removal of Gus Dur from the party he had founded. Gus Dur's departure from the party occurred in 2008. According to Yenny Wahid, Gus Dur's daughter, her father was removed from the party by the current Chairman of PKB, Muhaimin Iskandar, or Cak Imin. Cak Imin is Gus Dur's nephew. The two were involved in a conflict in 2008. The conflict began following the 2005 Congress in Semarang, after which Cak Imin was removed by Gus Dur, who served as Chairman of the PKB Shura Council. The dismissal was carried out because Cak Imin frequently approached the presidential palace or the administration of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono. As a result, PKB split into two factions, namely the Cak Imin faction and the Gus Dur faction. Both factions held Extraordinary Congresses. At the congress organized by Cak Imin, he was appointed leader of PKB and also removed Yenny Wahid, who at the time served as secretary-general; however, the court ruled in favor of Cak Imin (Hendrik 2023).

As the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, NU naturally has significant influence in Indonesia, particularly in politics. There have been several criticisms because this organization is closely connected to society. Is this wrong? Certainly not, but in my view, this has become excessive; as ordinary people, it is not ethical to support a candidate

pair in a politically heated situation. This study also reveals a correlation between kiai and politics; the involvement of kiai in practical politics has blurred their identity. Moreover, it has created gaps between one kiai and another, resulting in divisions within the community. Ultimately, practical politics affects credibility, especially among ordinary people, because kiai are no longer regarded as exemplary figures worthy of respect and honor. In the eyes of society, such behavior is considered an expression of a desire for power and does not reflect the role of a protector of the community (Setiawan 2014).

Based on the arguments above, the findings of this study are expected to contribute to discussions about political affairs within religion and Indonesia, particularly among Nahdliyin themselves. This study also offers a new perspective on politics in Indonesia. Thus, this journal can provide comprehensive implications for the relationship between political power, religion, and the state.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Nahdlatul Ulama means “the awakening of devout scholars.” The term “awakening” essentially carries a more proactive meaning than “association” or “organization.” As is commonly understood, devout scholars are guiding figures who are emulated by society (Mubin, 2020).

Accordingly, under the guidance of these scholars, it is expected that the direction toward the awakening and advancement of the Islamic community and Muslims will be more clearly demonstrated and achieved.

This study is based on several main theoretical foundations to analyze the phenomenon of Nahdliyin involvement in practical politics in Indonesia. First, Mass-Based Party Theory from (Panebianco, 1988) is used to understand how NU, through its social and cultural networks, has become a significant base of political power. This theory emphasizes the importance of social ties and group loyalty in building political power. In this context, NU's strength lies in its ability to convert socio-religious capital into political capital through parties such as PKB (Muhammad, 2015).

According to (Hicken, 2011), Clientelism Theory is highly important for explaining the transactional relationship between NU elites and Nahdliyin constituents. In this context, political loyalty is predominantly based on patron-client relationships rather than

rational considerations of candidates' programs or visions and missions; for example, NU's support for Jokowi followed by the appointment of Ma'ruf Amin as vice president demonstrates a pattern of political exchange (Lego & Triono, n.d.).

Political Personalization Theory from (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007) can be used to analyze the dominance of kiai figures or charismatic leaders within NU politics. This phenomenon shows that the role of individuals becomes more prominent than party ideology or programs, thereby strengthening the tendency toward personality-based politics. In this context, there are many examples, such as highly influential local kiai; kiai at the village level often have greater influence than state officials in mobilizing votes (Lego & Triono, n.d.).

Identity Politics and Religious Populism in the book by (Kyriazis-Gouvelis, 2021) are applied to examine the use of religious symbols in political mobilization. This often results in the erosion of the values of moderation (tawassuth), tolerance (tasamuh), and balance (tawazun), which are characteristic of NU. This creates a potential risk of reducing the values of moderation (tawassuth) and tolerance (tasamuh) in political contests (Nuha & Maslakha, 2024).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research method. The focus of this study is to analyze the involvement of the Nahdliyin group in practical politics through a theoretical approach and literature review.

Information was collected from various secondary sources such as books, scientific journal articles, organizational documents, media archives, and official publications. The analysis was conducted using a descriptive-critical approach, employing a thematic approach to identify patterns of political involvement and the strategic dynamics of NU in regional head elections.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Political Transformation of Nahdlatul Ulama from Ideology to Practical Politics**

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) has a strong ideological background in the history of Indonesian politics. From before independence through the New Order era, NU was known not only as a religious organization but also as an important actor in the political arena, for example through its involvement in the Masyumi Party and the United Development Party (PPP). However, after the Reform era, NU's political direction began to shift from an initially ideology-based approach toward a more pragmatic and opportunistic approach.

In reality, many kiai and religious figures from the NU community directly participate in electoral politics. This phenomenon is closely related to the fact that NU has a very large number of followers, making it an attractive source of votes for various political parties. This situation is consistent with the concept of a mass-based party in political theory, in which a party's strength rests on extensive social networks and strong bonds (Panebianco, 1988).

A major change in NU's political role occurred during the Reform era, particularly when Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) served as President of the Republic of Indonesia. During this period, NU's involvement in practical politics reached its highest point. However, after Gus Dur's leadership ended, NU's involvement in politics began to shift toward a more pragmatic pattern. NU no longer functioned only as a moral guardian in politics, but also began to be used as an instrument for bargaining over power. Findings from the study by (Sakti Hidayatullah et al., 2022) support this, showing that NU elites tended to engage in transactional and opportunistic politics, particularly during the administration of President Joko Widodo.

### **Figure Dominance and Power Politics**

Since the establishment of the National Awakening Party (PKB), which has strong roots in the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) tradition and was founded by Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), NU's political direction as an institution has become increasingly inconsistent. On the one hand, NU continues to claim that it is an organization focused on religious affairs. On the other hand, its leading figures are actively involved in practical politics. This ambiguity has created confusion and has often caused friction between the cultural group consisting of grassroots ulama and the structural group dominated by elites.

In addition, the highly dominant influence of certain figures within NU indicates a tendency toward political personalization. (Dalton & Klingemann, 2007) explain that political personalization occurs when the role of individuals becomes more prominent than party ideology or programs. In the context of NU, many figures who emerge in politics do so not because of their abilities or experience in the field, but because of their respected positions as religious leaders or *kiai*.

### **Identity Politics and the Erosion of Aswaja Values**

Another issue that has emerged is the increasing use of religion-based identity politics. Many Nahdliyin figures involved in politics use religious symbols during campaign periods, indirectly strengthening sectarian political tendencies. This practice has made the dividing line between religious loyalty and rational political choices increasingly blurred.

In this context, the role of *kiai* is highly central. (Ubaidillah, 2018) notes that *kiai* often function as political patrons, whereby every fatwa or directive they convey tends to be accepted and followed absolutely by their *santri* and followers, leaving little room for debate or critical reflection.

The involvement of NU figures in practical politics has the potential to strengthen religion-based identity politics. Although NU is known for promoting a moderate Islamic mission through the principle of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja), its involvement in electoral competition often draws it into conflicts characterized by religious identity. According to (Vincent, 2013), identity politics manifested in the form of religious populism can reduce the space for rational thinking in a democratic system because it prioritizes loyalty to groups over individual ability or competence.

Such a situation risks eroding the noble values that have long characterized NU, such as *tawassuth* (balance), *tasamuh* (tolerance), and *tawazun* (maintaining balance). When religious figures or NU cadres become involved in political activities merely because of their organizational background, rather than on the basis of their quality or capacity, these values are gradually displaced by practical interests and short-term political calculations.

### **Political Pragmatism and the Crisis of Cadre Development**

The phenomenon in which many inexperienced NU cadres occupy strategic positions has generated criticism of the political cadre development process within NU. Ideally, political cadre development should produce individuals who possess capabilities, understand organizational objectives, and are able to make meaningful contributions to public policymaking.

Most of them are recruited not because they possess adequate capacity or expertise, but because of personal relationships or religious affiliations with particular candidates. Such practices have resulted in a decline in the application of political ethical values that once served as the main foundation of NU's struggle. Research by (Maulana et al., 2024) reveals that in several regional cases, Nahdliyin citizens tend to choose political figures not because of programmatic considerations or visions and missions, but because of NU identity or emotional ties to pesantren and respected kiai figures. This condition is consistent with the concept of clientelism, namely a mutually beneficial relationship between elites and supporters based not on ability or achievement, but solely on loyalty (Hicken, 2011).

### **Identity Politics and the Decline of the Khittah**

PKB was established in 1998 by several Nahdlatul Ulama figures, with Gus Dur as one of its principal initiators, as an expression of the political aspirations of NU citizens. Initially, the party was expected to serve as a vehicle for the political struggle of Nahdliyin while maintaining national values and NU's distinctive moderate Islamic orientation. However, the emergence of internal conflict, particularly between Gus Dur and Muhaimin Iskandar (Cak Imin), shows that PKB has not been free from power struggles, personality-centered political tendencies, and divisions among party elites.

The conflict between the two main factions within PKB, namely the Gus Dur and Cak Imin camps in 2008, reflected the party's failure to fully represent the aspirations of NU citizens. Rather than becoming a collective vehicle, PKB appeared more as an arena for power struggles among elites seeking to control the party structure. This situation is consistent with the findings of (Mayrudin & Akbar, 2019), which reveal that many Islamic parties after the Reform era have instead become drawn into narrow identity politics and have not yet been able to establish democratic and inclusive party systems.

### **Criticism of the Direction of Contemporary NU Politics**

In light of this reality, NU faces a serious challenge: how can it maintain its commitment to its *khittah* as a *jam'iyah diniyah ijtimaiyyah* (socio-religious organization), while still providing space for the political participation of Nahdliyin citizens? The solution does not appear to lie in rejecting politics altogether, but rather in establishing clear boundaries for political ethics and strengthening a cadre development process based on moral values and competence, rather than merely on proximity or group affiliation.

According to (Hakim, 2019), Gus Mus emphasizes that NU needs to reaffirm its position as a balancing force in the dynamics of power, rather than becoming part of power itself. In his view, the political direction that NU should pursue is politics that serves the interests of the nation and the people, not pragmatic power politics. Ideally, NU should act as a moral guardian of the nation, rather than merely as an instrument for mobilizing the masses for electoral interests.

### **Kiai in Politics: Between Moral Legitimacy and Social Polarization**

Within *pesantren* communities, *kiai* occupy a very important position, not only as spiritual guides but also as leaders in social life. The charisma possessed by *kiai* among Nahdliyin makes them valuable political assets. According to (Weber, n.d.), the charismatic authority possessed by *kiai* enables them to influence and mobilize society without having to occupy a formal political structure. In the context of elections, this charisma is often utilized by political actors to obtain legitimacy. Support from *kiai* is frequently used as a symbol of moral authority and as a tool to strengthen the appeal of campaigns among voters.

The relationship between *kiai* and local political dynamics is an important subject in the landscape of Islamic political studies in Indonesia. *Kiai* are not understood merely as figures engaged in religious affairs, but also in terms of their role within the socio-political space of society. The prominence of *kiai* contributes to nurturing national life, and their exemplary conduct also affects political life. This often occurs when regional head candidates seek the blessing of a *kiai*. In fact, this is legitimate, as *kiai* also have political rights (Haris & Dardum, 2021).

However, the active participation of *kiai* in practical politics has attracted considerable criticism, particularly because it is considered to blur the religious role that

should be neutral. (Setiawan, 2014) notes that when a kiai openly declares support for one candidate pair in an election or regional election, this can cause divisions among the community at the grassroots level. Indeed, in several areas, cases have been found in which congregational communities became divided because of differences in political choices made by their kiai.

The impact of this polarization was evident during the 2024 presidential election, when several political figures, such as Anies Baswedan, Candidate Number 1, met with a number of habib, ulama, and figures from across Madura on Thursday, March 18, 2023. Before that, Prabowo Subianto paid a visit to several leaders of Islamic boarding schools in East Java in Surabaya on December 26, 2022. In fact, many other political figures have also visited kiai. Therefore, the role of religious institutions is important in maintaining the integrity of elections (Zahro & Saputri, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

The political transformation of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) from an ideological to a practical approach reflects a significant shift in the organization's dynamics. Initially, NU was known as a religious organization with a strong political role, including its involvement in the Masyumi Party and PPP. However, after the Reform era, NU tended to adopt pragmatic politics, in which its figures became involved in power transactions and utilized its mass base for electoral interests. This phenomenon is reinforced by Mass-Based Party Theory, in which NU becomes an important source of votes for political parties because of its extensive social networks. The dominance of figures such as Gus Dur and internal polarization within PKB further clarify the tendency toward political personalization, in which individual charisma outweighs organizational ideology.

Religion-based identity politics has also become a serious challenge for NU, given that many Nahdliyin figures use religious symbols to attract support. This practice has the potential to erode the values of “Aswaja,” such as tolerance and balance, while strengthening polarization at the grassroots level. The role of kiai as political patrons further blurs the boundary between religious neutrality and practical interests and can even trigger divisions among their followers. Studies show that Nahdliyin voters often choose based on emotional ties to kiai or NU identity rather than rational considerations

of programs or policies. This is consistent with the concept of Clientelism, in which group loyalty is prioritized over competence.

Going forward, NU needs to reaffirm its position as a socio-religious organization that safeguards the nation's moral values, rather than merely serving as a political instrument. Strengthening value- and competence-based cadre development, as well as establishing ethical limits on political involvement, can help reduce pragmatic and transactional practices. As stated by Gus Mus, NU should serve as a balancing force against power, rather than becoming part of political maneuvering that sacrifices its noble values. In this way, NU can remain relevant in maintaining its khittah while making a positive contribution to Indonesian democracy.

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