

Identity and Cultural Politics: NU's Existence in the Dynamics of Power in East Java

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the existence of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the dynamics of power in East Java using an identity and cultural politics approach while also examining the strategies used in establishing power relations at the local level. In the context of local politics, NU has strength from the cultural base of Islamic boarding schools, the network of ulama, and historical closeness to the grassroots community, making it an important actor in various regional political contestations. Using qualitative methods based on literature studies and documentation, this study analyzes how NU's cultural strength is mobilized to form strategic alliances with other political actors through formal and informal channels. Thus, NU's existence in East Java reflects cultural and spiritual strength and the ability to read and manage power dynamics at the local level.

Keywords: Nahdlatul Ulama, Identity Politics, Local Power, Cultural, East Java

INTRODUCTION

The role of religious organizations, especially Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), in forming a socio-political environment at local and national levels cannot be separated from the dynamics of Indonesian politics. As the most prominent Islamic organization in Indonesia with a strong mass base, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) not only acts as a religious institution but also as a potent political force, especially in East Java, where they have strong historical and cultural roots through a network of Islamic boarding schools and ulama, as well as relations emotional with the grassroots community. This influence is increasingly evident

in the political context of identity and culture, where NU mobilizes religious symbols and social networks to build political solidarity. Recent studies by Yani et al. (2022) show that the NU Kiai, as a religious elite, not only play a role as spiritual leaders but also as political actors, combining pragmatism and idealism based on Islamic ethics.¹ This phenomenon shows that Nahdlatul Ulama is a religious organization and a political entity that can adapt to the dynamics of power in Indonesia.

The political role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as an independent organization under Nahdlatul Ulama Ulama (NU) is closely related to the NU political thought framework, which combines the principles of Islam with national patriotism. As explained in the journal by Ali Maschan Moesa (2012), NU's political thinking from the start has been integrative, equitable, and accommodating to national political developments without ignoring basic Islamic principles.² This reflects NU's belief in rejecting the dichotomy between religion and state, as affirmed in various organizational documents. After that, Muslimat NU used this idea in real political activities at the local level. Recent studies show that Muslimat NU experienced a change in role, from merely supervising traditional religious activities to becoming an active participant in the policy-making process at the grassroots level.³ This transformation became stronger after the National Awakening Party (PKB) was founded in 1998 when it became the official political tool for members of the Nationalist Party.

Increasing evidence shows that Indonesia's socio-political space is not free from exploitation. Collective identity, including religious forces such as Nahdlatul Ulama. In this context, Nahdlatul Ulama, through its formal institutional structure and cultural network, such as Islamic boarding schools and religious study groups, often becomes an arena for political mobilization. As stated by Fajri (2023), identity politics is a dominant strategy in contestation. Politics in Indonesia because religious sentiment has proven to be an effective

¹ Yani, M. T., Sahal, M. A., Ma'arif, S., & Pambudi, D. I. (2022). Advancing the discourse of Muslim politics in Indonesia: A study on political orientation of Kiai as religious elites in Nahdlatul Ulama. *Heliyon*, 8, e12218. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e12218>

² Moesa, A. M. (2012). Kiai NU dalam paradigma politik kebangsaan. *Al-Daulah: Jurnal Hukum dan Perundangan Islam*, 2(1), 100–118.

³ Ishomuddin, M., Santoso, B., & Latifah, E. (2019). Culture and political understanding on Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in East Java. *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, 6(8), 51–62. <https://doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0608006>

means of mobilizing the masses and forming electoral loyalty in a society with minimal political understanding.⁴

With this transformation, NU's position as a cultural-political actor is getting stronger. They rely on traditional mass strength and focus on strategic issues in electoral democracy. According to research conducted by Yeby Ma'asan Mayrudin and M. Chairil Akbar (2019), the birth of PKB was facilitated by Nahdliyin Ulama as a realistic effort to meet the demands of Nahdliyin constituents without turning NU into a political party formally. The historical and cultural relationship between NU and PKB makes this party an aspirational political channel for Nahdliyin citizens. At the same time, NU remains a socio-religious organization independent of political practices.⁵

In addition, NU's involvement in political contestation through PKB shows how religious symbols and cultural values of Islamic boarding schools have become practical tools for political mobilization. The same study shows that PKB utilizes its political base NU's culture and expands its political segmentation to include groups not included in the NU tradition. This fragmentation, which reflects the dynamics of identity politics based on values and interests, allows NU to play a role in the dynamics of national politics without losing its religious roots. In addition, This dynamic shows the strategic role played by religious elites such as Kiai in mediating between contemporary political demands and traditional Islamic principles. Identity religious matters play an important role in conveying the political interests of Muslims in Indonesia, as shown by the fragmentation and differences in political positions of Islamic parties post-New Order, such as PAN, PKB, and PKS. Through political affiliation and social power- culturally, North Africa plays a key role in directing these dynamics toward a more flexible political model suited to complex national political realities.⁶

⁴ Pujangga Candrawijayaning Fajri, "Dominasi Politik Identitas dalam Kontestasi Politik Indonesia serta Mitigasinya Jelang Pemilu 2024," *Jurnal Demokrasi dan Politik Lokal (JDPL)* 5, no. 2 (2023): 6, <https://doi.org/10.26714/jdpl.5.2.2023.6-12>.

⁵ Yeby Ma'asan Mayrudin dan M. Chairil Akbar, *Pergulatan Politik Identitas Partai-partai Politik Islam: Studi tentang PAN, PKB dan PKS*, MADANI, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2019), hlm. 173

⁶ *Ibid.*, hlm. 180.

RESEARCH METHODS

The existence of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the dynamics of power in East Java is studied through literature study analysis and documents in this study. Data were collected from two sources. Primary data consists of official documents on Nahdlatul Ulama, PKB political policies, and historical notes on the political role of Nahdlatul Ulama in East Java. Secondary data consists of books, academic journals, and articles related to identity politics and religion- country. Data was collected through literature searches with specific keywords in academic databases such as Google Scholar and DOAJ and an analysis of NU political texts—comprehensive recordings of figures' speeches.

Furthermore, the data is evaluated thematically through a data reduction process, categorization based on central themes such as cultural mobilization and political identity, and Triangulation of sources for verification. Although this study has limitations, such as not conducting direct interviews and only focusing on East Java, the Triangulation of theory and sources maintains the validity of the data. In addition to avoiding plagiarism, research adheres to academic ethics and includes accurate citation sources. This method was chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of NU's political strategy by using religious and cultural networks to build influence at the local level.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The strong history and cultural traditions of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) influence involvement in local politics in East Java. As the largest Islamic institution in Indonesia, NU has a broad mass base, religious figures, and a network of Islamic boarding schools, making it a significant socio-political force in the region. In addition to acting as a moral and spiritual support for the people of East Java, NU also has strategic strength to influence the power process, especially in the election of regional leaders.

Most NU elite members are involved in political competitions, either directly as candidates or by providing cultural and structural support to specific candidates. This argument is supported by the findings in a recent study by Firdaus and Sulaiman (2023), which shows that the NU kiai and pesantren network plays an important role in shaping the political

preferences of the community in various districts/cities in East Java.⁷ Therefore, NU is present in local politics not only as a religious representation but also as a representation of social forces actively participating in local democratization processes. NU's involvement in local politics in East Java is strengthened by its cultural base. NU descendants are connected to grassroots communities through a network of Islamic boarding schools and religious traditions such as Italian, Yasin, and manaqiban. This results in relationships strong emotional ties between NU figures and their constituents.

This relationship stems from natural spiritual and social ties, not just political ones. As a result, NU members often give political support due to loyalty to the Kiai or charismatic figures they respect rather than political party affiliation. As explained by Muhtarom and Luthfi (2023), NU's strength in local politics is more based on symbolic and cultural authority possessed by the kiai, who can direct the political behavior of the people without having to use formal instruments of power.⁸

In this case, NU is a different political force because it can influence local politics through informal mechanisms based on traditional Islamic values and culture. In local politics in East Java, the NU elite has a strategic role that often determines the power struggle. Nahdliyin citizens are greatly influenced by the Kiai charismatic, a large Islamic boarding school caretaker, and a young NU figure active in politics. Kiai does not serve as a spiritual leader and a "kingmaker" who can vote for specific candidates through social structures, pesantren, and direct support. In addition, the involvement of the NU elite can be seen from their political affiliation with several political parties, especially PKB, which originated from the NU base, as well as a local political coalition. According to research by Nurfadillah and Zainuddin (2022), the NU elite has a significant influence on political mobilization because it is considered to have moral legitimacy and high social status in the eyes of the East Javanese people.⁹ Therefore, in local politics, candidate victory is often influenced by the support or neutrality of NU elites, showing that NU's political strength is

⁷ Firdaus, M., & Sulaiman, A. (2023). Peran Jaringan Kiai NU dalam Pemenangan Pilkada di Jawa Timur. *Jurnal Politik dan Pemerintahan Daerah*, 5(1), 45–60.

⁸ Muhtarom, A., & Luthfi, M. (2023). Kultur Politik Nahdliyin dan Pengaruh Kiai dalam Dinamika Politik Lokal. *Jurnal Sosial dan Politik Islam*, 6(2), 112–128.

⁹ Nurfadillah, R., & Zainuddin, M. (2022). Figur Kiai dalam Politik Elektoral di Jawa Timur: Studi atas Pengaruh Elite NU dalam Pilkada. *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik*, 25(3), 412–427.

not only cultural but also deeply embedded in formal political practices.

There are complex and pragmatic dynamics between NU and political parties, especially in Java. East. Because PKB was founded as a political tool for Nahdliyin citizens after the reformation, NU has had a strong emotional and ideological connection with PKB for many years. However, members of the Islamic Community Union do not monolithically side with one political party. Pragmatic factors such as the candidate's relationship with the pesantren community or kiai in the local area often influence their political decisions. In addition, there is an oddity in NU's relationship with political parties; NU leaders can provide their support to various parties depending on local circumstances and strategic interests.

The study's results by Amalia and Prasetyo (2023) emphasized this, stating that even though NU institutionally maintains a distance from political parties, many of its cadres and figures are active in various parties and play an important role in winning elections at the regional level.¹⁰ This relationship shows that Nahdlatul Ulama remains a potent political force despite not being a political party because the actors are close to and involved in formal political institutions. Muslims use political mobilization based on identity as their primary strategy in local political contestation, especially in East Java. To gain legitimacy and voter sympathy, candidates use cultural affiliations and their religious beliefs with NU. In a situation like this, the symbols that come from NU, such as the green turban and peci, are used together with typical Nahdliyin terms for campaigns that focus on the emotions and culture of the community. Because kiai are considered a representation of morality and community beliefs, their presence in campaigns is often more important than the promises made by candidates during the campaign.

This phenomenon is reinforced by the findings of Yusuf and Hamid (2023), who stated that the success of political mobilization in areas with a majority of NU citizens is very dependent on the extent to which the cultural and religious identities of political candidates are aligned with the identity of the voting community.¹¹ Therefore, identity-based mobilization functions not only as a tool to choose but also shows how cultural values and

¹⁰ Amalia, R., & Prasetyo, E. (2023). Relasi Sosial dan Politik antara Nahdlatul Ulama dan Partai Politik di Jawa Timur. *Jurnal Politik Lokal dan Demokrasi*, 4(1), 89-105

¹¹ Amalia, R., & Prasetyo, E. (2023). Social and Political Relations between Nahdlatul Ulama and Political Parties in East Java. *Journal of Local Politics and Democracy*, 4(1), 89-105.

symbols can be used in politics to gain greater support.

Previously, Muslimat NU concentrated more on socio-religious issues—and family education. However, this organization actively supports public policies and women's empowerment and even participates in electoral politics. Cadres Muslimat NU in East Java play a significant role as legislative members, mass organization activists, and community leaders. They serve as a link between the desires of the grassroots and higher political decisions. Despite this transformation, internal changes in NU began to give women more space in structures and discourse organization. They also began to respond to national political changes that demanded all levels of society to participate in democracy.

According to research by Lailatul and Hapsari (2023), NU Muslimat's involvement in politics reflects its repositioning as a civil force adaptive to the demands of the times, where gender roles are no longer only domestic but also strategic in influencing state policy and the direction of national politics.¹² Therefore, the transformation of Muslimat NU strengthens NU's overall role in national political dynamics and its position as an inclusive and democratic actor. It is progressive amidst Indonesia's socio-political changes.

Political actors affiliated with NU in East Java use an electoral approach different from conventional campaign approaches. They combine cultural and spiritual methods from the pesantren tradition and religious and social networks rather than relying only on modern political communication methods. Visiting Islamic boarding schools, visiting senior clerics, large-scale religious studies, and even funeral rituals packaged in forms of political consolidation are all examples of this tactic. This method not only gains support from the general public but also provides moral legitimacy for candidates among Nahdliyin. As revealed by Rahmawati and Hasan (2022), the strategy This kind of thing is called "pesantren cultural politics," where the campaign process is carried out through symbolic language and interpersonal communication that is familiar with local traditions.¹³ This advantage makes NU's political strategy more organic and participatory because it involves social structures already established in society's daily life, which helps build sustainable

¹² Lailatul, M., & Hapsari, D. (2023). Muslimat NU dan Politik Perempuan: Reposisi Peran di Tengah Dinamika Demokrasi Indonesia. *Jurnal Gender dan Politik*, 6(1), 56–72.

¹³ Rahmawati, N., & Hasan, M. (2022). Strategi Politik Kultural dalam Kontestasi Pilkada Berbasis Nahdliyin. *Jurnal Politik dan Budaya Lokal*, 4(2), 97–113.

political loyalty.

At the moment, NU faces difficulties in local politics in East Java, especially amidst social and political changes that are increasingly rapid. With the emergence of pragmatism politics, identity-based polarization, and advances in information technology, ways of thinking and political affiliation have changed. As a traditional cultural force, NU has difficulty remaining relevant amidst the younger generation, who are more flexible in their political choices. They are not always dependent on the tradition of pesantren or kiai patronage. In addition, the internal division between NU members can produce collective strength due to political confrontation and elite interests. In research by Wahyuni and Bahrudin (2023), it was stated that NU faces a dilemma between maintaining its religious shittah as an organization with socio-religious and political realities that demand practical involvement for the sake of influence wider.¹⁴

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is a cultural-political force different in East Java, with a network based on Islamic boarding schools, ulama, and emotional ties with the community. NU utilizes political identity through religious symbols and culturally based mobilization strategies to influence local power dynamics. Nahdlatul Ulama elite circles, especially Kiai, mediate between contemporary political practices and traditional Islamic principles. The relationship between NU and the Islamic Party National Awakening (PKB) shows his political beginnings while maintaining their religious goals. However, young people face problems because of social changes, such as the pragmatism of the younger generation and political polarization. Overall, NU has succeeded in becoming an adaptive model of identity politics in Indonesia. Blending tradition and modernity in local politics. To remain relevant, NU must balance its religious and political involvement.

¹⁴ Wahyuni, S., & Bahrudin, A. (2023). NU dalam Pusaran Politik Kontemporer: Antara Khittah dan Realitas Praktis. *Jurnal Dinamika Islam dan Politik*, 5(1), 121–138.

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