



The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Local Political Dynamics in North Sumatra in 2024

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ABSTRACT

Keywords:

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Local Politics, Political Elite

This study aims to examine the role of Nahdlatul Ulama in local political dynamics in North Sumatra in 2024. NU as the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia has a significant influence on the social, cultural, and political life of the community. However, in practice, the involvement of religious organizations in the political sphere often faces the risk of politicization that can affect the independence of the organization. Therefore, this research is directed to understand the form of NU's role in local politics and the factors that influence this involvement. This study uses a descriptive qualitative research method with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation. The informants in this study are the Deputy Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Regional Management (PWNU), the Deputy Secretary of the Nahdlatul Ulama Regional Management (PWNU), and the Katib of the Nahdlatul Ulama Regional Management (PWNU). The results of this study show that Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in local political dynamics plays a role that emphasizes moral, social, and educational functions rather than involvement in practical politics. The pattern of participation is influenced by social and religious factors that make NU play a role as the moral force of civil society in maintaining the harmony and quality of local democracy, which is carried out through the strategy of organizational neutrality and political education to the community.

1. Introduction

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as one of the largest Islamic organizations in Indonesia has a strategic role in local political dynamics, including in North Sumatra Province.⁸⁹ Since the 1998 reform era, the freedom to establish political parties and choose ideology has opened up a wider space for religious organizations to participate in practical politics.⁹⁰

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as the largest religious organization in Indonesia has played a significant political role since the colonial period to the reform era. Based on data from the Indonesian Democracy Index (IDI), one of the assessment indicators to measure the level of democracy is the aspect of citizens' political rights, namely the right to participate in politics⁹¹. During the Dutch colonial period, the NU began to show political firmness when the colonial government interfered in religious affairs, such as protesting against the withdrawal of the authority of the religious court in 1931 and rejecting the marriage law plan. During the Japanese occupation, NU experienced a serious clash when it rejected the *seikeirei* ritual which was considered contrary to the teachings of monotheism, even K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari was imprisoned for four months for his refusal.⁹²

Nahdlatul Ulama has great capital to gain and maintain political influence through the pattern of obedience from the community to NU. This capital is an important force in local political dynamics⁹³. NU maintains its influence by building religious educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools as a means of *da'wah* and through involvement in Islamic political parties.⁹⁴ These two approaches make the solidarity network more effective in achieving organizational goals.

Haris (2021) identifies two main reasons for NU's involvement in politics. First, the political network of Islamic boarding schools and traditional people serves as the main support base, so that the policies taken will receive support even if not from all levels of society. Second, the trust of the Muslim community, especially NU congregations, in NU's decision makes NU's political strength more solid in terms of internal solidarity.

NU's involvement in politics is not always smooth. Fathurrahman (2021) noted that in 1968, NU's political role and participation experienced negative segmentation, for example the grouping of voters or society which caused a significant decline in Islamic politics. This is due to the lack of responsiveness of Islamic leaders to the internal dynamics of the organization and limitations in the government's administrative capabilities.

In the context of North Sumatra's local politics in 2024, the role of NU is increasingly interesting to study considering the various dynamics that occur, both in the context of regional head elections, public policy, and social issues. In its development, elite theorists have experienced the problem of conceptualization frameworks⁹⁵. Political power cannot be fully correlated with the number of supporters alone, but also depends on the ability of the organization to manage and utilize its social capital.

Based on this background, a study of the role of Nahdlatul Ulama in local political dynamics in North Sumatra in 2024 is important to understand how Indonesia's largest religious organization

⁸⁹ Edward Aspinnall and Mada Sukmajati, eds., *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2019).

⁹⁰ R William Liddle and Saiful Mujani, *Democracy and the Cartel of Parties in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁹¹ Social Studies, Taufiq Wijaya Giry, and Universitas Negeri Medan, "Student Political Participation in the 2023 Medan State University Elections (Study at Unimed PPKn Department)" 4, no. 2 (2024): 852–59.

⁹² Merle C Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to Present* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2018).

⁹³ Hannan, "Religious-Power Hegemony and Social Transformation," *Journal of Socio-Cultural* 16, no. 1 (2019).

⁹⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

⁹⁵ Dahlianatalia Lumban Gaol et al., "Analysis of the Role of Political Actors in the Public Policy Formulation Process in Sampali Village, Percut Sei Tuan District" 2, no. 2 (2024): 1238–43.

contributes to the development of democracy and governance at the regional level, as well as the challenges and opportunities faced in the contemporary political context.

2. Method

This study uses a descriptive qualitative research method with data collection techniques through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and documentation.⁹⁶ The informants in this study are the Deputy Chairman of PWNU, the Deputy Secretary, and the Katib of PWNU. The location in the study is the place where the researcher conducts the research. The location chosen for this study is on Jalan Sei Batang hari no 92, Babura Sunggal, Medan Sunggal District, North Sumatra.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Role of Nahdlatul Ulama in Local Political Dynamics

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) carries out its political role more dominantly in moral, social, and educational aspects, rather than direct involvement in practical politics. These findings show that NU positions itself as a community organization that plays a role in shaping and influencing the political life of the community through the cultivation of religious and social values.⁹⁷ From the perspective of political dynamics theory, the role emphasizes that the political process is not solely related to the struggle for power, but also includes the social interactions that shape people's political attitudes and behaviors.⁹⁸ The results of the interview with Masdar Limbong revealed that NU interprets its role in the political context as an effort to create a conducive political atmosphere in the community:

"NU's role in the political context is more directed at creating a conducive political atmosphere in the community. This is realized through religious activities, such as tausiyah and lectures, which aim to enlighten and calm the ummah so that they are not provoked by the developing political dynamics. NU does not show partiality to certain candidates, both in the regional head election and legislative elections. This organization gives freedom to all its citizens to make their own political choices in accordance with their rights and responsibilities as citizens. There is no effort from NU to direct or lead citizens' political choices to certain candidates. In addition, NU has set strict internal rules, namely that administrators who want to run for political contests are required to resign from the organization's management. This provision reflects NU's commitment to maintaining the independence and consistency of organizational principles so as not to get involved in practical politics."

The results of the interview with Masdar Limbong revealed that NU interprets its political role as an effort to create a peaceful and conducive political climate in the community. This effort is carried out through religious approaches, such as tausiyah and lectures, which serve to provide enlightenment while reducing potential conflicts due to political dynamics. Within the framework of the theory of political dynamics, this role reflects the function of social stabilization, where NU contributes to maintaining the balance of the political system, especially in political momentum such as the election of regional heads and legislative elections.⁹⁹ NU's neutrality attitude that does not favor certain candidates or political parties, as well as giving NU residents the freedom to make their political choices independently, is in line with the concept of autonomous political participation. In the theory of political participation, ideal participation is a participation born from individual consciousness, not the result of mobilization or organizational pressure.¹⁰⁰ By not conducting political briefings, NU shows its

⁹⁶ Edward Schatz, ed., *Political Ethnography: What Immersion Contributes to the Study of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

⁹⁷ Michael Buehler, *The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁹⁸ Greg Fealy and Sally White, eds., *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2018).

⁹⁹ Robert W Hefner, *Ritual and Cultural Revival: Islam, Politics, and Multicultural Citizenship in Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

¹⁰⁰ Gerry van Klinken, *Communal Violence and Democratization in Indonesia: Small Town Wars* (London: Routledge, 2014).

commitment to democratic principles, especially respect for freedom of choice and differences of political views.

3.2 Factors Influencing the Political Participation of Nahdlatul Ulama in Local Political Dynamics

The political participation of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in local political dynamics is influenced by a number of interrelated factors and forms a distinctive pattern of political involvement. Social and religious factors are the main foundation that influences NU's attitude and role in responding to political developments at the local level. In the perspective of political participation theory, value and cultural factors are important elements that shape the political orientation and behavior of a group. The religious values embraced by NU serve as normative guidelines in determining the form of political participation that is considered in accordance with organizational principles.¹⁰¹

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"The role of religious activities such as tausiyah, lectures, prayers, and other spiritual activities is very important in responding to local political dynamics. Through these activities, NU tries to calm the people and provide understanding so that the community is not easily provoked by different political choices. The messages conveyed in tausiyah and lectures usually emphasize the importance of maintaining unity, mutual respect, and not magnifying differences. In addition, prayer and other spiritual activities are also a way for NU to create a safe and peaceful political atmosphere. With this religious approach, NU does not interfere in practical politics, but still plays a role in maintaining community harmony so that the political process can run in an orderly manner and does not cause conflicts."

The religious approach is considered effective because it is able to reach the moral and spiritual dimensions of the community directly. In various religious forums, NU instills the values of mutual respect, brotherhood, and self-control in responding to political differences.¹⁰³ This is in line with normative political participation theory, which emphasizes that political participation is not only measured by the level of formal involvement, but also by political attitudes and orientations that support the creation of a healthy and ethical democratic order.

3.3 Nahdlatul Ulama's Strategy in Responding to Local Politics

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)'s strategy in responding to local political dynamics can be understood through the theoretical framework of political dynamics that emphasizes the importance of social stability, conflict management, and the adjustment of social actors to political changes that occur in society. NU has consistently affirmed its position as a community organization that is outside the realm practical politics. This attitude is manifested through a commitment to maintain organizational neutrality by not providing support to certain political parties or candidates, as well as limiting the use of NU's name, symbols, and attributes in political activities. This strategy is a form of organizational

¹⁰¹ Ricklefs, *Islamisation and Its Opponents in Java: A Political, Social, Cultural and Religious History, c. 1930 to Present*.

¹⁰² Diego Fossati, "The Resurgence of Ideology in Indonesia: Political Islam, Aliran and Political Behaviour," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2019): 161–88.

¹⁰³ Buehler, *The Politics of Shari'a Law: Islamist Activists and the State in Democratizing Indonesia*.

adaptation to local political dynamics that has the potential to cause social fragmentation if not managed carefully.¹⁰⁴

From the perspective of political dynamics theory, restricting the use of organizational symbols and attributes has a strategic function as a conflict prevention mechanism. This policy is not only administrative, but also an instrument to avoid politicizing organizational identities that can trigger divisions, both within NU and in the community.¹⁰⁵ By keeping a distance from practical political interests, NU seeks to maintain institutional independence while maintaining social cohesion in a politically plural society. Mr. Masdar Limbong stated:

"NU sets strict provisions related to the boundary between personal attitudes and organizational attitudes. Members and administrators are allowed to express political views on their own behalf, as long as they do not use NU's name, symbol, or attributes. This provision was enacted as an effort to maintain the neutrality and independence of NU as a community organization, as well as to prevent NU's involvement in practical political practices."

The results of the study show that NU consciously positions itself as a socio-religious actor who plays a role in creating a safe, orderly, and conducive political climate, not as an electoral political actor. This role is carried out through religious approaches, such as *tausiyah* and lectures, which aim to build public awareness to be able to respond to differences in political choices rationally and maturely. This approach is in line with the theory of political dynamics that views social organizations as stabilizing agents in the political system, particularly at the local level that are vulnerable to horizontal conflicts.¹⁰⁶

NU's neutral attitude is also closely related to the theory of political participation. NU gives full freedom to citizens and its members to determine their own political choices as individual rights and obligations as citizens. Within the framework of this theory, political participation is understood as an individual activity that is voluntary and autonomous, rather than as a representation of organizational attitudes. NU sets a firm boundary between personal political attitudes and organizational attitudes, where members and administrators are allowed to express political views on personal behalf as long as they do not use NU's institutional identity. This separation reflects an effort to maintain a balance between individual freedom and institutional neutrality.

4. Conclusion

The role of Nahdlatul Ulama in local political dynamics is more directed towards the implementation of moral, social, and educational functions than involvement in practical politics. NU consistently positions itself as a community organization that plays a role in maintaining social stability and creating a conducive political climate. This role is carried out through religious approaches such as *tausiyah*, lectures, recitations, and other spiritual activities that aim to provide understanding and calm to the community so that they are not easily influenced by political dynamics and differences.

Social and religious factors are the main factors that affect the pattern of NU's political participation. The religious approach is considered effective because it is able to touch the moral and spiritual aspects of society, so that it plays a role in preventing social conflicts and maintaining harmony in the midst of different political views. With this role, NU appears as a moral force and part of civil society that makes a real contribution to the quality of local democracy, even though it is not involved

NU's strategy in dealing with local political dynamics is carried out through efforts to maintain organizational neutrality and the implementation of political education to the community. Organizational neutrality is reflected in impartiality, restrictions on the use of NU names and symbols in political activities, and a clear separation between individual political attitudes and organizational attitudes. Meanwhile, political education is carried out through socialization and coaching that aims to

¹⁰⁴ Olle Törnquist, *Dilemmas of Pluralist Democracy: Autonomy vs. Control in Indonesia* (Jakarta: PSHK, 2018).

¹⁰⁵ Dan Slater, *Ordering Power: Contentious Politics and Authoritarian Leviathans in Southeast Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ Andreas Ufen, "Political Parties and the Role of Islam in Indonesia," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2020): 3–28.

increase people's political participation without influencing certain political choices directly in the formal power structure.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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