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**ISLAMIC ORTHODOXY AND HEGEMONIC POWER: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF INDONESIA AND THE ABBASID DYNASTY THROUGH ANTONIO GRAMSCI'S PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines the political hegemony of Islamic orthodoxy in the Abbasid Dynasty and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) through a comparative analysis using Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The research aims to analyze how religious orthodoxy is constructed through the interaction of political legitimacy, religious authority, and the production of discourse, as well as how these mechanisms shape the position of theological groups outside the mainstream. Employing a library research method with comparative, historical, and conceptual approaches, this study finds that the Abbasid Dynasty relied primarily on state power and official orthodoxy during the Mihnah to establish theological authority, whereas NU has developed religious orthodoxy through civil society networks, including pesantren, educational institutions, da'wah activities, and political engagement. Despite these differences, both cases demonstrate that the sustainability of orthodoxy depends not only on formal political authority but also on the ability to generate social consensus and legitimacy. The findings indicate that the political hegemony of Islamic orthodoxy plays a significant role in defining the boundaries of religious legitimacy and the acceptability of theological groups within Muslim societies.

**1. Introduction**

The relationship between religious orthodoxy and political power has always occupied a central position in the historical development of Islamic politics, and it continues to do so within the framework of modern states characterized by religious societies. (Nur dkk., 2025) In this context, Islamic orthodoxy functions not only as a normative instrument for regulating social life but also as a mechanism for legitimizing particular religious ideologies that are considered authoritative by dominant powers. (Pamungkas & Hidayati, 2025) Historical experiences in Islamic politics demonstrate that the formation of religious orthodoxy has occurred through the institutionalization of religious interpretations, which subsequently acquire both social and legal recognition through various instruments, such as the state, religious elites, and political authorities. (Andhika dkk., 2024) This

condition indicates that Islamic orthodoxy is never neutral, as it always operates within power relations that determine who possesses the legitimacy to define orthodox Islam and which groups are placed outside the boundaries of orthodoxy. At the same time, this reality underscores that state policies constitute the crystallization of competing political interests and aspirations that continuously interact and contend with one another. (MD, 2009)

This configuration of power relations is reflected in the history of Islam during the Abbasid Dynasty, when the state played a dominant role in determining official theological orientations and restricting groups perceived as threatening political stability or the legitimacy of political authority. This was evident in the Abbasid Dynasty's systematic intervention through the Mihnah during the reign of Caliph Al-Ma'mun, who, through the qadis and the authority of the caliphate, enforced the Mu'tazilite theological doctrine that the Qur'an was a created being. (Lahmi, 2015) This political initiative demonstrates that religious orthodoxy was shaped not merely through theological argumentation but also through the legitimizing power of the state, which employed it as an instrument of ideological control. It can also be observed that, since the classical period, efforts to establish Islamic orthodoxy have functioned not only as religious norms but also as a means of determining the boundaries of social and religious legitimacy within Muslim societies.

This relational pattern can also be observed in the contemporary dynamics of Islamic orthodoxy politics in Indonesia, particularly in the role of dominant religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in shaping the construction of national Islamic orthodoxy. As the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, NU occupies a strategic position within the social, political, and religious bureaucratic spheres, enabling the paradigm of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah to attain strong legitimacy in both public discourse and state policy. In their study, Amal and Saat (Amal & Saat, 2022) demonstrate that NU frequently promotes moderation and pluralism; however, at the same time, it exhibits an exclusivist tendency toward Wahhabi groups through restrictions on their educational and da'wah activities at the local level. This contradiction suggests that the discourse of tolerance within religious politics does not always operate in a manner that is consistent with the principles of pluralism, particularly when confronting groups that are positioned by NU as lying outside the mainstream of Islamic orthodoxy. In this context, the politics of moderation cannot be separated from the process through which legitimacy is produced for particular religious identities that receive dominant recognition within the public sphere and the state's legal structures.

Studies on the relationship between orthodoxy, politics, and Islamic orthodoxy have developed extensively within the field of political theology. For instance, a study by Yani et al. (Yani dkk., 2022) explains that NU kiai elites possess both pragmatic and idealistic political orientations, which influence the direction of Muslim political discourse in Indonesia. The study demonstrates that religious authority is no longer confined to the spheres of da'wah and education; rather, it has evolved into a significant political force that shapes social legitimacy and influences the direction of public policy. Other studies on religious freedom in Indonesia have similarly shown that local regulations and regional political configurations frequently serve as instruments for restricting certain religious groups. (Hakim, 2021) This occurs despite the fact that the Indonesian Constitution of 1945, particularly Article 28E paragraphs (1) and (2), Article 28I paragraph (1), and Article 29 paragraph (2), guarantees every citizen the freedom to practice his or her religion and beliefs. Most previous studies, however, have tended to separate discussions of contemporary Islamic orthodoxy politics from those of classical Islamic orthodoxy. Consequently, there remains a limited body of scholarship that connects the hegemonic patterns exhibited by modern Islamic organizations and classical Islamic dynasties within a single comparative analytical framework.

The limitations of previous studies reveal a significant research gap in the scholarship on Islamic orthodoxy and religious politics, particularly regarding how Islamic orthodoxy has been employed as an instrument of hegemony in the construction of orthodoxy across both historical and modern contexts of Islamic politics. Studies on the Abbasid Dynasty have generally been confined to discussions of the history of the caliphate, political conflicts, or the development of theological schools, without relating these issues to a specific theoretical framework. Similarly, studies on Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Indonesia have predominantly focused on Islamic moderation, democracy, and the role of civil society, while paying limited attention to its political influence on the construction of the legitimacy of national Islamic orthodoxy. As a result, there has been no comprehensive examination of the continuity of relational patterns linking the formation of Islamic orthodoxy, political power, and the construction

of dominant religious identities across both Islamic history and modern Indonesian politics. Yet, such a historical comparison is crucial for understanding how religious orthodoxy is produced, negotiated, and maintained through various mechanisms operating within Muslim societies.

This study is driven by the fundamental question of how the political hegemony of Islamic orthodoxy operates in the process of constructing religious orthodoxy in Indonesia through Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and within the Abbasid Dynasty, as well as how these patterns of power relations influence the position of theological groups outside the mainstream. The research focuses on analyzing the use of state or political legitimacy, religious authority, and political discourse in determining the boundaries of acceptability for particular groups within the socio-religious structure. It also seeks to identify both the similarities and differences in hegemonic patterns between the context of a modern democratic state and that of the classical Islamic caliphate in the construction of religious orthodoxy. The academic significance of this study lies in its attempt to establish a dialogue between the study of classical Islamic history and contemporary theories of hegemony, which have largely developed as separate fields of inquiry. Its practical relevance emerges from the growing contestation of religious identities and the increasing use of political legitimacy in defining the boundaries of moderation, radicalism, and orthodoxy in Indonesia.

## **2. Method**

This study employs a library research method with comparative, historical, and conceptual approaches to analyze the relationship between the construction of Islamic orthodoxy and political power in Indonesia through Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), as well as within the Abbasid Dynasty. The comparative approach is used to identify patterns of relationship between the politics of classical Islamic orthodoxy formation and the political influence of NU's orthodoxy in shaping the paradigm of Aswaja (Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah), religious moderation, and the legalization of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Indonesia. The historical approach is employed to examine political practices aimed at constructing classical Islamic orthodoxy, including the Mihnah during the Abbasid period, the legitimization of Sunni doctrine during the Umayyad era, and the use of qāḍī authority in establishing an official state theology. Meanwhile, the conceptual approach is utilized to analyze the hegemony of religious orthodoxy and power relations through Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony. The research data consist of primary sources in the form of books, including *A Baghdad Chronicle* and *Religion and Politics under the Early 'Abbasids*, as well as relevant documents and policy materials. Secondary sources are drawn from international journal articles, academic books, and previous studies concerning the politics of Islamic orthodoxy, religious orthodoxy, and state–religion relations. Data analysis is conducted using descriptive-comparative, interpretative, and thematic methods, combined with inductive and deductive reasoning, to identify the function of Islamic orthodoxy as an instrument of ideological legitimacy and the production of orthodoxy within Muslim societies across different historical periods.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

### **3.1 The Hegemonic Formation of Islamic Orthodoxy and the Construction of Religious Orthodoxy**

The relationship between Islamic orthodoxy and political power constitutes one of the most fundamental issues in the study of the politics of Islamic orthodoxy, as both play a significant role in shaping structures of legitimacy that determine religious authority within Muslim societies.

The relationship between Islamic orthodoxy and political power constitutes one of the most fundamental issues in the study of the politics of Islamic orthodoxy, as both play a significant role in shaping structures of legitimacy that determine religious authority within Muslim societies. The law of a sovereign state cannot be understood as a set of entirely neutral norms detached from the socio-political configurations that underpin it. The formation of orthodoxy takes place through the interaction of various actors who possess differing interests and capacities in defining the meaning and objectives of the norms being enacted. (Anggraeni & Wijaya, 2019) These characteristic positions state law not merely as an instrument of social regulation but also as a medium through which legitimacy is produced for particular values and identities. In the context of religious politics, the role of state law is often

closely associated with the process of constructing orthodoxy and may even determine the boundaries of acceptability for particular beliefs within the public sphere.

The model developed by Antonio Gramsci provides a relevant theoretical framework for explaining how domination can operate through mechanisms of social consent. Gramsci conceptualizes hegemony as the capacity of a dominant group to have its worldview accepted as a common and legitimate truth by other social groups. (Buckel & Fischer-Lescano, 2009) Domination is maintained not only through the coercive apparatus of the state but also through institutions that generate consensus, such as education, culture, religion, and law. Hegemonic structures enable the interests of particular groups to be presented as representations of the general interest, thereby acquiring broad legitimacy within society. Through this perspective, it is possible to understand how a system of values can endure over the long term without necessarily relying on the continuous use of repressive force.

The theory of political hegemony finds its relevance in its ability to explain the formation of religious orthodoxy as a social and political process that extends beyond mere doctrinal debates. The orthodox status of a particular doctrine emerges through a process of institutionalization that enables certain interpretations to gain social recognition, legal legitimacy, and political support. Religious authorities function as producers of meaning who articulate normative values within the collective consciousness of society. State law may also play a role in providing formal validation for such constructions, thereby allowing a particular religious paradigm to attain a dominant position over competing interpretations. The relationship between religion and positive law within the state demonstrates that religious orthodoxy is the outcome of a hegemonic process that operates through the interaction of social institutions, religious authorities, and structures of power. (Siswati, 2017)

Antonio Gramsci developed the concept of hegemony to explain how a social group maintains and reproduces its power not only through coercive forms of domination but also through the production of social consent. Within this framework, domination (coercion) operates through the use of state instruments and the threat of sanctions to ensure public compliance with the prevailing social order. Hegemony, by contrast, functions through a group's ability to shape the intellectual and moral orientation of society, enabling its values, ideas, and interests to be accepted as legitimate and taken for granted. (Gramsci, 1971, hlm. 57–59) This process unfolds through various institutions of civil society, such as education, religion, the media, and culture, which serve to produce and reproduce particular worldviews. (Gramsci, 1971, hlm. 12–13) One of the principal mechanisms in this process is the formation of common sense, namely a set of beliefs, values, and assumptions that are widely accepted without significant questioning.

A central role in the formation and reproduction of hegemony is played by intellectuals. Gramsci distinguishes between traditional intellectuals and organic intellectuals based on their relationship to the social structures from which they emerge. Traditional intellectuals tend to be perceived as autonomous actors standing outside particular social interests, although in practice they often contribute to the maintenance of the established social order. (Gramsci, 1971, hlm. 7–8) Organic intellectuals, by contrast, arise from specific social groups and function to articulate, organize, and disseminate the worldview of those groups to the broader society. (Gramsci, 1971, hlm. 6–7) Intellectual activity is therefore concerned not only with the production of knowledge but also with the formation of collective consciousness and the construction of social legitimacy. (Maglaras, 2013)

This condition underlies Gramsci's distinction between the *war of movement* and the *war of position*. The former refers to direct confrontation aimed at seizing political power through open and revolutionary mobilization. The latter is oriented toward a long-term struggle within the spheres of education, culture, religion, and the media in order to achieve intellectual and moral leadership before political power can be attained or maintained. Gramsci argues that modern societies are characterized by the strength of civil society institutions; therefore, political domination cannot be sustained solely through control of the state. The occupation of cultural spaces and the production of knowledge become essential elements in building enduring legitimacy. (Egan, 2014) The possibility of resistance to the dominant order occupies a central place in Gramsci's theory of hegemony. Hegemony is not understood as a permanent condition, since subordinate groups possess the capacity to develop critical consciousness and construct counter-hegemonic projects. This process is explained through the concept of *catharsis*, namely the transformation of consciousness from one limited to individual economic interests toward a political consciousness that enables individuals to understand their position within

the social structure in a more reflective manner. (Kandil, 2011) Such critical consciousness also creates space for the formation of alternative ideologies capable of challenging the legitimacy of the dominant order through social organization, education, and the production of new discourses.

The ongoing nature of such contestation may also produce a situation that Gramsci describes as *interregnum*, a condition in which the old order begins to lose its legitimacy while the new order has not yet succeeded in building sufficient consensus to replace it. Such a situation is often characterized by various forms of social, political, and cultural instability that reflect the weakening of a previously dominant hegemony. (Stahl, 2019) A crisis of legitimacy creates opportunities for the emergence of new actors, ideologies, and configurations of power that seek to redefine the direction of social life. (Babic, 2020) This concept provides an important framework for understanding changes in the relationship between religious orthodoxy and political power across different historical contexts. Gramsci's theory of hegemony offers an adequate analytical framework for explaining how religious orthodoxy is constructed, maintained, contested, and negotiated through the interaction of social institutions, religious authorities, and structures of power.

### **3.2 The Construction of Religious Orthodoxy under the Abbasid Dynasty**

The construction of religious orthodoxy during the Abbasid Dynasty cannot be separated from the close relationship between political and religious authority that developed from the eighth to the ninth century CE. The Abbasid Caliphate inherited a governmental structure that positioned the caliph as both the holder of political authority and the symbol of religious legitimacy for the Muslim community. This position enabled the state to become actively involved in various theological debates that emerged within society. The development of *kalām* theology, Islamic orthodoxy, and judicial institutions took place alongside the state's efforts to maintain political stability and promote the ideological unification of the caliphate. (Nabila dkk., 2023)

The *Mihnah* policy instituted by Caliph al-Ma'mūn in 833 CE represents one of the clearest examples of the use of state power to define the boundaries of religious orthodoxy. The *Mihnah* was a form of religious inquisition that required scholars (*ulama*), *qāḍīs*, and state officials to accept the Mu'tazilite doctrine concerning the created nature of the Qur'an. This policy functioned not merely as a theological debate but also as a means of asserting the caliph's authority to determine the religious truth that was to be accepted by society. Rejection of the state's official doctrine was treated as a form of defiance against political authority, resulting in the interrogation, imprisonment, and political persecution of a number of scholars. (Nawas, 1994) The *Mihnah* is often regarded as an ideological ordeal that generated conflict and suffering within the Muslim community. During its implementation, several *ḥadīth* scholars and theologians were detained, subjected to torture, and, in some cases, lost their lives because they refused to accept the doctrine that the Qur'an was a created being. (Levy, 1929, hlm. 87)

The implementation of the *Mihnah* demonstrates how judicial institutions and *qāḍīs* were positioned as important instruments in the production of theological legitimacy. Legal officials not only performed judicial functions but also played a role in monitoring compliance with the official doctrine endorsed by the state. The relationship between positive law and theology during this period illustrates how the boundary between political authority and religious authority became increasingly blurred. Legal legitimacy in the construction of Islamic orthodoxy was employed to strengthen the position of Mu'tazilism as a theological paradigm that enjoyed state support. (Khan, 2023)

The *Mihnah* under al-Ma'mūn constituted a politico-religious policy that made acceptance of the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an the primary criterion for the legitimacy of religious authority. State recognition of scholars and judges was conditioned upon their willingness to accept this doctrine, while rejection resulted in the loss of both orthodox and social standing, including the inadmissibility of their testimony, prohibition from transmitting *ḥadīth*, and the revocation of their authority to issue legal opinions (*fatwas*). *Qāḍīs* who supported the state's official doctrine were not only required to believe in it personally but were also expected to play an active role in enforcing and disseminating the doctrine among the wider public. The *Mihnah* thus functioned as an instrument for subordinating religious authority to the framework of state power while simultaneously reinforcing the caliph's claim to determine the legitimate interpretation of Islamic doctrine. Al-Ma'mūn's sharp criticism of a number of scholars further demonstrates that the conflict extended beyond a theological debate concerning the nature of the Qur'an. Rather, it reflected a more fundamental contestation over

the source and limits of religious authority between the institution of the caliphate and the scholarly community, which served as the custodian of religious learning and tradition. (Zaman, 1997, hlm. 106–107)

The effort to assert the supremacy of state-sponsored religious authority was not implemented solely through mechanisms of doctrinal examination and institutional sanctions, but also through strategies of delegitimizing scholars who opposed the caliph's official policy. Al-Ma'mūn not only required scholars to accept the theological standards he had established but also sought to undermine their reputations through personal criticism. He accused jurists (*fuqahā'*) and *ḥadīth* scholars of attempting to attain positions of leadership by influencing the general public through teachings that he regarded as erroneous. Such accusations reflected the caliph's suspicion of the growing social influence of the scholarly community and, at the same time, revealed his concern over their position as alternative sources of authority within society. In the context of the Islamic tradition, which generally views the pursuit of leadership for personal gain in a negative light, al-Ma'mūn's criticism also functioned as a means of delegitimizing these scholars by portraying their efforts to expand their social influence as contrary to the ideals and ethical standards of a genuine religious scholar. (Zaman, 1997, hlm. 108–109)

Resistance to the *Mihnah* revealed an ongoing contestation over who possessed the legitimate authority to define religious doctrine within Muslim society. The figure most commonly associated with this resistance was Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, who refused to accept the doctrine of the createdness of the Qur'an despite facing pressure from the state. Ibn Hanbal's position received broad support from *ḥadīth* scholars and traditionalist *ulama* who rejected political interference in matters of creed. This resistance gradually shifted the center of religious authority away from the caliphal court and toward an independent scholarly community that derived its legitimacy from religious learning and social support. (Sa'adah dkk., 2025)

This contestation did not involve Ahmad ibn Hanbal alone as the principal figure of resistance, but also encompassed a number of other scholars who became targets of the *Mihnah* policy. Historical records indicate that jurists, judges, and *ḥadīth* scholars from Baghdad as well as from various provincial regions were subjected to examination during the course of the inquisition. Among the prominent figures recorded as having been subjected to the *Mihnah* were Muhammad ibn Sa'd, Yaḥyā ibn Ma'in, Abū Khaythamah Zuhayr ibn Ḥarb, Aḥmad ibn Ismā'il al-Dawraqī, Abū Muslim who served as a *mustamlī* for the *ḥadīth* scholars of Wāsiṭ Yazīd ibn Hārūn, 'Alī ibn al-Ja'd al-Jawharī, 'Alī ibn 'Abd Allāh ibn Ja'far al-Madīnī, Abū Mushir 'Abd al-A'lā ibn Mushir al-Ghassānī, Nu'aym ibn Ḥammād, and, of course, Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. (Zaman, 1997, hlm. 111)

The *Mihnah* may be understood as a political instrument employed by al-Ma'mūn to assert the caliph's religious authority while simultaneously restricting the intellectual authority and social influence of the *ulama* through the imposition of doctrinal standards defined by the ruler. Regardless of whether the policy emerged as a response to the growing influence of the *ulama* or as a means of strengthening the caliph's religious claims, the *Mihnah* essentially represented an effort to subordinate scholarly authority to political power. (Zaman, 1997, hlm. 110) A shift in political orientation during the reign of Caliph al-Mutawakkil marked the end of the dominance of Mu'tazilite doctrine as the state's official theological position. The *Mihnah* was abolished, and political support for Mu'tazilite theology was withdrawn. Groups affiliated with the *ahl al-ḥadīth* tradition were subsequently granted greater space to shape public religious discourse. This development encouraged the consolidation of Sunni theology, which later emerged as the dominant paradigm in the classical Islamic world. (Afdillah, 2022) The political support extended to Sunni scholars contributed to the formation of scholarly networks and social institutions that further strengthened the position of Sunni orthodoxy within Muslim society.

### **3.3 Nahdlatul Ulama and the Construction of Islamic Orthodoxy in Indonesia**

The position of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) within Indonesia's religious landscape is determined not only by its capacity as the country's largest Islamic mass organization but also by its ability to establish religious legitimacy that significantly influences the formation of national Islamic discourse. Since its establishment in 1926, NU has developed the paradigm of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (Aswaja) as its theological foundation, serving as a primary reference for the religious practices of Nahdliyin members as well as a large segment of Indonesian Muslims. (Nahdlatul Ulama, 2021) In this context, the concept of Aswaja within NU functions not merely as an organizational identity but also as a normative framework that shapes a construction of religiosity understood as moderate,

authoritative, and compatible with Indonesia's socio-cultural context.(Yugo, 2025) The institutionalization of this paradigm has been carried out through various channels, including pesantren networks, educational institutions, ulama organizational structures, and the Bahsul Masail forum, all of which collectively produce religious responses to contemporary issues.(Susandi dkk., 2025)

The strengthening of the Islamic orthodoxy constructed by NU has also been significantly influenced by the existence of pesantren networks distributed across various regions. Pesantren function not only as religious educational institutions that transmit the classical Islamic intellectual tradition but also as spaces for the formation of a religious habitus oriented toward Aswaja values.(Mustofa dkk., 2026) Within this structure, the kiai occupies a central position of authority, serving as an intermediary between religious texts and the social realities encountered by the community.(Sari dkk., 2025) This relationship establishes a pattern of knowledge reproduction that enables Aswaja values to acquire sustained legitimacy across generations. Consequently, pesantren have become important instruments in shaping the religious orientation of society while simultaneously reinforcing NU's position in defining the normative standards of religious practice considered legitimate within Indonesia's social context.(Mujahid, 2023)

NU's religious legitimacy has been further strengthened through its involvement in the formulation of public policies related to education and religious life. The enactment of Law No. 18 of 2019 on Pesantren reflects the state's recognition of pesantren as an integral component of the national education system. This policy provides a stronger legal foundation for pesantren to carry out their educational, da'wah, and community empowerment functions.(Chairifa, 2025) Given the close relationship between pesantren and NU's social structure, the policy has significant implications for strengthening the organization's position within the national religious arena. In this regard, Cucun Syamsurizal, a member of the National Awakening Party (PKB) faction and a prominent NU figure, was among the initiators of the Pesantren Bill that later became the law.(Kompasiana.com, 2018) This demonstrates that the process of legitimization is not merely administrative in nature but also contributes to the symbolic reinforcement of the religious paradigm developed by NU.

NU's role in the construction of contemporary Islamic orthodoxy is also evident in its development of the narrative of religious moderation, which has received broad support from the state. The discourse of religious moderation has been promoted as an approach to maintaining social cohesion within a pluralistic and multicultural society. The involvement of NU figures in various public policy forums and state religious institutions demonstrates the close relationship between religious authority and the national social development agenda.(Rasuki, 2025) The moderation paradigm advanced by NU emphasizes the principles of *tawassut* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *i'tidal* (justice and uprightness) as foundational values for responding to contemporary religious challenges.(Sodikin dkk., 2025) From this significant position, it can be observed that NU has emerged as one of the principal actors in shaping the definition of moderate Islam, a conception that has gained broad legitimacy within the public sphere.

The process of constructing orthodoxy through the paradigms of Aswaja and religious moderation is also closely related to the construction of religious identity boundaries within society. The production of discourse on moderate Islam indirectly shapes categories that distinguish groups perceived as being either within or outside the mainstream of national religious life. Research has shown that groups associated with puritanism and radicalism are frequently positioned as the antithesis of the Islam Nusantara and religious moderation paradigms promoted by NU.(Sodikin dkk., 2025) This mechanism is not always manifested through formal orthodox exclusion; rather, it more often operates through processes of symbolic delegitimization within social and discursive spaces. The production of legitimacy for a particular paradigm simultaneously contributes to the formation of boundaries of acceptability for other religious paradigms.(Afiah dkk., 2025)

A number of incidents that have occurred in recent years indicate ongoing dynamics concerning the acceptance of the preaching activities of certain religious groups and figures in various regions. A religious lecture by Syafiq Riza Basalamah in Surabaya in February 2024 was discontinued following objections raised by the local branch of GP Ansor.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, a religious gathering led by Hannan

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<sup>1</sup> "Kronologi Pembubaran Pengajian Ustaz Riza Basalamah Versi Ansor Surabaya," diakses 4 Juni 2026, <https://www.detik.com/jatim/berita/d-7207542/kronologi-pembubaran-pengajian-ustaz-riza-basalamah-versi-ansor-surabaya>

Attaki in Pamekasan in 2023 was halted after opposition emerged from segments of the local community, supported by members of Banser NU. (*Sejarah-Tugas Banser NU yang Bubarkan Pengajian Ustadz Hanan Attaki*, t.t.) A comparable incident occurred during a preaching event featuring Khalid Basalamah in Sidoarjo in 2017, which was not continued after objections were expressed by several parties who considered the content of the sermon to be inconsistent with the religious traditions practiced within the local community. Several religious lectures delivered by Felix Siauw in Lamongan were also reported to have faced rejection or restrictions for various reasons related to concerns over potential controversy and social division. (*Usai Didemo Banser di DKI, Ustadz Felix Siauw Ditolak Ceramah di Lamongan*, t.t.) These incidents subsequently received widespread attention from the mass media and became part of the broader public discourse concerning the relationship between religious authority, the space for religious preaching, and the diversity of Islamic expressions in Indonesia.

These dynamics demonstrate that the construction of orthodoxy in the context of modern Indonesia operates through a combination of religious authority, educational networks, social legitimacy, and support from state policies. NU's influence does not primarily rest on coercive power, as was the case with the state in the classical caliphate system; rather, it derives from its ability to build social consensus regarding forms of religious practice considered compatible with Indonesia's national identity. This authority has been produced through a long-term process involving pesantren-based education, religious fatwas, civil society organizations, and participation in the formulation of public policies. As a result, NU has indirectly exerted a distinctive influence on the country's socio-religious environment.

### **3.4 A Comparative Analysis of the Political Hegemony of Islamic Orthodoxy in the Abbasid Dynasty and Nahdlatul Ulama**

The formation of Islamic orthodoxy within the Abbasid Dynasty and Nahdlatul Ulama can be understood as a process of hegemony involving the interplay of power, the production of knowledge, and the construction of social consensus. Employing Gramsci's perspective allows orthodoxy to be understood not merely as the triumph of one theological doctrine over another, but as the success of a particular group in establishing its worldview as a legitimate truth accepted by society. In this context, orthodoxy does not emerge naturally rather, it is the product of a historical process involving institutions, authorities, and social networks that operate continuously over time. The success of a religious paradigm in becoming dominant largely depends on its ability to shape a collective consciousness that supports and legitimizes that paradigm.

The experience of the Abbasid Dynasty during the Mihnah illustrates the use of domination as an initial instrument in the effort to establish religious orthodoxy. Caliph al-Ma'mun employed state authority to impose the Mu'tazilite doctrine concerning the createdness of the Qur'an through state officials, judicial institutions, and the governmental bureaucracy. This policy reflected the use of political power to create theological uniformity within Muslim society. Orthodoxy functioned as a mechanism for controlling the discursive sphere and limiting the emergence of religious views that diverged from the state's official doctrine. This policy demonstrates a form of domination that, in Gramscian terms, constituted an early stage in the construction of stable political authority.

The Mihnah also demonstrates that al-Ma'mun's theological project was not merely intended to resolve doctrinal disputes but was also aimed at strengthening the caliph's authority over the community of religious scholars (*ulama*). Rehan Khan argues that the Mihnah represented an effort by the state to integrate political authority and religious authority into a centralized structure of legitimacy centered on the caliph. Within this framework, theological issues became an integral component of the state's broader project of political consolidation. Consequently, the debate over the status of the Qur'an ultimately evolved into a contestation over who possessed the legitimate authority to define religious truth within Muslim society. (Khan, 2023)

The failure of the Mihnah demonstrates that domination alone is not always capable of producing sustainable hegemony. The resistance led by Ahmad ibn Hanbal and the networks of hadith scholars illustrates that social acceptance cannot be secured solely through the coercive power of the state. The rejection of the state's official doctrine reflected the emergence of a form of counter-hegemony that sought to preserve religious authority outside the political control of the caliphate. This phenomenon is consistent with Gramsci's argument that subordinate groups can develop an alternative consciousness that challenges the legitimacy of the dominant ideology. Resistance to the Mihnah

reveals that the stability of orthodoxy requires broader social consent rather than mere formal compliance with state policies.

Christopher Melchert argues that the success of the Sunni tradition in the post-Mihnah period was rooted in the ability of the *ulama* to establish educational networks, systems of hadith transmission, and forms of scholarly authority that gained widespread recognition among Muslim communities. This authority developed through social relationships that were relatively independent of political power. The legitimacy enjoyed by the *ulama* was derived from their mastery of religious knowledge and recognition by scholarly communities, rather than from formal positions granted by the state. Consequently, the Sunni paradigm evolved into a framework of religiosity that gained broad acceptance within society. This process more closely resembled a mechanism of hegemony than one of domination, as it depended upon the gradual formation of social consensus rather than direct coercion. (Melchert, 2002)

The concept of the organic intellectual can be employed to analyze the role of Sunni *ulama* during the Abbasid period as well as the role of *kiai* within the Nahdlatul Ulama tradition. Gramsci argues that organic intellectuals function to articulate the worldview of particular social groups and to cultivate a collective consciousness that sustains that worldview. In the post-Mihnah period, Sunni *ulama* were not merely engaged in teaching religious doctrines; they also constructed a normative framework that defined the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. (Forlenza, 2021) A similar function can be observed in NU's network of *kiai*, who act as mediators between the Islamic scholarly tradition, the social needs of the community, and public policy. Through their educational activities and the production of religious discourse, *kiai* have enabled the Aswaja paradigm to acquire legitimacy that is continuously reproduced across generations.

The formation of Islamic orthodoxy by NU has primarily proceeded through mechanisms of hegemony rather than domination. Unlike the Abbasid Dynasty, which possessed coercive instruments through the authority of the caliph and the state, NU does not exercise formal political power. Instead, it relies on extensive networks of pesantren, educational institutions, social organizations, and religious authorities capable of shaping the religious orientation of society. Nevertheless, certain cases suggest that NU, through some of its organizational networks, has exerted pressure on groups whose theological perspectives differ from its own. This can be observed in the cancellation or restriction of several religious gatherings featuring preachers such as Hannan Attaki, Syafiq Riza Basalamah, Felix Siauw, and Khalid Basalamah. The paradigm of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah (Aswaja) promoted by NU has been constructed as a form of religiosity that is moderate, tolerant, and compatible with Indonesia's socio-cultural character. These values are disseminated through pesantren education, *Bahsul Masail* forums, religious preaching activities, and various civil society institutions affiliated with NU. This process illustrates how hegemony operates through the cultivation of social consent toward a particular religious paradigm.

Ahmad Najib Burhani's research demonstrates that NU's position within Indonesia's public sphere is shaped not only by its organizational capacity but also by its success in producing a discourse of moderate Islam that has gained broad support from both the state and civil society. The discourses of religious moderation and Islam Nusantara function as interpretive frameworks that influence public perceptions regarding forms of Islam considered compatible with national life. (Burhani, 2012) The construction of these discourses simultaneously legitimizes particular paradigms while constraining the space of legitimacy available to alternative paradigms perceived as inconsistent with the orientation of religious moderation. This illustrates how hegemony operates through the production of meaning rather than merely through the exercise of formal power. The discursive arena thus becomes the primary space in which orthodoxy is constructed and maintained.

The concept of the *war of position* provides a relevant framework for understanding NU's long-term strategy in building social and religious influence. This position has been strengthened through the cultivation and influence of various civil society institutions, including pesantren, schools, universities, youth organizations, media outlets, and religious institutions. Such a strategy has enabled the Aswaja paradigm to develop into a component of the common sense of Muslim society in Indonesia. The success of hegemony is not determined by immediate political victories but by the ability to shape social consciousness in a sustained manner. The characteristics of this struggle demonstrate a strong correspondence between NU's historical experience and Gramsci's concept of the *war of position*.

#### 4. Conclusion

The analysis conducted through a Gramscian perspective demonstrates that the formation of Islamic orthodoxy is the result of the interaction between orthodox legitimacy, religious authority, and the production of discourse that shapes societal acceptance of a particular religious paradigm. A comparison of the two cases reveals that the Abbasid Dynasty during the Mihnah relied primarily on political instruments and state-sponsored orthodoxy to establish religious orthodoxy, whereas NU has relied more extensively on civil society networks through pesantren, educational institutions, da'wah activities, and various forms of political engagement. Although the mechanisms employed differ significantly, both cases demonstrate that the sustainability of orthodoxy depends not only on the strength of doctrine or the support of formal political power but also on the ability to generate enduring social consensus. The findings of this study further indicate that the political hegemony of Islamic orthodoxy plays a significant role in defining the boundaries of acceptability for theological groups outside the mainstream, whether through formal regulations or through processes of symbolic and discursive legitimization.

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