

Islamic Political Movements in Indonesia: From Nahdlatul Ulama to Islamist Parties in the Post-Reformasi Era

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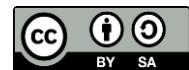
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Abstract

The post-Reformasi era in Indonesia since 1998 has witnessed a dynamic resurgence of Islamic politics, featuring a complex landscape of both large moderate civil society organizations and formal Islamist political parties. This study aimed to comparatively analyze the evolution, political strategies, and societal impact of these diverse Islamic movements in Indonesia's democratic transition. A qualitative research methodology was employed, utilizing a case study approach. Data was gathered through discourse analysis of party manifestos and public statements, as well as in-depth interviews with political and religious leaders. The findings reveal a strategic divergence: Nahdlatul Ulama has largely focused on influencing politics from a civil society perspective, promoting cultural Islam and pluralism. In contrast, Islamist parties have pursued formal state power, often employing identity politics. This has created a continuous negotiation within the public sphere between substantive Islamic values and formalist political agendas. The study concludes that Indonesian Islamic political movements are not monolithic. The enduring influence of moderate mass organizations acts as a crucial counterbalance to the formal political aspirations of Islamist parties, shaping a unique and contested model of Islamic democracy.

Keywords: islamist parties, nahdlatul ulama, post-reformasi



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INTRODUCTION

The fall of the authoritarian New Order regime in 1998 inaugurated the *Reformasi* era, a period of profound political transformation that fundamentally reshaped Indonesia's socio-political landscape. This transition to democracy unleashed a wide array of political forces that had long been suppressed, none more significant than the resurgence of political Islam. For decades, the expression of Islam in the public sphere had been carefully managed and constrained by the state (Muhajir & Nurcholis, 2024; Yani dkk., 2023). The new democratic space provided a fertile ground for Islamic ideas, actors, and organizations to re-enter the political arena with renewed vigor, leading to a dynamic and often contested process of defining the role of Islam in the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy.

This resurgence has not been a monolithic phenomenon. The landscape of Islamic politics in post-Reformasi Indonesia is characterized by a remarkable diversity of actors and approaches. On one hand, it features the continued and powerful influence of massive, long-standing civil society organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah (Ainissyifa dkk., 2024; Setianingrum & Dwiyanto, 2024). These organizations, with their tens of millions of members, have traditionally engaged with politics from a cultural and social perspective, advocating for a substantive interpretation of Islamic values that is compatible with Indonesian pluralism and the national ideology of Pancasila.

On the other hand, the post-1998 era witnessed the proliferation of formal Islamic political parties, some of which advocate for a more formalist interpretation of Islam's role in the state. These parties, ranging from moderate to more conservative Islamist ideologies, have sought to translate Islamic principles directly into state law and public policy by competing in elections and participating in parliamentary politics (Rahmat dkk., 2024; Tuala dkk., 2024). The dynamic interplay and occasional tension between the socio-cultural approach of the mass organizations and the formal-legalistic approach of the political parties have become a central and defining feature of Indonesia's ongoing democratic consolidation.

A central problem in understanding contemporary Indonesian politics is the complexity and apparent contradiction within its Islamic political movements. The simultaneous presence of powerful, pluralism-advocating civil society groups and electorally significant Islamist parties creates a complex and often confusing political dynamic (Husna dkk., 2024; Mursalin dkk., 2024). This makes it difficult for observers to develop a coherent understanding of the overall trajectory of political Islam in the nation. Is Indonesian Islam becoming more pluralistic and democratic, or is it moving towards a more conservative, formalist expression?

This broad question points to a more specific analytical problem: the lack of a comparative framework that systematically analyzes the distinct strategies, ideologies, and societal impacts of these different types of Islamic movements. Much of the scholarship tends to focus either on the large civil society organizations *or* on the political parties in isolation (Kholis & Rini, 2023; Marpaung dkk., 2024). This siloed approach fails to capture the crucial dynamics of interaction, competition, and mutual influence between these two spheres of Islamic political action, which is essential for a holistic understanding of the subject.

The absence of such a comparative analysis poses a significant problem for both academic inquiry and policy-making. It hinders our ability to understand the sources of resilience for Indonesian democracy and to identify the key factors that have, thus far, prevented the nation from following the path of more radicalized Islamic politics in other parts of the world (Itmam & Aouich, 2024; Kholis & Rini, 2023). The fundamental problem is that without a clear, comparative understanding of how these different movements operate and interact, any analysis of the future of Islam and democracy in Indonesia remains incomplete and speculative.

The primary objective of this study is to conduct a systematic, comparative analysis of the political strategies and societal impacts of two major forms of Islamic political movements in post-Reformasi Indonesia: the socio-cultural approach exemplified by Nahdlatul Ulama and the formal-

political approach of major Islamist parties (Itmam & Aouich, 2024; Saleh, 2025). The overarching goal is to elucidate the distinct roles these movements play in shaping Indonesia's democracy and to understand the nature of their interaction within the public sphere.

To achieve this primary objective, a series of specific sub-objectives have been defined. The first is to trace the political evolution of Nahdlatul Ulama in the post-Reformasi era, analyzing its strategic decision to largely remain a civil society force and its promotion of "Islam Nusantara" (Islam of the Archipelago) (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024; Hidayat, 2024). The second objective is to analyze the ideologies, electoral strategies, and policy platforms of key Islamist political parties, focusing on their efforts to gain formal state power.

The third and most critical objective is to comparatively assess the methods and impacts of these two approaches. This involves analyzing their respective discourses on democracy, pluralism, and the state, and examining their influence on public policy and social norms. The study aims to provide a clear, evidence-based account of how the dynamic between these large-scale movements contributes to the unique and contested character of Indonesian democracy.

The scholarly literature on Islam in Indonesia is rich and extensive, with a strong tradition of research on the country's major Islamic organizations and political parties (Hidayat, 2024; Ichsan dkk., 2024). Numerous excellent monographs and articles have been written on the history, theology, and social role of Nahdlatul Ulama, as well as on the rise and electoral performance of parties like the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). This body of work provides a deep and essential foundation for any study of Indonesian Islam.

A significant gap exists, however, in studies that place these different actors into a single, comparative analytical frame (Ichsan dkk., 2024; Soemantri dkk., 2025). The literature is largely bifurcated, with one set of scholars focusing on the "civil society" Islam of NU and Muhammadiyah, and another set focusing on the "political party" Islam of the Islamist parties. There is a scarcity of research that systematically and directly compares the political strategies and discourses of these two camps side-by-side, analyzing them not as separate phenomena, but as interacting components of a single, overarching political field.

This research is explicitly designed to fill this analytical gap. It moves beyond the single-case study approach that dominates the literature to provide a relational analysis of Indonesia's most significant Islamic movements (Afwadzi dkk., 2024; Mahmud, 2025). By juxtaposing the strategies of NU with those of the Islamist parties, this study aims to illuminate the dynamics of competition, ideological negotiation, and mutual influence that are missed by more narrowly focused analyses. It addresses the need for a more integrated understanding of the complex ecosystem of Islamic politics in contemporary Indonesia.

The principal novelty of this research lies in its direct comparative framework and its focus on the strategic divergence between civil society and formal political party approaches. By treating these two forms of Islamic political engagement as distinct but interacting strategies, this study provides a novel lens for interpreting the trajectory of Indonesian democracy. The analysis of this dynamic as a central tension between substantive, cultural Islam and formalist, political Islam is a key conceptual innovation of this work.

This research is strongly justified by its potential to provide a more nuanced and accurate understanding of one of the world's most important and complex democracies. As Indonesia plays an increasingly significant role on the global stage, a clear understanding of the internal dynamics that shape its political character is of immense importance (Saepudin dkk., 2023; Soemantri dkk., 2025). This study is justified by its ability to offer a sophisticated analysis that moves beyond simplistic binaries of "moderate" versus "radical" Islam, providing crucial insights for international relations, comparative politics, and Islamic studies.

The broader scientific justification for this work is its contribution to the comparative study of political Islam. The Indonesian case, with its unique history and the powerful role of moderate civil

society organizations, offers a critical counterpoint to the experiences of the Middle East and South Asia (Chotimah dkk., 2025; Purwanto dkk., 2023). By systematically analyzing the factors that have contributed to the relative success of a more pluralistic and democratic model of Islamic politics in Indonesia, this study provides invaluable insights and lessons for the broader global discourse on the relationship between Islam and democracy.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design utilizing a comparative case study approach. This design was selected as the most appropriate method for conducting an in-depth, contextualized analysis of the complex phenomena of Islamic political movements (Kafid dkk., 2023; Purwanto dkk., 2024). The comparative framework allows for a systematic examination of the similarities and differences between the two distinct types of movements the socio-cultural approach of Nahdlatul Ulama and the formal-political approach of Islamist parties. The research is descriptive and analytical in nature, seeking to build a rich, explanatory narrative of the strategies, ideologies, and impacts of these movements in the post-Reformasi era.

Population and Samples

The population for this research consisted of all significant Islamic political movements active in Indonesia since 1998. The sample was selected using a purposive sampling strategy to focus on the most influential and representative cases. The first case selected was Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), representing the largest and most influential Islamic civil society organization. The second case consisted of a sample of major Islamist political parties that have consistently gained parliamentary representation, with a primary focus on the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) as a key exemplar of the formalist political approach. This selection allows for a focused and deep comparison of the two dominant strategies within Indonesian political Islam.

Instruments

The primary instrument for data collection in this qualitative study was the researcher, guided by a set of semi-structured interview protocols and a discourse analysis framework. The interview protocols were designed to elicit in-depth information from key informants on topics such as organizational strategy, ideological orientation, and perceptions of democracy and pluralism (Alabdulhadi & Alkandari, 2024; Ibrahim dkk., 2023). The discourse analysis framework was used for the systematic examination of primary documents, including party manifestos, official organizational statements, press releases, and the public speeches of key leaders. This dual-instrument approach allowed for the triangulation of data from both personal accounts and official organizational texts.

Procedures

The research procedure was conducted in three main stages. The first stage was data collection, which involved two primary activities. A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews was conducted with a purposively selected sample of senior leaders from Nahdlatul Ulama and the selected Islamist parties, as well as with independent academic experts and political analysts. Concurrently, a comprehensive set of primary documents from the post-Reformasi period was gathered from organizational archives and public sources. The second stage was data analysis. The interview transcripts and collected documents were systematically analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify recurrent themes, strategic frames, and ideological positions. A comparative discourse analysis was then applied to contrast the language and rhetoric used by the different movements. The final stage was data synthesis, where the findings from the interviews and the discourse analysis were integrated to construct a cohesive, comparative narrative that addresses the core research objectives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of primary documents and interview transcripts revealed a profound and consistent divergence in the core political discourses of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). NU's discourse consistently centers on themes of cultural Islam, nationalism, and pluralism. Key informants from NU repeatedly emphasized the organization's role as a social-religious guardian (*jam'iyah diniyah ijtima'iyah*) focused on substantive Islamic values like justice and compassion, rather than the formal implementation of Islamic law. Their public statements and official documents frequently invoke the national ideology of Pancasila and the concept of "Islam Nusantara" (Islam of the Archipelago) to frame their political identity.

In stark contrast, the discourse of the PKS is overwhelmingly focused on the pursuit of formal political power as the primary vehicle for implementing Islamic principles in society. Their party manifestos and the speeches of their leaders prioritize themes of good governance, anti-corruption, and moral order, all framed within an Islamic perspective that advocates for a greater role for Sharia in public life. While acknowledging Pancasila, their rhetoric often emphasizes the Islamic identity of the nation and the religious obligations of the state, presenting a clear formalist political agenda.

Table 1. Comparative Thematic Analysis of Political Discourses: NU vs. PKS

Thematic Category	Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)	Prosperous Justice Party (PKS)
Primary Role	Civil Society Guardian; Cultural Da'wah	Formal Political Actor; Parliamentary Struggle
View of the State	Pancasila state is final; Protector of all groups	State should reflect Islamic identity; Implementer of Sharia values
Core Ideology	Islam Nusantara; Substantive Islam; Pluralism	Political Islam; Good Governance; Formalist Islam
Primary Strategy	Bottom-up social influence; Moral suasion	Top-down political power; Electoral competition

The data presented in the table illustrates a fundamental strategic choice that defines the two movements. NU's discourse is explained by its historical trajectory and its theological foundations in traditionalist Sunni Islam, which has long emphasized a separation between the domains of religion and direct state administration. Their focus on "Islam Nusantara" is a deliberate ideological construction designed to position themselves as an indigenous, moderate, and nationalist force, thereby creating a discursive shield against accusations of being anti-pluralist and providing a powerful counter-narrative to more globalized, Middle East-centric Islamist ideologies.

The PKS's discourse is explained by its ideological origins in the global Muslim Brotherhood movement, which views the acquisition of state power as an essential step toward the creation of an Islamic society. Their focus on governance and anti-corruption is a pragmatic political strategy designed to appeal to a broader electorate beyond their core Islamist base, framing their religious agenda in the more universally appealing language of technocratic competence and public morality. This represents a strategic adaptation of their core ideology to the realities of a competitive democratic system.

The dominant strategic frame employed by Nahdlatul Ulama is that of the "moral buffer" or "cultural anchor" for the nation. Interviews with senior NU leaders consistently revealed a self-perception of the organization as a moderating force that protects Indonesian society from religious extremism and political instability. They frame their political engagement not as a pursuit of power for its own sake, but as a national responsibility to ensure that the democratic process remains aligned with the nation's pluralistic and tolerant cultural values.

The Prosperous Justice Party, conversely, operates within a dominant strategic frame of "gradual Islamization" through democratic means. Their leaders articulate a long-term vision of transforming the state and society from within the political system. They frame their participation in elections and

coalitions not as a compromise of their principles, but as a necessary and pragmatic phase in a larger project of political da'wah. Their strategy involves a dual approach: building a loyal grassroots base through social services while simultaneously seeking to influence legislation and policy at the national level.

The strategic framing used by NU allows for the inference that its primary political goal is the preservation of its socio-cultural hegemony and institutional influence, rather than the direct control of the state apparatus. By positioning itself as the guardian of national identity and moderate Islam, NU creates a political environment in which any government, regardless of its composition, must seek its approval and accommodate its interests. This infers a highly sophisticated and resilient long-term strategy focused on maintaining relevance and power from outside the formal structures of government.

The PKS's frame of gradual Islamization leads to the inference that the party is engaged in a long-term ideological project that transcends short-term electoral calculations. Their willingness to enter into coalitions with secular nationalist parties, while sometimes criticized by their base, can be inferred as a strategic maneuver to gain experience, build political capital, and slowly embed their cadres and ideas within the state bureaucracy. This infers a patient and pragmatic approach to achieving a fundamentally transformative, ideological goal.

The relationship between the discourses of the two movements is often oppositional and mutually constitutive. NU's promotion of "Islam Nusantara" was developed and gained prominence, in part, as a direct response to the perceived rise of "transnational" Islamist ideologies represented by parties like the PKS. NU leaders frequently frame their cultural approach as the "antidote" to the more rigid and formalist Islam they associate with the Islamist parties, thereby defining their own identity in opposition to the other.

This dynamic creates a continuous ideological contestation in the public sphere. When Islamist parties advocate for policies based on a formal interpretation of Sharia (e.g., anti-alcohol regulations), NU often responds not by rejecting the Islamic premise, but by offering a different, more substantive interpretation rooted in its own theological tradition that emphasizes compassion and context over rigid legalism. This relational dynamic forces a constant public negotiation over the meaning and political application of Islam in a democratic context.

A critical case study illustrating these dynamics is the highly contentious 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. During this election, Islamist groups, with the tacit or open support of political parties like PKS, mobilized large-scale protests against the incumbent Christian governor, Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, using highly charged blasphemy accusations. This represented a peak moment of formalist, identity-based political mobilization in the post-Reformasi era.

In this charged environment, the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama played a crucial role as a moderating force. While not officially endorsing any candidate, prominent NU figures like the late President Abdurrahman Wahid's family and the youth wing (GP Ansor) publicly and repeatedly called for calm, condemned the use of religious rhetoric to divide the nation, and defended the rights of religious minorities. They actively framed the election not as a religious battle, but as a test of Indonesia's commitment to pluralism and the rule of law.

The actions of the Islamist parties and their allies during the 2017 election are explained by their strategic calculation that mobilizing religious sentiment was the most effective path to achieving a key political victory. The election was seen as a symbolic battleground for the role of Islam in the nation's capital. The use of identity politics was a deliberate strategy to consolidate their conservative base and to frame the political contest in terms that were favorable to their ideological project, directly linking religious identity to electoral choice.

NU's response is explained by its core strategic frame as the nation's "moral buffer." The leadership perceived the massive, identity-based mobilization as a direct threat to the social cohesion and pluralistic fabric of Indonesia, which they see as their duty to protect. Their public statements and actions were not primarily about the electoral outcome but were aimed at defending their long-term

vision of a substantive, tolerant, and culturally grounded Indonesian Islam against what they viewed as a divisive and dangerous formalist political campaign. This case study vividly illustrates the two movements acting out their distinct strategic roles in a moment of national political crisis.

In summary, the results of this comparative analysis reveal a clear and fundamental divergence in the strategies and ideologies of major Islamic political movements in post-Reformasi Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that these movements are not monolithic but are engaged in a dynamic and often oppositional relationship. Nahdlatul Ulama primarily operates as a civil society force, leveraging its immense social and cultural capital to promote a substantive and pluralistic vision of Islam. Islamist parties, in contrast, focus on acquiring formal state power to implement their more legalistic and formalist agenda.

This research interprets this dynamic as a central and defining feature of Indonesia's unique model of Islamic democracy. The findings lead to the conclusion that the persistent influence and moderating discourse of large, traditionalist civil society organizations like NU have served as a crucial counterbalance to the political ambitions of more ideologically driven Islamist parties. This ongoing negotiation between the cultural and formal-political spheres is a key factor in explaining the resilience of Indonesian democracy and its ability, thus far, to accommodate a vibrant expression of political Islam without succumbing to majoritarianism or religious extremism.

This study provided a comparative analysis of the two dominant modes of Islamic political engagement in post-Reformasi Indonesia. The primary finding is the identification of a fundamental strategic divergence. Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) operates predominantly from a civil society position, employing a strategy of cultural da'wah and moral suasion to influence the state from the bottom up. In contrast, Islamist parties like the PKS pursue a formalist political strategy, aiming to capture state power directly through electoral competition to implement their agenda from the top down.

The research established that this strategic divergence is rooted in distinct ideological frameworks. NU's political discourse is consistently framed around the concepts of "Islam Nusantara," pluralism, and the finality of the Pancasila state, emphasizing a substantive and culturally-grounded interpretation of Islam. The PKS's discourse, conversely, is framed around the necessity of formal political power to implement a more legalistic version of Islamic values in public life, reflecting a more universalist and formalist Islamist ideology.

The case study of the 2017 Jakarta election provided a vivid illustration of these two strategies in action. It revealed the capacity of Islamist parties to mobilize a powerful, identity-based political campaign for formal political ends. It simultaneously highlighted NU's role as a "moral buffer," deploying its own discourse of pluralism and national unity to act as a counterbalance, aiming to preserve social cohesion rather than win an election.

The findings demonstrate that the relationship between these two types of movements is often oppositional and mutually constitutive. NU's modern political identity has been shaped, in part, as a direct counter-narrative to the rise of transnational Islamist ideologies espoused by parties like the PKS. This creates a continuous and dynamic contestation over the public meaning and political role of Islam in democratic Indonesia.

The findings of this study are in strong agreement with the broad consensus in the literature on Indonesian politics that the country's Islamic landscape is diverse and not monolithic. Our work reinforces the conclusions of numerous scholars who have highlighted the historical and theological differences between traditionalist organizations like NU and more modernist or Islamist movements. This study provides a contemporary, post-Reformasi validation of this long-standing analytical framework.

A key point of differentiation from much of the existing literature is our direct, comparative methodology. Many prior studies have offered excellent in-depth analyses of either NU *or* a specific Islamist party, but few have placed them in a single, relational frame to analyze their interaction. By juxtaposing their strategies and discourses, our research moves beyond a simple description of diversity

to an analysis of the dynamic contestation that this diversity produces, filling an important analytical gap.

This research contributes to the broader comparative literature on political Islam by highlighting the unique case of Indonesia. The findings challenge models of political Islam derived primarily from Middle Eastern contexts, where large, moderate, and pro-democratic civil society organizations like NU are often absent. The Indonesian case, as detailed in our findings, demonstrates an alternative trajectory where the existence of such a powerful civil society actor fundamentally alters the political calculus and moderates the overall expression of political Islam.

The analysis of NU's strategy as one of preserving socio-cultural hegemony rather than seeking direct state control aligns with and provides empirical depth to theories of civil society's role in democratic consolidation. Our work shows how a non-state actor can wield immense political power by shaping the dominant national discourse and acting as a veto player. This provides a compelling case study that enriches the theoretical literature on the relationship between civil society and the state in new democracies.

The results of this study signify that the political expression of Islam in Indonesia is best understood as a vibrant, ongoing negotiation rather than a linear progression towards a single outcome. The clear and persistent divergence between the strategies of NU and the Islamist parties indicates that there is no single, unified "Islamic agenda." Instead, the public sphere is a site of continuous debate over the very meaning of an Islamic polity, a process that is, in itself, a hallmark of a functioning democratic society.

The powerful role of NU as a moderating force is a particularly significant reflection. It signifies that the resilience of Indonesian democracy is deeply rooted in the country's specific social and historical context. The existence of a massive, deeply institutionalized, and culturally embedded traditionalist organization provides a powerful societal anchor that prevents the political landscape from being dominated by more polarizing, ideologically rigid movements. This reflects the profound importance of indigenous civil society in shaping a nation's democratic trajectory.

The pragmatic adaptation of Islamist parties like the PKS to the democratic process is also a significant finding. Their focus on good governance and their participation in electoral coalitions signify a strategic choice to work within the democratic system, even as they pursue a long-term transformative agenda. This reflects a process of political learning and moderation that is often observed when ideological movements are required to compete in a pluralistic and competitive electoral environment.

Ultimately, the dynamic of mutual constitution between the two camps signifies the health and dynamism of Indonesia's political discourse. The fact that NU's pluralistic "Islam Nusantara" was sharpened in response to the rise of formalism, and that the PKS's political strategy has been forced to adapt to the dominant moderate culture, indicates a responsive and evolving political ecosystem. It reflects a system where ideas are contested, and no single group has been able to achieve ideological closure, a key feature of a resilient and open society.

The primary implication of this work is for policymakers and analysts seeking to understand and engage with Indonesia. The findings strongly imply that any effective engagement strategy must look beyond the formal political arena of parties and parliaments and recognize the immense influence of civil society organizations like NU. Understanding Indonesian politics requires a deep understanding of the cultural and social forces that shape the boundaries of acceptable political discourse.

For the field of comparative politics and Islamic studies, the implications are significant. This research provides a clear case study that challenges monolithic interpretations of political Islam. It implies that the future of Islam and democracy in other parts of the Muslim world may depend heavily on the presence or absence of analogous, deeply rooted, moderate civil society organizations capable of acting as a counterbalance to more ideologically driven political parties.

The findings also have important implications for pro-democracy actors within Indonesia. The research highlights the critical role that NU plays in defending pluralism and suggests that strengthening

the capacity and voice of such moderate civil society organizations is a key strategy for safeguarding and deepening Indonesian democracy. It implies that supporting the educational, social, and intellectual infrastructure of these groups is a direct investment in the nation's democratic health.

From a broader international relations perspective, this study has implications for how Western democracies view political Islam. The Indonesian case demonstrates that Islamic political movements are not inherently anti-democratic and can operate in diverse and even mutually moderating ways. This implies the need for a more nuanced foreign policy that avoids generalizations and is capable of distinguishing between different types of Islamic actors, supporting those who are compatible with democratic values while engaging critically with those who are not.

The strategic divergence between NU and the PKS is fundamentally caused by their vastly different historical origins and institutional structures. NU was founded in 1926 as a socio-religious organization to defend traditionalist Islamic practices and has built its identity and influence over nearly a century through a vast network of schools, social services, and cultural institutions. Its primary logic is that of a mass-based social movement, not a nimble political party, which causally explains its preference for a long-term, culture-shaping strategy.

The PKS's strategy, in contrast, is a direct result of its origins as a modern political party founded in the specific context of the post-1998 democratic opening. Its institutional logic is that of a cadre-based party designed for electoral competition and parliamentary politics. Its ideological roots in the Muslim Brotherhood provide a clear blueprint that prioritizes the acquisition of state power as the primary means of social transformation. This institutional and ideological DNA is the direct cause of its formalist, top-down political approach.

The role of NU as a moderating force is causally linked to its vested interest in the stability and preservation of the Indonesian state as it currently exists. As a massive, established institution, NU has a great deal to lose from radical political upheaval or the imposition of a rigid, state-controlled version of Islam that could threaten its own socio-religious authority. Its defense of Pancasila and pluralism is therefore a product of both sincere ideological conviction and a pragmatic institutional self-interest in maintaining a political system in which it thrives.

The oppositional and mutually constitutive relationship between the two movements is caused by their direct competition for the same broad constituency: the Indonesian Muslim populace. They are competing to define what it means to be a modern Indonesian Muslim and what the political implications of that identity should be. This competition for ideological and political market share forces them to constantly define themselves in relation to each other, leading to the dynamic of counter-discourse and strategic adaptation observed in the results.

Future research should be directed at expanding this comparative framework to include other significant actors in the Indonesian Islamic political landscape. A similar in-depth analysis of Muhammadiyah, the other major moderate civil society organization, would be invaluable. Additionally, comparative studies of other, smaller Islamist parties would provide a more complete and nuanced picture of the full spectrum of Islamic political thought and strategy in the country.

A critical next step is to conduct longitudinal research to track the evolution of these movements' strategies and discourses over time. The post-Reformasi era is now over two decades old, providing a sufficient timeframe to analyze how these organizations have adapted to changing political and social conditions. A longitudinal study could investigate, for example, how the rise of social media and digital communication has impacted their respective strategies of influence and mobilization.

Quantitative research is needed to complement the qualitative findings of this study. Large-scale public opinion surveys could be designed to measure the real-world impact of the competing discourses of NU and the Islamist parties on the attitudes of the broader Muslim population. Such research could quantitatively assess the reach and resonance of concepts like "Islam Nusantara" versus the formalist agendas of the parties, providing a clearer picture of the ongoing ideological contest.

Finally, future work should apply this comparative model to other countries in the Muslim world. Identifying and analyzing the dynamics between major Islamic civil society organizations and formal Islamist parties in countries like Malaysia, Turkey, or Morocco would provide a crucial comparative perspective. This would allow for the development of a more generalizable theory about the factors that lead to different outcomes and trajectories for political Islam in diverse democratic and semi-democratic contexts.

CONCLUSION

The most distinct finding of this research is the identification of the dynamic of mutual counterbalance between Indonesia's major Islamic civil society organizations and its formal Islamist political parties. The study demonstrates that the political landscape is not a simple contest but a complex ecosystem where the socio-cultural power of Nahdlatul Ulama acts as a significant moderating force on the formal political ambitions of parties like the PKS. This oppositional yet mutually constitutive relationship is a distinguishing feature that explains the unique resilience and character of Indonesian democracy in the Muslim world.

This study's primary contribution is conceptual and methodological, offering a relational framework for analyzing political Islam that moves beyond single-case studies. The value lies in treating civil society actors and political parties not as separate phenomena but as interacting components of a single political field. This comparative method provides a more holistic and dynamic model for understanding how different modes of Islamic political engagement compete and co-shape the public sphere, offering a valuable analytical tool for the study of other complex polities.

The research is limited by its primary focus on Nahdlatul Ulama and the PKS, which does not capture the full spectrum of Islamic movements, such as the influential Muhammadiyah or other Islamist parties. Future research must therefore be directed at expanding this comparative framework to include these other significant actors to create a more comprehensive map of the political landscape. Furthermore, a longitudinal study is needed to track the evolution of these strategic interactions over time, particularly in response to the growing influence of social media and changing geopolitical dynamics.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

Author 4: Formal analysis; Methodology.

Author 5: Writing - original draft; Supervision; Validation.

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