



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Islamic Leadership and Political Engagement: The Role of Ulama in Indonesia's Democratic Dynamic

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: Nov 27, 2024 Accepted: Jan 22, 2025	The involvement of religious leaders in the political landscape of Indonesia presents a multifaceted dynamic, particularly within the context of presidential electoral contests. The participation of Ulama, functioning simultaneously as spiritual guides and political entities, engenders discourse concerning the delineation between religious and political spheres within democratic frameworks. This investigation seeks to elucidate the typology of scholars and their consequential influence on Indonesian politics, as well as the implications of these roles for the stability of democratic governance. The methodological approach adopted in this research is qualitative, employing a descriptive-exploratory design. Data collection was conducted through comprehensive literature reviews, observations of clerical engagement on social media platforms, and interviews with pivotal informants. The thematic analysis of the data utilized nVivo12 software for enhanced rigor. The findings of this study delineated three distinct clerical typologies: independents who refrain from direct political engagement, ideological Ulama who maintain moderate positions without overt participation, and practical political Ulama who actively engage in electoral campaigns. These results indicate that ulama play a pivotal role in shaping public sentiment and directing political policies, particularly through the medium of social media. This research contributes substantively to the advancement of Islamic political theory and offers practical insights for managing the interplay between religious and political dynamics in the contemporary digital era.
Keywords Islam Politics Contestation Ulama Democracy	
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INTRODUCTION

Ulama in Indonesia strongly support pluralism and harmony between religious communities (Kawangung, 2019; Pedersen, 2016). Religious pluralism calls on all parties to establish harmonious relations with other religions shun arrogance and spread tolerance. On the other hand, Indonesia stands out as a model of democracy where ulama are actively involved in politics, effectively balancing political spiritual responsibilities (Kanas & Martinović, 2016; Rosidi et al., 2021) The application of religion in Indonesia currently has a diverse character (Seeth, 2023). Indonesia is a

role model for democracy with the largest Muslim population in the world, which allows for a large surge in the migration of many Muslim countries in the world to embrace democracy (Ehteshami, 2014) Indonesia possesses the potential to serve as an archetype for Islamic states that aspire to integrate within a democratic political framework.(Kubicek, 2022). Currently, the religious landscape in Indonesia is characterized by considerable diversity, reflective of the unique attributes of each region (Seeth, 2023).

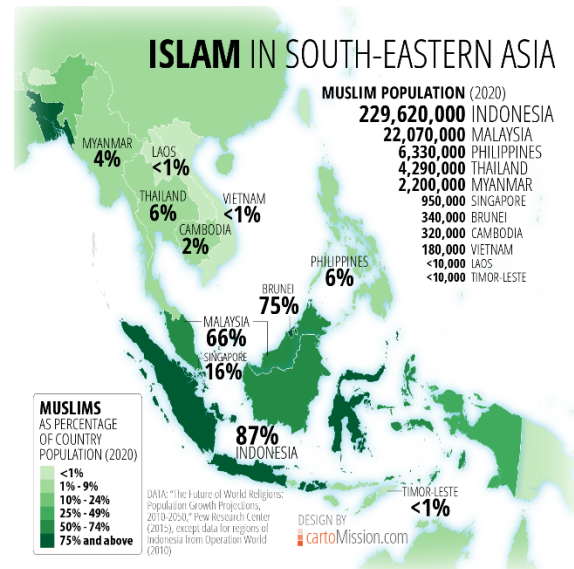


Figure 1: Percentage of Muslims

Sources: www.guides.library.cornell.edu, 2020

Figure 1. Represents a cartographic depiction of the Muslim demographic distribution in Southeast Asia as of the year 2020. Indonesia is the preeminent nation, hosting the most substantial Muslim populace, estimated at approximately 229,620,000 individuals, constituting 87% of its overall population. Malaysia similarly boasts a noteworthy Muslim community, totaling 22,070,000 individuals or 66% of its total demographic. Brunei Darussalam exhibits the highest percentage of Muslims, quantified at 75%. Conversely, Singapore's Muslim population stands at 16%, while the Philippines accounts for 6%, and Thailand comprises 5% of its Muslim inhabitants. Other nations, including Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and East Timor, display exceedingly minimal proportions of Muslim populations, each below 1%. This cartographic representation effectively elucidates the extent of demographic heterogeneity within the region.

The proportion of the predominantly muslim demographic in Indonesia exhibits a direct correlation with the substantial presence of scholars who significantly influence the socio-political and religious trajectories within the nation. Ulama in Indonesia function not solely as spiritual leaders, but also as pivotal social and political agents. Indonesia exhibits a consistent engagement with Islamic principles in quotidian life (Sikumbang, 2024). Conversely, the heterogeneity of scholarly perspectives in Indonesia encapsulates the pluralistic and inclusive dynamics of Islam, while simultaneously posing challenges in the management of divergent viewpoints within the public sphere.

In the realm of Indonesian politics, the participation of scholars in the political arena, both in theory and practice, is a well-established phenomenon (Becker et al., 2017). The concentration of clerical influence ought to remain confined to religious domains and should refrain from encroaching upon political spheres, let alone practical political matters (Pribadi, 2014) Conversely, scholars epitomize a policy promoting religious moderation (Hati et al., 2023; Indainanto et al., 2023). There is a pressing need for more objective indicators and metrics to foster justice for all citizens, devoid of discrimination (Syarif et al., 2020)

This inquiry endeavors to bridge this lacuna by assimilating the political involvement of scholars within a pluralistic and democratic context in Indonesia, thereby addressing ambiguities concerning their capacity to reconcile the tensions between religious identity and democratic ideals (Irawan, 2024). Moreover, the study integrates the impact of scholars in political engagement, a dimension that has been largely neglected in the prevailing scholarship (Rosidi et al., 2021). Moreover, the study integrates the impact of scholars in political engagement, a dimension that has been largely neglected in the prevailing scholarship (Rosidi et al., 2021). By elucidating the ways in which scholars can function as mediators in advancing ethical governance and mitigating the polarization inherent in identity politics, the research offers pragmatic insights for both policymakers and scholars (Rosidi et al., 2021). An examination of methodologies for incorporating religious authority into political frameworks underscores the significance of contextual factors in molding dynamic (Rosidi et al., 2021)

The study aspires to delineate the typology of scholars within Indonesia's socio-political milieu, thereby illuminating the broader interplay between religion and politics. As the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, Indonesia represents a distinctive case study for understanding how scholars navigate their dual responsibilities of spiritual leadership and political participation (Rosidi et al., 2021; Abdullah et al., 2024). The significance of this research extends beyond its focus on Indonesia; it also contributes to the political discourse concerning Islam within a democratic framework. The existing body of literature has thoroughly chronicled the historical role of scholars in Indonesian politics, particularly their contributions during the struggle for independence and the subsequent political evolution (Irawan, 2024; Predelli, 2019;). Nevertheless, substantial gaps persist in comprehending their function within the contemporary democratic paradigm, particularly regarding clerical engagement in politics in the Indo-Asian context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Relation of Ulama and Democratic Politics

The interplay between intellectuals and the political landscape in Indonesia has emerged as a significant focal point in scholarly investigations, particularly within the framework of democracy, which facilitates extensive civil society engagement. This analysis is predicated on the assertion that Muslim religious leaders, often referred to as popular scholars, serve as potent agents in the formation of social movements. Numerous discourses and scholarly inquiries have extensively examined the politicization of religion. Research has concentrated on the historical trajectory and evolution of religious politicization within Indonesia (Hamayotsu, 2014; Romli, 2019; Susanto, 2019). Investigations pertaining to the intersection of religion and media have also been conducted (Mahan, 2012; Morgan, 2013; Jam e al., 2016) Religion constitutes a profoundly sensitive aspect of individuals' lives, particularly for Indonesians, the majority of whom adhere to religious beliefs. The phenomenon of religion-based politicization entails the utilization of religious symbols to galvanize the masses, incite religious sentiments, and consolidate authority within legislative bodies, with the ultimate objective oriented towards political rather than religious ends (Ronaldo & Darmaiza, 2021) Islamic doctrines have intricately connected religious concepts to socio-political frameworks (Yusron, 2020; Jam e al., 2012)

The role of religious leaders during presidential elections in Indonesia exemplifies the instrumentalization of religion aimed at achieving political advantage (Arifin, 2022; Foret, 2014) Furthermore, religious figures represent a pivotal element in comprehending the Political Theology of Political Islam, wherein religion is perceived as possessing strategic functional power against prevailing political conditions (Kurniawan, 2018). The politicization of religion is likewise a critical concept in elucidating Political Theology, particularly Political Islam, which interprets religion as embodying strategic functional power in relation to existing political realities (Abdullah & Wekke, 2018; Kurniawan, 2018; Saputra, 2021).

In the realm of electoral politics, religious leaders frequently assume pivotal roles as strategic participants in politically motivated mobilizations grounded in faith. The endorsement of political

candidates by Ulama can significantly enhance their legitimacy and expand their electoral appeal among the Muslim electorate (Langohr, 2013). This particular occurrence is evident in numerous electoral contests within Indonesia, wherein political aspirants endeavor to cultivate associations with prominent Ulama to secure both moral and political endorsement.

Typology of Political Ulama

The typology of ulama in the Indonesian political context can be categorized into three main groups: independent clerics, ideological clerics, And political scholar (Fealy, G., & White, 2008) Independent scholars focuses on da'wah and education without direct involvement in practical politics, maintaining its integrity and credibility as a moral guardian of society (Sarkissian, 2012). Ideological cleric are more inclined towards spreading Islamic values and ideology related to socio-political issues through lectures and the media, even though they are not directly involved in political parties (Kanas & Martinović, 2016; Verkuyten et al., 2014). Meanwhile, political scholar actively participate in practical politics by joining or establishing an Islamic-based political party, aiming to influence state policy.. (Fleischmann et al., 2013; Rosidi et al., 2021). This typology shows variations in ulama strategies in influencing Indonesian political dynamics, which reflects the complexity of the relationship between religion and the state in a democratic system

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-exploratory design to analyze roles *scholar* in the context of Indonesian politics, especially the 2024 presidential election. This approach was chosen to explore the dynamics of the relationship between religion and politics in depth, with a focus on the influence *scholar* in shaping public opinion and political strategy. This research design utilizes netnographic methods to explore interactions and influences *scholar* through social media, considering the importance of digital platforms in modern politics (Janta et al., 2014; Madun, 2023).

Research data consists of primary and secondary data obtained through several data collection techniques. Primary data was collected through activity observations *scholar* on social media, including platforms such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, which have a significant role in building political narratives and mass mobilization (Lugosi et al., 2012). In addition, secondary data is collected from various sources, such as scientific journals, books, research reports, and news articles, which provide a theoretical basis and enrich the analysis.

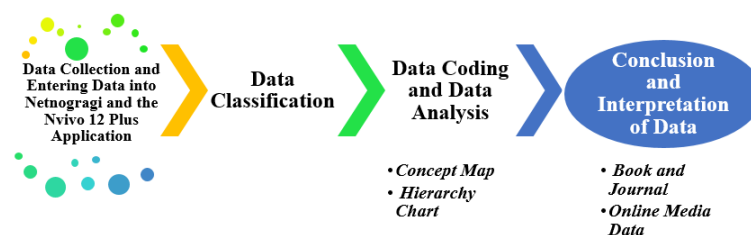


Figure 1. Data analysis process

Data analysis techniques were carried out systematically using NVivo12 software to support the thematic analysis process. The collected data was reduced by filtering relevant information for research purposes, then coded based on main themes (Kozinets, 2002; Wittel, 2000; Islam et al., 2024). The data analysis process in this research was carried out in the NVivo 12 application with features *concept map dan heirarchy cat* analysis to find the relationship between ulama and politics based on variables and visualization of research data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Typology of Ulama in Indonesian Political Contestation

The position of ulama in Indonesian politics is very strategic and influential, considering the large Muslim population which reaches 87% of the total population. Ulama not only act as spiritual leaders,

but also as central figures in national political dynamics. Through large religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, ulama have the capacity to mobilize the masses, influence public opinion, and participate in the legislative process and policy making. The involvement of ulama in politics can be seen in support for prospective leaders, advocacy for policies based on Islamic values, and the formation of Islamic political parties. The typology of ulama in Indonesia consists of independent ulama, ideological ulama and political ulama.

Independent ulama are a group of ulama who choose not to be directly involved in practical politics or political parties. They focus on spiritual development, religious education, and moral preaching without being influenced by particular political interests. Their role as guardians of public morality is very important, because it maintains the integrity of preaching so that it remains objective and inclusive.

Ideological Ulama, On the other hand, ideological ulama are those who actively contribute to political discourse and public policy through the spread of Islamic ideology or values, even though they do not join political parties. They influence public opinion and the direction of state policy through fatwas, lectures, and intellectual forums. In this case, they function as a bridge between Islamic values and public policy, providing a relevant perspective on national strategic issues, especially those related to policy ethics and morality (Sarjito, 2023)

Political Ulama, are ulama who are actively involved in practical politics by joining political parties or establishing Islamic-based parties. This group of ulama then fought directly in practical political life (Yahya & Sahidin, 2022). The involvement of political ulama reflects efforts to institutionalize religious values in state governance, between political interests and the integrity of Islamic morality (Danuwidjaja & Manan, 2023). In this context, political clerics act as agents of change who can influence the direction of government policy and fight for the interests of Muslims in the wider political system (Hawari, 2023).

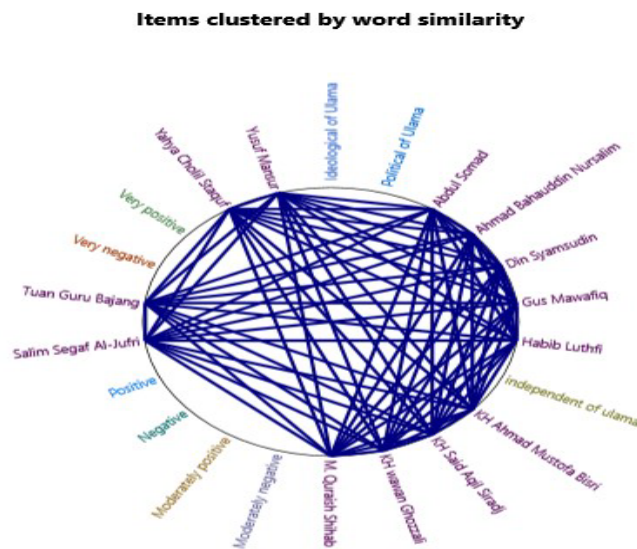


Figure 2. Visualization of Indonesian Ulama

Figure 2 is a visualization of item clustering based on word similarity (Items clustered by word similarity) which describes the conceptual relationship between various categories of ulama and the public's perception of them, both across the spectrum of ideology and sentiment. This visualization shows the complex relationship between typologies of ulama such as independent ulama, ideological ulama, And political ulama with varying perceptions of public sentiment, starting from very positive, positive, moderately positive, moderately negative, until very negative. Famous ulama figures in Indonesia such as Habib Luthfi, Gus Muwafiq, Abdul Somad, Ahmad Baharuddin Nursalim, And Yahya Cholil Staqif associated with these categories through connecting lines that indicate the level of closeness of concepts based on word similarity analysis. The interconnected network of thick and

thin lines between the names of ulama figures and sentiment categories reflects the level of similarity of words and conceptual relationships. Thicker lines indicate stronger relationships between the items, while thinner lines indicate weaker relationships. For example, scholars with orientation ideological or political tend to have a more intense relationship with diverse public perceptions, both positive and negative. On the other hand, ulama are categorized as independent more often associated with predisposed perceptions moderate or positive because of their more neutral role in political dynamics.

Relations between Ulama and Politics in Indonesia

Every time a political contest is held, ulama and religious figures become mouthpieces for Indonesian politicians or leadership candidates (Rumilah et al., 2022). Even Islamic religious figures are directly involved in becoming leadership candidates, such as presidential and vice presidential candidates, competing with figures from other camps.



Figure 3. 2024 Indonesian Presidential Candidates with Ulama

Figure 3 represents the dynamics of the relationship between ulama and politics in political contestation in Indonesia, which reflects how political figures establish strategic closeness with religious figures to strengthen legitimacy and electoral base. In the first photo, Prabowo Subianto is seen with Habib Luthfi bin Yahya, a charismatic cleric and member of the Presidential Advisory Council who is widely known among the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Habib Luthfi's involvement in the public sphere focuses more on preaching nationalism and unity, so that his meeting with Prabowo can be interpreted as a form of moral or symbolic support without practical political ties. The second photo shows Anies Baswedan with Abdul Somad, an ideological cleric who is widely known through his lectures discussing social and political issues. Anies' closeness to Abdul Somad illustrates a political strategy that utilizes the influence of ulama to strengthen an Islam-based political identity and gain the sympathy of Muslim voters.

The third photo shows Ganjar Pranowo with Abuya Muhtadi Dimiyathi, a charismatic cleric from Banten who has great influence among Islamic traditionalists. The meeting marked Ganjar's efforts to embrace traditional Islamic groups as part of a strategy to expand political support. This phenomenon reflects that in Indonesian politics, the relationship between ulama and politicians is mutually beneficial: politicians gain moral legitimacy and mass support, while ulama have the opportunity to voice the interests of the people in the realm of public policy. However, this dynamic also creates challenges in maintaining the independence of ulama so that they are not trapped in pragmatic political interests. Integration between political interests and the role of ulama is an important aspect in Indonesian political analysis, reflecting the complexity of the relationship between religion and the state in a multicultural democracy.

The concept of state and government has given rise to long discussions among Muslim thinkers. Raising differences of opinion and views does not only stop at the conceptual theoretical level, but also enters the realm of practical politics,

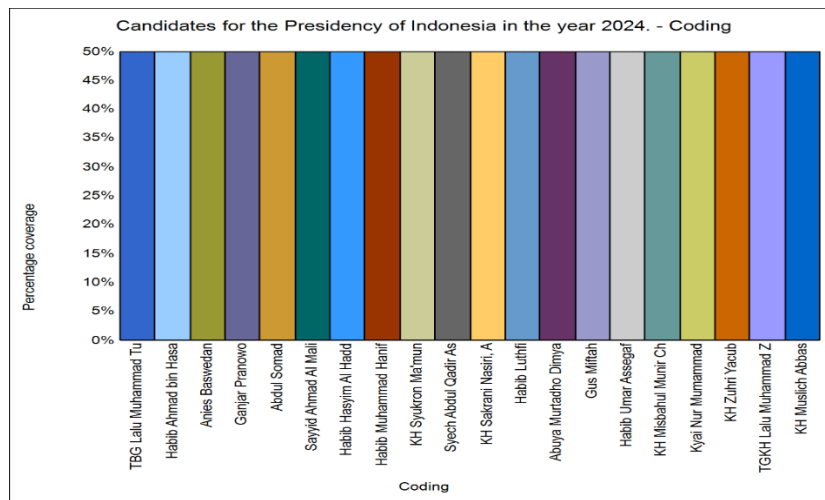


Figure 4. Diagram of the percentage of ulama in the 2024 presidential election

Figure 4. is a diagram that illustrates engagement or coverage percentage various figures, both politicians and ulama, in context Indonesian Presidential election in 2024. This graph shows that each figure has a relatively balanced engagement percentage, namely approaching or reaching 50%. The characters featured include potential presidential candidates such as Anies Baswedan, Ganjar Pranowo, And Prabowo Subianto, as well as a number of influential scholars such as Abdul Somad, Habib Luthfi, Gus Miftah, KH Said Aqil Siradj, And Habib Muhammad Hanif. The uniform distribution in this diagram indicates that both political figures and ulama have a significant and relatively equal level of involvement in the political discourse leading up to the 2024 presidential election. This shows that in Indonesian politics, the support or involvement of ulama is an important factor in influencing electoral dynamics. This percentage balance reflects the strategy of political candidates who seek to build closeness with religious figures to strengthen their moral legitimacy and electoral base, while ulama also use political momentum to voice the aspirations of the people and strengthen social influence.

These findings underscore the complexity of the relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia, where the roles of ulama and political figures intersect in the democratic process. In addition, this graph shows that the politicization of religion and the role of ulama in politics is an inevitable strategy in electoral contestation. This phenomenon is relevant for further study in the context of multicultural Indonesian democracy, especially in assessing its impact on political stability, social integration and strengthening substantive democratic values.

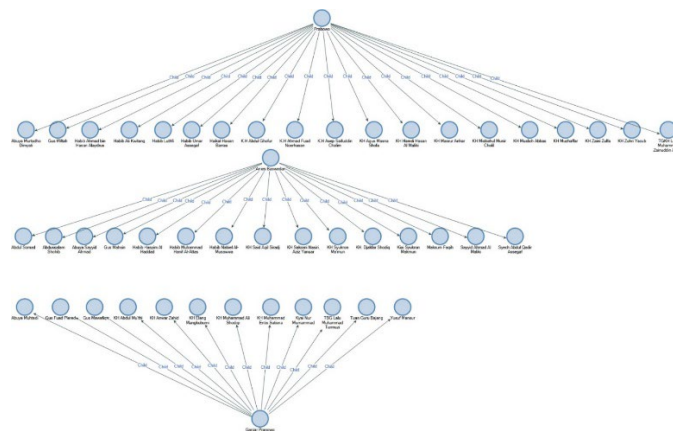


Figure 5. Visualization of the ulama network in Indonesian politics

This image is a visualization of the network of relationships between Indonesian presidential candidates and various influential ulama figures, which are organized in a hierarchical structure

based on closeness and political support. There are three main candidates shown in this diagram, viz Prabowo Subianto, Anies Baswedan, And Ganjar Pranowo, each of whom is connected to a number of prominent clerics and religious figures in Indonesia. This visualization shows how the three candidates built political support networks through relationships with ulama, which played a significant role in mobilizing the electoral base, especially among Muslim voters.

Prabowo Subianto has the most extensive clerical support network in this diagram, with direct connections to various influential figures such as Habib Luthfi, Gus Miftah, KH Abdul Ghofur, And Habib Umar Assegaf. This reflects Prabowo's political strategy which seeks to embrace ulama from across the ideological spectrum to strengthen his legitimacy and expand his political support base. Anies Baswedan also appears to have relations with a number of popular scholars such as Abdul Somad, Habib Rizieq Shihab, And KH Said Aqil Siradj, which shows its political orientation in embracing Islamic groups that are more ideological and critical of the government. Meanwhile, Ganjar Pranowo appears to be more selective in building networks with ulama, which is demonstrated through relationships with figures such as Gus Muwafiq, KH Ahmad Muzani, And Mr Bajang Teacher, which represents moderate and traditionalist Islamic groups.

This visualization makes it clear that in political contestation in Indonesia, relations between politicians and ulama are a key strategy in gaining public support. The involvement of ulama in candidates' political networks reflects their central role in influencing voter preferences, especially in the context of Indonesia's Muslim-majority society. This phenomenon also shows the fragmentation of support among ulama, which can reflect the diversity of political orientations in the ummah base. These findings are relevant for further analysis within the framework of studying the relationship between religion and politics, especially in understanding how strategic alliances between politicians and ulama influence the dynamics of democracy and political stability in Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

Relations between religious and political figures take a fair and equal approach as fellow humans and Indonesian citizens. Islam is a religious belief that only regulates human relationships with God. Islam is a religion which also contains constitutional and political systems. Because Islamic teachings emphasize the importance of political issues, all Muslims, both religious leaders and ordinary people, have rights and obligations in political life. The position of religious and political figures is very urgent in the 2024 presidential election in Indonesia. Religious figures play a role in protecting people from ignorance and creating a better life. Religious figures are able to unite everything wisely without any gaps despite different relationships in determining the country's leadership. Islam provides freedom of choice by feeling mutual understanding, so this is good for the ulama themselves and Indonesian society.

This research reveals that *scholar* not only acts as a spiritual leader, but also as a political actor who influences public opinion and the direction of political policy. *Scholar* independent minds tend to keep their distance from practical politics and focus more on spiritual formation, whereas *scholar* ideological, adopting a moderate stance by providing political views without being directly involved in the political process. On the other hand, *scholar* Practical politics is actively involved in supporting political candidates and taking part in campaign activities. Additionally, this research provides a deeper understanding of how *scholar* can be a link between religious values and political practices in a pluralistic society. These findings are not only relevant to the political context in Indonesia, but also provide valuable insights for other Muslim countries in managing the relationship between religion and politics in the modern era.

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