The Hegemony of Pesantren Ulama in the Contemporary Political Dynamics of Central Java

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine the hegemony of religious leaders (Ulama) in contemporary politics and how Ulama exercise their hegemonic roles in the political process in Central Java. Data was obtained through primary and secondary sources, with primary data collected through field research using interviews, and secondary data gathered through literature research. The findings indicate that the entanglement between Ulama and politics is caused by two factors: political oligarchy within political parties and the political hegemony of Ulama. The political hegemony of Ulama in the political constellation of Central Java makes them highly influential in political affairs. However, from the perspective of real political dimensions in Central Java, Ulama have yet to secure strategic positions in either the executive or legislative branches.

Keywords: *Ulama, Transactional Politics, Political Hegemony, Political Party Oligarchy.*

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Islamic Religious Leaders (Ulama) and politics is always intriguing to discuss. Currently, ulama in various Islamic countries hold significant positions in society (Batalla & Baring, 2019; Hamidi et al., 2022; Yahya & Sahidin, 2022). Ulama wield influence not only in the social-religious domain but also in the political domain. In some European countries, the relationship between religion and the state remains important in the social, cultural, and political domains (Magazzini et al., 2022; Vekony et al., 2022). Similarly, in America, religion still serves as a driving force for its citizens (Setiawan et al., 2020). Like Western countries, in several Asian countries such as Bangladesh and Turkey, there are many activities that demonstrate the flexible relationship between religion and politics in national life (Kozin et al., 2020). Even ulama have played a role in various socio-political changes.

In Indonesia, there are political ulama and non-political ulama (Hamidi et al., 2022; Magazzini et al., 2022; Setiawan et al., 2020; Watson, 2018). This division relates to the ulama's views on the concept of the state as understood from religious texts. Political ulama believe that engaging in politics is a religious obligation, with political behavior exemplified by the Prophet and the *Khulafaur Rashidin* (the first four leaders of Islam after the Prophet). This belief is based on three models of religious understanding regarding the relationship between religion and politics among ulama in Indonesia, namely: (1) unified paradigm, (2) symbiotic paradigm, and (3) secularistic paradigm (Hamidi et al., 2022; Magazzini et al., 2022; Yahya & Sahidin, 2022).

The more moderate an ulama's religious understanding, the more moderate their political views. The significant involvement of ulama in practical politics is not without reason; they adhere to Islamic legal principles according to their beliefs. Furthermore, the participation of ulama in politics can be categorized into three political motivations: engaging in politics to gain power, engaging in politics to propagate Islamic values, and engaging in politics to demonstrate the existence of ulama in the socio-community field (Yahya & Sahidin, 2022).

Meanwhile, non-political ulama are those who do not engage in politics and delegate political matters to other ulama who are concerned with political thought and behavior. Researchers can categorize this group of non-political ulama into three groups: pesantren (purely academic) ulama, Sufi (Mystich) ulama, and structural ulama within Islamic organizations (Barton et al., 2021; Mudzhar, 2005; Sabet, 2001).

However, nowadays, the role of ulama in politics has often been reduced to that of vote-getters (Hidayat & Miskan, 2019; Nuri, 2014). The large number of ulama who act as campaigners for presidential or legislative candidates is due to offers (rewards) from related parties. Nonetheless, the ulama claim that their participation in practical politics is not because of the ideas or visions of the candidates they support, but because of social responsibility as ulama who are requested by their followers to support certain presidential or legislative candidates (Fernando et al., 2023; Syafei & Darajati, 2020). This has led to a tradition where legislative and presidential candidates seek the support of ulama as vote-getters in democratic events (elections).

Unfortunately, ulama are often associated with money politics, namely transactional politics, which frequently occurs in various electoral activities. Money politics is a common problem in various political stages, both domestically and internationally (Amin, 2021; Ashar et al., 2020; Efianda & Iswahyuni, 2021; Syafei & Darajati, 2020). Transactional politics practiced by politicians through the distribution of public goods and various political policies can lead to shortcut political processes or instant political practices.

Due to the occurrence of transactional politics among ulama, public trust in ulama's politics has diminished. Transactional politics is not only a political fraud but also erodes the pillars of democracy in the country. The difficulty of proving transactional politics makes it more prevalent and even considered normal as a political tradition leading up to elections

(legislative, presidential, and regional elections). Article 73 of Law Number 10 of 2016 (Law 10/2016) concerning the Second Amendment to Law Number 1 of 2015 on the Stipulation of Government Regulations in Lieu of Law Number 1 of 2014 (Law 1/2014) on the Election of Governors, Regents, and Mayors into Law clearly states that political dowries are prohibited (Ahmad, 2017; Amin, 2021).

The task of ulama in politics is not only to reject transactional politics but also to uphold the values of ethical politics that are courteous, honest, and fair. Campaigns often become arenas for unhealthy political contests because, during campaigns, each party frequently denigrates opposing groups. Conversely, other groups also engage in the same behavior, denigrating and ridiculing others (Huda, 2013; M. Mukhsin Jamil, 2021; Suradi & Surahman, 2020).

Amidst the conflicts between voters, ulama, as the last bastion of societal morality, must serve as good examples in the political practices of this country. However, many ulama involved in politics still succumb to the temptation of money politics. Even some ulama who are committed to truthful political values often get pushed out of practical politics. For political ulama, such challenges are easily faced because, in the political world, money politics will always emerge in every political process. Meanwhile, non-political ulama often view money politics as a form of reward (bisyaroh) as per the tradition among ulama (Ashar et al., 2020; Hidayat & Miskan, 2019).

This study aims to unravel the problems faced by ulama in the political sphere, which are often perceived as deviating from the traditions that have developed in contemporary politics. The first problem is the difference in political attitudes among ulama involved in practical political processes, influenced by their socio-cultural backgrounds. The second is the role of ulama's political hegemony in practical political contests.

The method used in this research is a qualitative descriptive approach with a purposive sampling technique for selecting research subjects (Moeloeng, 2017). The research subjects are pesantren ulama involved in political parties in Central Java. In-depth interviews about the political activities of pesantren ulama are the primary data, and the secondary data consists of literature reviews from books and journals relevant to this research theme (John W. Creswell, 2018). In-depth interviews were conducted using predetermined interview guidelines. Data analysis involved six steps, including data reduction, data classification, analysis, conclusion drawing, and data validity testing.

DISCUSSION
The Relationship between Ulama and Politics

The figure of the ulama in the study of Islamic politics is not a new subject, as ulama are one of the actors involved in politics in Indonesia. Ulama are present not only in the socio-religious field but are also considered knowledgeable about social community issues. Zamahsyari Dhofier, in his book "Tradisi Pesantren," discusses in great detail the role of ulama in anthropological research discourse in Indonesia, whether they are active in political parties or not (Niam, 2010; Zamakhsyari Dhofier, 1984).

Currently, ulama and politics represent two distinct entities that are interconnected and interwoven within society. The influx of ulama into the political arena is an inevitable phenomenon for several reasons. First, regulatory aspects provide opportunities for anyone to be active in political parties and even in parliament without stringent educational requirements. Second, the prominent status of ulama serves as significant social capital, especially in rural areas where paternalistic attitudes are still prevalent. Third, the patron-client relationship between ulama and their students (santri) and the pesantren community is very strong. Santri and the pesantren community view ulama not merely as community leaders but as individuals with high supernatural power (Abidin & Dong, 2020; Suradi & Surahman, 2020).

These broad opportunities are utilized by ulama to engage in politics with various objectives. This is evident from the large number of ulama who seize the chance to be active in political parties, whether in religious-identity parties, national religious political parties, or even nationalist parties (Huda, 2013; Yahya & Sahidin, 2022). Ulama choose their political parties for several reasons, such as gaining power, dedicating themselves to preaching in politics, and following the directives of kyai as part of the kyai-santri relationship (Abidin & Dong, 2020; Yani et al., 2022).

Many previous researchers have analyzed the various forms of the relationship between ulama and politics. However, in this paper, the author categorizes the forms of the ulama-politics relationship into three types based on the ulama's activism in various political behaviors, particularly contemporary political participation (Barton et al., 2021; Ichwan, 2012; Yani et al., 2022). Generally, the forms of the relationship between ulama and politics can be illustrated in the following table.

Table 1: The Relationship between Ulama and Politics

Category	Political Ulama	Structural Ulama	Pesantren Ulama
Definition	Ulama involved in political activities and influencing political decision-making and public policy..	Ulama within formal religious or governmental institutions handling religious matters.	Ulama who serve as caretakers, educators, and leaders in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools).
Characteristics	o Active in political parties or political organizations. o Influence government policy decisions.\ Participate in political campaigns and elections o Use religious knowledge (fiqhiyyah principles) to provide views and guidance in the political context.	• Active in official institutions like Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI). • Formulate official religious fatwas through LBM (Lembaga Bahtsul Masail), Majlis Tarjih, and the MUI Fatwa Commission.	o Focused on Islamic religious education for santri (pesantren students). o Teach classical Islamic texts (kitab kuning) and religious sciences. o Serve as role models in daily life for santri. o Directly involved in religious activities in pesantren, such as study circles, prayers (dzikir), and other worship activities.
Relationship	o Active in political parties or councils.	• Serve as advisors or leaders in political institutions.	o Serve as advisors for parties and candidates.
Examples	1. Ulama serving as parliament members (KH Dimyati Rois, Kaliwungu; KH Khalwani, Purworejo) 2. Ulama acting as political advisors for government officials (KH Yusuf Chudori, Magelang).	1. One of NU leaders (KH Ubaidillah Shodaqoh). 2. One of MUI leaders (KH Ahmad Daroji, Prof. KH Noor Ahmad). 3. One of Muhammadiyah Leaders (Dr. KH Tafsir, M.Ag).	Kiai or ustaz managing pesantren like: 1. KH Liwauddi (PP Mansajul Ulum Pati). 2. KH Sholahudin (PP A; Hikmah Bumiayu)

Sumber:
Hasil penelitian lapangan, 2023 (KH Liwauddin, 2023; KH Sholahuddin Masruri, 2023).

Transactional Politics of Ulama

The prevalence of transactional politics during presidential and legislative elections has increased the urgency to analyze the political problems currently occurring in Indonesian society

(Ahmad, 2017; Amin, 2021; Ashar et al., 2020; Efianda & Iswahyuni, 2021). Transactional politics not only undermines democracy but also disrupts the political cadre system within parties, which is a concern for genuine politicians. The rise of instant politicians often damages the well-organized cadre process within political parties.

Transactional politics is based on friendship and brotherhood (Fernando et al., 2023; Yani et al., 2022). Sometimes, these relationships can override established systems within political parties. Consequently, transactional politics leads to the emergence of instant, capitalist, and apathetic politicians who disregard the political voice of the people.

The current phenomenon of transactional politics is caused by the lax cadre system within parties and the emergence of new figures with strong social and economic capital (Ashar et al., 2020; Duwila, 2022; Amin, 2021). The following two factors play the most significant roles in the occurrence of transactional politics: political oligarchy and political hegemony.

1) Political Party Oligarchy

Generally, oligarchy is understood as a form of governance run by a few powerful individuals from certain groups or classes. In a political party, political oligarchy often involves maintaining the power of a family or group. Party leaders believe that oligarchy ideology is inevitable, and other leaders must support the expectations of the few in power. Such political parties are usually controlled by a few highly influential figures (Duwila, 2022; Juniar, 2021).

In an oligarchic political system, political party decisions are dominated by a few elite party rulers. This situation allows party elites to play a crucial role in determining the party's direction. Several factors drive political parties to engage in oligarchic practices, including: The first factor is the leadership characteristics of political party leaders, who are often the main figures or elites significantly influencing the party's policies. The second factor is the historical or ideological aspects of the political party, where the founding fathers of the party become its backbone, leading to dependency on their leadership and financial support. The third factor is the party's Articles of Association and Bylaws (AD/ART), which often provide opportunities for party elites to strengthen their leadership in the future..

These aspects provide opportunities for ulama to participate in political parties. In some political parties, ulama often receive privileges to join the party leadership without engaging in any political work. Examples of such ulama include KH Dimyati Rois from Kaliwungu Kendal, KH Subhan Luwungragi from Brebes, and KH Chalwani from Purworejo, who are frequently used as vote-getters in various political parties.

The oligarchic practices within political parties often result in the emergence of instant politicians, which substantively harms the party. In some cases, political oligarchy leads to corruption within political parties, contradicting efforts to establish an ideal democratic order. Oligarchy also disrupts the recruitment and cadre process necessary for achieving the ideal political party (Ashar et al., 2020; Faedlulloh et al., 2023; Marwing, 2021). The emergence of presidential, vice-presidential, and legislative candidates indicates a slow cadre process, leaving political parties with limited strong and dignified human resources to offer.

Among the three presidential and vice-presidential candidates in the 2024 election, only the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) has put forth its cadre as a presidential candidate, despite internal conflicts over selecting the suitable candidate. Whether Puan Maharani, prepared by the PDI-P Chairman, or Ganjar Pranowo, who received the most support from PDI-P members, would be the candidate was uncertain. Ultimately, the PDI-P Chairman announced Ganjar Pranowo as the presidential candidate, paired with Mahfudz MD, who ideologically affiliates with the largest Islamic organization, NU (Nahdlatul Ulama), and is a prominent figure in HMI (Islamic Students Association), with high electability.

Similarly, Anies Baswedan, the former Governor of Jakarta and not a party leader, received the presidential candidate mandate from several political parties such as PKS (Prosperous Justice Party), the Democratic Party, the Masyumi Party, and the Ummat Party. Although the Democratic Party eventually switched to support the Prabowo-Gibran ticket, the party led by the son of former President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono retained full authority in selecting its presidential candidate for the 2024 election.

2). Ulama Political Hegemony

The political hegemony of ulama in the 2024 Presidential Election is based on the substantial influence of religious leaders in shaping political directions and outcomes. Ulama possess significant power in mobilizing support, shaping public opinion, and legitimizing presidential candidates (Sihidi et al., 2020).

Simply put, hegemony means dominance, but in political reality, it is more complex than mere dominance. Hegemony occurs when a group in power and its members exert control over other groups through both coercion and persuasion. Thus, hegemony involves not only the use of power but also consent, employing political leadership and ideological influence (Setiawan, 2018; Setiawan et al., 2020; Sumiyana et al., 2023; Wojnicka et al., 2022).

In understanding social theory, Antonio Gramsci categorizes hegemony into three types based on its levels: total hegemony, characterized by total mass affiliation; decadent hegemony, marked by significant challenges faced by the ruling group in modern society; and minimum hegemony, where hegemony is seen through the ideological unity among the ruling elite without societal involvement in political matters (Sumiyana et al., 2023; Yani et al., 2022).

The ulama's power over politics today offers them a significant opportunity to easily gain power. With strong social capital, ulama are highly sought after by political parties. Especially during democratic events, ulama can serve as potent vote-getters for presidential, vice-presidential, and legislative candidates.

In political events like the current presidential election, ulama are indispensable socio-political tools due to their considerable political influence. The presence of ulama and habaib, such as Habib Lutfi Pekalongan, who openly supports the Prabowo-Gibran ticket in the 2024 presidential election, significantly impacts the Prabowo-Gibran campaign. Habib Lutfi sets a political example for the Muslim community, particularly followers of spiritual orders (thariqah) (Aini & Jawad Filfil, 2023; Dalle, 2023; Sebastian, C. & Pratama, Aditya, 2024).

Similarly, KH Marzuki Mustamar, Chairman of the Tanfidziyah Executive Board of East Java's PWNU, supports the Anies-Muhaimin ticket, signaling to NU members in East Java and Indonesia to choose the candidates endorsed by KH Marzuki. NU members feel more comfortable voting for candidates chosen by their respected ulama, especially since KH Marzuki's support comes with the explanation that supporting a candidate who is a descendant of NU's founder is a way to honor NU's founders (Aini & Jawad Filfil, 2023; Dalle, 2023).

These cases exemplify political endorsements by ulama. Habib Lutfi, Chairman of the International Sufi Forum and Rais 'Aam of Jam'iyyah Ahlu Thariqah al-Mu'tabarah an-Nahdliyah, focuses on spiritual matters (ukhrowi). Similarly, KH Marzuki, Chairman of East Java's PWNU, emphasizes social community messages in his preaching. The religious influence of Habib Lutfi and KH Marzuki is capitalized upon by politicians as a political strength benefiting certain groups.

According to Gramsci, religious and cultural hegemony is the primary way for the dominant class to maintain power. KH Marzuki Mustamar's example shows how ulama and religious institutions like NU strive to create and maintain cultural hegemony among Indonesia's Muslim community. As Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, NU influences political and social policies through religious activities such as lectures, writings, and organizational activities that shape and direct the political and religious consciousness of society.

Personally, KH Marzuki Mustamar and Habib Lutfi, both from NU, fight to uphold NU and the broader Muslim community. In Gramsci's context, they are considered organic intellectuals, individuals crucial in shaping the social and political consciousness of a particular social class. Gramsci's view of organic intellectuals helps us understand how certain ideologies and class interests can be maintained through intellectual and political activities in the 2024 presidential election.

This phenomenon aligns with the paternalistic nature of society and the inseparability of religious political issues from societal culture. The political hegemony of ulama is not about applying pragmatic power politics but aims to develop religiously-based political idealism. KH Marzuki often states that his support for Anies-Muhaimin is not about political calculations but as part of his da'wah through actions (bil hal), following the example of past ulama like KH Wahab Hasbullah, one of NU's founders.

KH Marzuki Mustamar plays a significant role in using religion to mobilize the Muslim community within a religious political framework. As a religious leader and organic intellectual, he uses Islamic teachings to foster social and political awareness, build collective identity, and challenge injustice. Consequently, religion becomes not only a spiritual component but also an integral part of social and political life, influencing the choices and actions of Muslims.

Similarly, pesantren kyai in Central Java, like KH Hanief Ismail Rois Syuriyah of PCNU Semarang, uses Islamic teachings and principles to influence and shape the political consciousness and actions of the surrounding Muslim community. The 2024 Presidential Election provides valuable lessons for Muslims to engage in proper and healthy politics (https://www.detik.com/jateng/berita/d-7153584/rais-pcnu-kota-semarang-sebut-pilih-02-agar-pilpres-satu-putaran).

Although ulama's significant political influence can change public choices, they also risk leading their followers into massive political corruption. Therefore, ulama must always uphold their moral and ethical duties, distinguishing between political and spiritual tasks, teaching good politics, and ensuring they are responsible and free from corruption. By doing so, ulama can remain a constructive force supporting justice and goodness in society without falling into political corruption (Farid & Efendi, 2022; Istiqomah et al., 2022).

The substantial political power of ulama should not drag them into political destruction. Ulama must continue developing political idealism based on religious values. Religious political values necessitate that politics is a duty for everyone, both as voters (ahlul ihtiyar) and as candidates to be elected as leaders (ahlul imamah) (Al-Mawardi, 1960; Arifianto, 2020; Mahatma, 2017; Romli, 2020).

In Indonesia, good ulama political hegemony is based on democracy, justice, tolerance, and diversity. Good ulama political hegemony should promote the overall welfare of society, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or group. By applying these principles, ulama can significantly contribute to Indonesia's sustainable and inclusive progress.

CONCLUSION

The involvement of ulama in political power is an inevitability in today's democratic era. Like other members of society, ulama are free to express their political voices to achieve their aspirations. This study maps three categories of ulama in politics: political ulama, structural ulama, and pesantren ulama. Ulama strive according to their believed ideals, making political differences among them a commonly accepted practice. The entanglement between ulama and politics is caused by two factors: political oligarchy within political parties and the political hegemony of ulama. These two factors provide ulama with the opportunity to actively participate in political contests in Indonesia.

This study on ulama and politics has limitations, as it only discusses the behavior of ulama in Central Java. Therefore, researchers interested in this theme are encouraged to conduct studies in other regions with more current and comprehensive discussions.

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