

## Exploring the Existence and Social Role of Kiai in the Dynamics of Politics and Democratization in Indonesia

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### Abstract:

This study examines the existence and social role of *kiai* in the dynamics of the constellation of power and the democratization process in Indonesia, both when Indonesia was in the pre-independence period and after achieving independence. To make this study focused, the discussion will be directed to answer three research questions: how to understand and articulate politics in the current democratic system in Indonesia? How and what has the democratic political system in Indonesia been implemented so far, especially since the implementation of the multi-party democracy system after the 1998 reform? How can we read and understand the social role of *kiai* in the dynamics of politics and democratization in Indonesia? Based on its methodology, this study is a literature review conducted based on the type of qualitative research. Two sets of data are used in this study: primary and secondary. After analyzing the research data based on the theory of political sociology, this study found interesting findings that *kiai*, although conceptually identical to the socio-religious role as educators and preachers, on many occasions and at the social level, *kiai* have made significant contributions and contributions beyond the religious realm, even spreading widely to the political realm and the space of democratization in Indonesia. In general, the contribution and social role of the *kiai* at this level are carried out through two aspects at once, namely, the cultural element and the structural aspect. They play the artistic aspect as organic intellectual figures, namely playing a significant role in strengthening society's integration and social cohesion so that the structure and building of the nation and state remain solid and strong. As for the structural aspect, *kiai* carries out this role through his involvement in some government structures, starting from the legislative structure to the executive, whether he carries out this role directly or indirectly.

**Keywords:** Existence of *kiai*, social role, democratization, politics, Indonesia

### Introduction:

In addition to being known by the world community as a country with a majority Muslim population, Indonesian society is also known to have a relatively large attitude of recognition of the existence of religion (Islam) and its symbols. This fact can be easily found in their daily lives, social systems, and structures, which in many ways

represent religious values (Islam).<sup>1</sup> At the level of the social system, almost all social systems of Indonesian society contain religious values, starting from the cultural system, education system, and economic system, even in the realm of the most profane social system, namely the socio-political system. Likewise with the building of its social structure, at this level, many social structures in

<sup>1</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, 'Indonesian Muslims and Their Place in the Larger World of Islam', 1 January 2011.

Indonesia reflect the presence of religious values (Islam) in them, both social structures at the macro level, such as Islamic boarding schools, and social structures at the micro level. For example, the hierarchy system or social class of society in everyday life, which until now tends to place religious figures (Islam) as a high or dominant social class. One of the most dominant and influential religious social classes in the social dynamics of Indonesian society today is the *kiai* (English: Indonesian terminology referring to a Muslim cleric) social class.<sup>2</sup>

In Indonesia, studying the existence and role of *kiai* in their position as local religious (Islamic) elites in Indonesia is interesting and important. Interesting, because in reality, until now, the existence of *kiai* is still a central figure in the social life of Indonesia as a whole, especially among people from certain regions who are known to have a relatively strong and dominant socio-religious character, both at the level of thought and practice in daily life activities.<sup>3</sup> It is important because the facts show that *kiai* have made a significant contribution to the process of forming the civilization of the Indonesian nation. Although in terminology, the great name of *kiai* is identical to the role and function of religion in carrying out the function of education and religious preaching to society, in reality, their actual contribution is not limited to that. Moreover, the contribution of *kiai* can also be found in other social aspects, including nationality and statehood, through their concrete role in strengthening and solidifying the political system and democratization in Indonesia from the pre-independence period to gaining its independence as it is now.

Scientific studies on the existence and role of *kiai* in the dynamics of politics and democratization in Indonesia have been carried out by researchers from across disciplines at the academic level. Based on the previous literature source search, the general tendency of studies on it has narrowed to three significant hypotheses. First, the existence and social role of *kiai* in the dynamics of politics in Indonesia tend to be faced with opposing views.

There has been the attachment of political labels that are biased towards harmful and destructive stigmas, such as opportunists and pragmatists, as revealed in the writings of Martin van Bruinessen, *NU, Tradisi, Relasi-Relasi Kuasa* (1994); John Gregory Fealy, *Ulama and Politics in Indonesia: A History of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) 1952-1967* (1998).<sup>4</sup> Second, in addition to the stigmatization of opportunists and pragmatists, another hypothesis regarding the existence and social role of *kiai* in the dynamics of politics and democratization in Indonesia is the attachment as a political broker. The famous American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1926-2006) first proposed this hypothesis in his academic text entitled *The Javanese Kijaji: the Changing Role of a Cultural Broker* (1960).<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, until this article was written, the two hypotheses above continued to circulate; even in many discussions and studies, they were often used as references and sources of literature to justify the discourse on the religious role of *kiai* in politics.

To some extent, the tendency to take things for granted has caused problems and ongoing debate among academics. Moreover, so far, adverse claims and hypotheses about the political role of *kiai* have usually come from outside groups, who sociologically have limitations and methodological weaknesses in appreciating and understanding the social and cultural systems of Indonesian society. Therefore, in addition to aiming to cover up the failings and shortcomings of previous studies, this paper is also intended to test the two hypotheses above by emphasizing the perspective of the study and its studies based on two perspectives at once, namely the perspective of Islamic political thought and the sociology of religion. The use of these two perspectives allows this study to produce readings that are not only different but also more comprehensive than several previous studies that tend to emphasize their approach to a single perspective of the discipline of anthropology.

Regarding its significance, the urgency of this study is based on the hypothesis that the existence and religious role of *kiai* in the dynamics of politics and democratization in Indonesia have quite long

<sup>2</sup> Rojabi Azharghany, 'Power Islamization: Unveiling the Islamic Politics of Kiai as Leaders of The Indonesian People', *Al-Insyiroh: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 8, no. 1 (22 March 2022): 1–26, doi:10.35309/alinsyiroh.v8i1.4689.

<sup>3</sup> Sholikah Sholikah and Nurotun Mumtahanah, 'Kontribusi Kebangsaan Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari: Membangun Relasi Harmonis Islam dan Indonesia', *Akademika* 15, no. 1 (1 July 2021), doi:10.30736/adk.v15i1.515.

<sup>4</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, *NU, Tradisi, Relasi-Relasi Kuasa* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 1994); Greg Fealy, *Ulama and Politics in Indonesia: A History of Nahdlatul Ulama, 1952-1967* (Australia: Monash University, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Clifford Geertz, 'The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Cultural Broker', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (1960): 228–49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/177816>.

historical ties and connections. The personality and charismatic power of the *kiai* as an Islamic religious figure who is known to uphold ethical and moral values can play a function as one of the controllers of the course of political power and a strengthener of democratization at the grassroots level amidst the complex problems of governance in Indonesia, which in the last decade has experienced challenges and issues in many aspects.<sup>6</sup> The arguments underlying this hypothesis will be detailed and divided into two formulations. First, the figure of the *kiai* is a local religious figure (Islam) who represents the authentic Indonesian social system and structure; until now, his figure continues to receive quite significant recognition, even on many occasions, often becoming an influential figure in many aspects of social and development in Indonesia. Second, sociologically, there is a relatively strong emotional relationship between the *kiai* and the history of the birth and formation of democratic politics in Indonesia. This emotional relationship has been formed for a long time, even since Indonesia was not born and gained its independence as it is now.

## Result and Discussion:

### *Kiai* in Social Dynamics in Indonesia; A Conceptual Perspective:

In Indonesian society, the term *kiai* is quite popular and closely tied to people's lives. The dominant position and social role of *Kiai* in Indonesia's social system and structure is one of the strong reasons why their existence and name are pretty well-known. Interestingly, although the *kiai* figure is formed traditionally and passed down from generation to generation, its existence still exists and occurs well, even clearly and playing a central role in the process of social change in Indonesian society in almost all aspects, starting from religious aspects, educational aspects, cultural aspects, including political aspects.<sup>7</sup> This fact has also left several quite heated debates among academics, one of which revolves around the question, why do *kiai* have a reasonably dominant role and social influence in social dynamics in Indonesia? Does this situation have anything to do with his social status as a religious figure? To answer the two

questions above, this section will first provide an extraordinary description of the understanding or definition of *kiai* from the perspective of terminology and etymology, which is essential to provide a deep and comprehensive picture of *kiai*, both from a conceptual and contextual perspective.

Etymologically, according to the Indonesian Dictionary, the word *kiai* has several meanings: a term for a religious scholar (clever in Islam), a term for a teacher of occult sciences such as a shaman and so on, a name for a district head in South Kalimantan; a prefix for every object that is considered to have magical powers such as weapons, gamelan, and so on; also used as a pseudonym for a tiger.<sup>8</sup> If we look closely at all the five definitions of *kiai*, the first version is considered the most relevant to describe the context of this study. The subject of *kiai* in this study is a group of religious scholars known to have exceptionally qualified and deep expertise in spiritual knowledge (Islam), both at the level of thought and understanding and especially at the level of practice. In Indonesia, the figure of a *kiai* and the various symbols of charisma attached to him practically place him as a central figure, becoming a reference or primary reference in every socio-religious event. Sociologically, the central role and position of the *kiai* amid society in Indonesia can be found in every religious ritual activity of the community, where the *kiai* plays the central figure as the leader of the activity.

Regarding terminology, the definition of *kiai* comes from a famous Indonesian social thinker, Zamakhsyari Dhofier (1994). According to him, *kiai* is a title given by society to someone who is an expert in Islam and has become a leader of a *pesantren* (traditional Islamic boarding schools) and teaches classical learning to his students.<sup>9</sup> Martin Van Martin Van Bruinessen (1995) defines *kiai* as a religious figure with a central position in the world of *tarekat* (Islamic mystical brotherhood). As a figure, *kiai* is often used as a role model, and every action of his is imitated and followed by society.<sup>10</sup> Society sees the figure of *Kiai* as a person who is close to God, has a high spiritual soul, and always adorns himself with attitudes and actions full of virtue. This meaning is

<sup>6</sup> Afina Izzati, 'Kiai Sebagai Figur Toleransi Kearifan Lokal di Lasem', *FIKRAH* 8, no. 2 (16 November 2020): 243, doi:10.21043/fikrah.v8i2.8005.

<sup>7</sup> Zamakhsari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Tentang Pandangan Hidup Kiai* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> KBBI Online, 'Arti Kata Kiai - Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) Online', accessed 18 January 2023, <https://kbbi.web.id/kiai>.

<sup>9</sup> Zamakhsari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Tentang Pandangan Hidup Kiai* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1994), 32.

<sup>10</sup> Bruinessen, *NU, Tradisi, Relasi-Relasi Kuasa*, 67–99.



in line with the views of Mustafa al-Maraghi, where he defines *kiai* as people who know the power and majesty of Allah SWT so that they are afraid to commit immoral acts.

Based on the three definitions above, there are at least three critical keywords in understanding the concept of *kiai* referring to his social role in society; first, *kiai* is a unique title full of meaning of the owner of honour or even nobility. The position of *Kiai* as an honorable and noble person places him in a high social class compared to other social classes. In a culture of society entirely of traditionalist and feudal values, such as Indonesia, it is natural for *kiai* to receive special recognition and respect. This is also an explanatory variable as to why the name *Kiai* is very popular and charismatic compared to other social classes. Second, *kiai* is identical to a figure or religious figure who holds the baton of leadership of the *pesantren*, in this case, as a caregiver. Until now, this thesis has been difficult or even impossible to refute in Indonesia because wherever there is a *pesantren*, there must be a *kiai* and *nyai* as caregivers.<sup>11</sup> Third, the title of *kiai* is traditionalist, in the sense that it is formed traditionally through the collective awareness of society over their self-confidence in their spiritual abilities and magical powers. This type contrasts with formalistic social titles in general, which are formed and obtained through normative provisions. Due to its traditional nature, it is natural that in many regions, the granting of the title and nobility of *kiai* is usually embedded in a family system and is passed down from generation to generation. This fact is relatively different from the general theoretical view, which claims that the status of *kiai* is formed because of elements of knowledge and insight into religious knowledge so that anyone can hold the title of *kiai* as long as the person concerned has sufficient religious (Islamic) capacity.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of the various definitions and understandings above, in the social context in Indonesia, most literature sources agree that the role and social function of *kiai* based on the dynamics that are developing in Indonesia can be grouped into three: first, the social role in the field of education. In this section, *kiai* plays more of his social role as an educator, transferring knowledge of the Islamic religion to students (Indonesian:

*santri*) through certain learning activities, both formally and informally. *Kiai* carries out the function of educators through their active involvement in educational institutions, especially Islamic boarding schools, the oldest and most classical education system in Indonesia. Second, the social role in the field of preaching. In this function, the *kiai* broadcasts religion and development to the community, making calls to embrace, study, and practice the teachings of Islam, whether the preaching activities are carried out directly or indirectly. Third, the role of social control. In this section, the *kiai* carries out the control function by guiding and regulating the community to comply with the prevailing norms, values, and attitudes and preventing the community from committing social deviations, both deviations from social norms, especially religious norms. The *kiai* carries out social control to direct the community to follow the correct standards to create a stable and comfortable social life.

### **The Variety of Social Roles of *Kiai* in Indonesian Politics, from Cultural to Structural:**

However, even though at the theoretical level, the role and function of *kiai* are more focused on the religious sector, it cannot be concluded that *kiai* have no contribution to national and state politics. The history of Indonesian civilization as a religious nation, which is culturally and socially identical to spiritual values, clearly shows how the figure of the *Kiai* has become an inseparable part of Indonesia's journey. The big question now? How can we prove that the existence of the *Kiai* figure is truly real and concrete and has a significant role and contribution to the history and journey of Indonesian national and state politics? It is easy to question because many social facts firmly point in that direction. *Kiai*, who in the widespread sense is understood as an Islamic religious figure, whether it is recognized or not, has made significant contributions to various fundamental aspects of society. This is in the socio-religious field and other essential elements related to education, the economy, and cultural systems. Referring to their roles and functions, the existence of *kiai* in the socio-political dynamics in Indonesia can be grouped into two roles, namely cultural and structural. Conceptually, the word culture comes from the word *culture*, which means the same as culture, a way of life

<sup>11</sup>The Pesantren Tradition: The Role of the Kiai in the Maintenance of Traditional Islam in Java" 06, no. 01 (2012): 20.

<sup>12</sup> Amir Fadhilah, 'Struktur dan Pola Kepemimpinan Kiai dalam Pesantren di Jawa', *HUNafa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 8, no. 1 (15 June 2011): 101, doi:10.24239/jsi.v8i1.89.101-120.

shared by a group of people and passed down from generation to generation. Culture includes beliefs, knowledge, arts, laws, morals, and customs. Concretely, in the context of this study, the socio-cultural role of *kiai* in socio-political dynamics includes their contribution through religious values and their participation or involvement (*kiai*) in overseeing national issues and their problems. Suppose the concept of cultural roles refers to this formulation. In that case, there are many social roles of *kiai* in Indonesia that can be included in this category or criteria, one of which is the social role of *kiai* when carrying out political resistance against the colonizers, precisely when Indonesia was still in the phase of imperialism of western countries.<sup>13</sup>

The contribution of *Kiai* at that time was so outstanding that many ranks of *Kiai* were remembered as national heroes. We know two significant ulama figures in the ranks of national heroes, Hadratus Syekh KH. Hasyim Asy'ari and KH. H. Ahmad Dahlan. We all agree that both of these figures are barometers of Indonesian civilization. The terminology of a progressive nation and the archipelago, currently a shared noble ideal, was born and grew from these two figures. The two largest community organizations were also born from these figures, *Nahdlatul Ulama'* (NU) and Muhammadiyah. Since their inception, these two organizations have proven to have a reasonably clear track record in building civilization and maintaining the fabric of Indonesian nationality. And don't forget, before KH. H. Asy'ari and KH. H. Ahmad Dahlan was known to the public as a significant and influential figure. Both were first known as students of a famous *kiai* in Madura, namely Syaikhona Kholil Bangkalan.<sup>14</sup>

Apart from that, besides Hadratus Syekh KH. Hasyim Asy'ari and KH. Ahmad Dahlan, many other names historically have significantly

contributed to the history of the Indonesian nation and civilisation. At least, if we refer to the data in the Directorate of Heroism, Pioneering, Solidarity, and Social Restoration (K2KRS) of the Ministry of Social Affairs, there are at least eight (8) national heroes who have a background in the figurative self as a *kiai*, namely: KH Ahmad Dahlan (1868-1923); KH Samanhudi (1987-1956); KH. Agus Salim (1884—1954); KH. Zainul Arifin (1909-1963); KH. Mas Mansyur (1896-1915); KH. Wahid Hasyim (1914-1953); KH. Zainal Mustofa (1899-1944). With great respect and recognition for their services, we know the names above today as national heroes.<sup>15</sup>

What about the socio-political role of *Kiai* at the structural level? Grammatically, the term structural means the way something is arranged or built; arrangement; a building placed in a particular pattern; arrangement of elements or parts of an object. If we refer to this definition, the structural concept requires a building to be formal and is usually used as a term that contains formal legal meaning. On this occasion, the idea of structural role is deliberately intended to describe the socio-political role of *kiai* at the practical level, which is directly related to governance and institutions. There are quite a lot of historical records that prove how *Kiai* had a prominent role there. *Kiai*, in their capacity as Islamic religious figures and community figures, has coloured the discourse space of democracy in Indonesia, both at the theoretical and practical levels.<sup>16</sup>

At the theoretical level, the *Kiai* contributed significantly in giving birth to various thoughts about nationality and statehood; their tremendous and fresh ideas about civil society that are oriented towards defending and siding with populist society have been born from them. From Hadratus Syekh KH. Hasyim Asy'ari, we currently know and understand how loving the nation and state is part of faith.<sup>17</sup> From the figure of KH. Abdurrahman

<sup>13</sup> Fifi Nofiaturrehman, 'Melacak Peran Kiai-Santri Dalam Politik Kebangsaan Di Indonesia', *Islamic Review: Jurnal Riset Dan Kajian Keislaman* 3, no. 1 (24 January 2018), <https://doi.org/10.35878/islamicreview.v3i1.63>.

<sup>14</sup> Abd Hannan and Kudrat Abdillah, 'Hegemoni Religio-Kekuasaan dan Transformasi Sosial; Mobilisasi Jaringan Kekuasaan dan Keagamaan Kyai dalam Dinamika Sosio-Kultural Masyarakat Madura', *Jurnal Sosial Budaya* 16, no. 2 (2019).

<sup>15</sup> Rusman H Siregar, 'Kisah KH Hasyim Asy'ari dan KH Ahmad Dahlan, Dua Tokoh Satu Guru', *SINDOnews.com*, Agustus 2021, <https://kalam.sindonews.com/read/515546/70/kisah-kh->

[hasyim-asyari-dan-kh-ahmad-dahlan-dua-tokoh-satu-guru-1629356923](https://kalam.sindonews.com/read/515546/70/kisah-kh-hasyim-asyari-dan-kh-ahmad-dahlan-dua-tokoh-satu-guru-1629356923); Muhyiddin, 'Guru Para Kiai, Syaikhona Kholil Bangkalan', *Republika Online*, 2 February 2021, <https://republika.co.id/share/qnwm5p366>.

<sup>16</sup> Ciputra William, '8 Kiai Bergelar Pahlawan Nasional, Ada KH Hasyim Asyari hingga KH Ahmad Dahlan', *KOMPAS.com*, 19 January 2022, <https://regional.kompas.com/read/2022/01/19/101200578/8-kiai-bergelar-pahlawan-nasional-ada-kh-hasyim-asyari-hingga-kh-ahmad>.

<sup>17</sup> H Siregar, 'Kisah KH Hasyim Asy'ari dan KH Ahmad Dahlan, Dua Tokoh Satu Guru'.

Wahid (Gusdur), we were taught to practice democracy morally, that no power and position needs to be defended to death, which can give birth to conflict, disagreement, and bloodshed, from KH.H. Abdul Hamid Bin Isbat (1868-1933) which was then continued by R.KH. H. Abdul Hamid Baqir Banyuanyar, today we inherit a small book called *Tarjuman*, which teaches the importance of being kind to everyone without considering the background of identity and the dimensions of primordialism, religion, ethnicity, language, and skin colour.<sup>18</sup>

At the practical level, the role and contribution of the *Kiai* in strengthening democratic politics in Indonesia is visible from their involvement when they 'got involved' in overseeing national issues. If we want to go back several decades ago, long before Indonesia found its independence status as it is now, the role and contribution of the *Kiai* have been felt since then. Likewise, Indonesia experienced great political turmoil in 1998, marked by the fall of Soeharto after 32 years in power. Several years later, KH Abdurrahman Wahid, the best cadre from the *Kiai* community then, appeared on the national stage and was surprisingly elected as the fourth president. Of course, KH. Abdurrahman Wahid was not the only figure from the *Kiai* community at that time; many other names had made outstanding political contributions.<sup>19</sup> In the current democratic political discourse, the contribution or social structural role of the *kiai* community in the dynamics of socio-politics in Indonesia is depicted in KH.H. Maruf Amin, who was born and raised in a *kiai* environment, is even the caretaker of a famous Islamic boarding school in Indonesia.

### **Pros and Cons of the Social Role of *Kiai* in Politics in Indonesia:**

However, the wider the tap of democracy and the implementation of a multi-party or total democracy system after the 1998 reformation, the discourse around the role and social (political) activism of *kiai* is increasingly varied and often reaps pros and cons. Moreover, during this period, the attitudes and political choices of *Kiai* experienced massive fragmentation due to the political decisions of some of its figures who wanted to establish new parties. The experience of splitting the political axis of

Islamic parties that occurred in the 1950s was repeated in the political transition period after the reformation. Sure enough, during this period, many new political vehicles emerged with an Islamic religious flavour, and the choice to join and change parties became wide open. Meanwhile, political parties with non-Islamic ideologies took advantage of this situation to reap profits by establishing Islamic religious wing organizations, which were deliberately designed as unique posts for *Kiai* groups to enter and join their political movements.<sup>20</sup>

The increasingly heterogeneous political affiliation among the *Kiai* makes it almost difficult for them to have one voice in responding to various political issues. In a democratic political atmosphere, differences at this level are pretty reasonable. To a certain extent, this condition, on the one hand, has a positive impact on the independence of the *Kiai*'s political activism, with the *Kiai* becoming freer and more autonomous in controlling the wheels of democratic politics in Indonesia so that they remain on track. This was proven when the *kiai* became a balancer and a defensive wall when the communist political movement emerged, which tried to infiltrate sporadically in the final seconds of Soekarno's leadership. In this incident, the *Kiai*'s political stance was divided into two camps, some supporting the government and others opposing. And who would have thought, through these differences, they could control the course of Indonesian power so that they were safe from the grip and control of the communist group?

However, the fragmentation of *Kiai*'s political activism often also gave rise to negative perceptions and assessments. *Kiai*'s political activism usually uses wild and unpredictable political moves and frequently sparks debate and pros and cons in society. Consequently, although *Kiai* has contributed significantly to strengthening the democratic political structure in Indonesia, until now, their political activism has often been faced with debates and pros and cons. There has been the attachment of biased, negative, and destructive political labels such as opportunist and pragmatic to accusations of being a political broker, as revealed in the writings of Martin van Bruinessen (1994),<sup>21</sup> John Gregory Fealy (1988),<sup>22</sup> and

<sup>18</sup> Ibnu Hajar, *Kiai Di Tengah Pusaran Politik, Cet. II* (Jogjakarta: IRCiSoD, 2009).

<sup>19</sup> Fifi Nofiaturrehman, 'Melacak Peran Kyai-Santri Dalam Politik Kebangsaan Di Indonesia'.

<sup>20</sup> Hajar, *Kiai Di Tengah Pusaran Politik, Cet. II*, 34–78.

<sup>21</sup> Bruinessen, *NU, Tradisi, Relasi-Relasi Kuasa*.

<sup>22</sup> Fealy, *Ulama and Politics in Indonesia: A History of Nahdlatul Ulama, 1952-1967*, 1952–67.



Clifford Geertz (1983).<sup>23</sup> Ironically, the variety of negative labels has become a wild ball that is currently enjoyed by many groups, including the middle-class intellectual group, in this case, academic activists. In the campus world, the stigmatization of the role and politics of *kiai* has continued to be maintained until now; even in many discussions and studies, it is often used as a reference and source of literature to justify. Based on the search for previous studies, there are at least several terminologies related to the activism and orientation of the social (political) behaviour of *Kiai* that will be questioned in this article. One of them that has invited quite a heated debate among academics is the label of opportunist politics.<sup>24</sup>

Genealogically, until this article was written, the author has not found any research that clearly and firmly states who first attached the term opportunist politics to *kiai*. However, in several reading sources discussing the theme around *kiai* and their political upheavals in the pre-reform era, especially the old and new orders, such terms have recently been relatively easy and often found. Some of the literature sources in question are the writings of Martin van Bruinessen in his book *NU, Tradisi, Relasi-Relasi Kuasa; Pencarian Wacana Baru* (1994). In addition, there is also a book by John Gregory Fealy Ulama and Politic in Indonesia: A History of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (1988). In the Great Dictionary of the Indonesian Language, opportunist (me) is a noun that means an understanding that merely seeks to take advantage of existing opportunities for one's interests without adhering to certain principles.<sup>25</sup> The terminology of interest in this definition has a reasonably broad meaning, but generally, the desired meaning is close to power and material. In the Marxian perspective (the term for Karl Marx's followers), interest refers to fundamental sectors in society in the form of the economy and its production sources, which in Karl Marx's language is termed a semi-structure.<sup>26</sup> The semi-structured itself is the most substantial element in the life of society, where other social structures such as culture, education, religion, and politics are built on top of

it (read: dialectical materialism and historical materialism). Different from Karl Marx, Weber prefers to translate interest as authority. In Weber's view, authority has a more strategic position than material (economy) because, with it, all forms of domination practices in the name of power can be carried out.<sup>27</sup> Authority has a source of legitimacy that allows it to operate in all situations, even in impossible conditions, by using repressive means (read: legitime *herrschaft*). Although there are differences in interpretation between Karl Marx and Weber in interpreting the meaning of interest, substantially both assume the same point, namely control over resources.

In contemporary political discourse, opportunism is considered unethical because it is not strongly committed to remaining in one line within the group or faction. Therefore, in other literature sources, opportunism is often equated with (political) behaviour that contains betrayal of the values of the struggle that have become a standard agreement (political consensus), especially the ideology of the party and its political movement.<sup>28</sup> Put, opportunism requires social (political) thinking, attitudes, and behaviour that places personal achievement as a priority while at the same time choosing to ignore collective communal interests and needs. However, no matter how harmful opportunism is and is considered not to reflect political etiquette, few actors or political subjects at the elite level choose to continue using it. Practical politics talks about the art of maintaining and predicting all possibilities that will occur in the future. At the same time, opportunism is the translation of the most rational political attitude when the existing reality is not in line with previous political calculations and calculations.

John Gregory Fealy identified the orientation of the *Kiai's* political opportunism starting from reading about the political turmoil within the *Kiai* during Soekarno's leadership (old order). During this period, Soekarno implemented a guided democracy policy to put political pressure on the modernist Islamic group, which then tended to position itself

<sup>23</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Abangan, Santri Dan Priyayi Dalam Masyarakat Jawa* (Jakarta: Pustaka Jaya, 1983).

<sup>24</sup> Greg Fealy and Robin Bush, 'The Political Decline of Traditional Ulama in Indonesia: The State, Umma and Nahdlatul Ulama', *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, no. 5 (2014): 536–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43495819>.

<sup>25</sup> KBBI Online, 'Arti Kata Oportunisme - Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (KBBI) Online', accessed 18 January 2023, <https://kbbi.web.id/oportunisme>.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, 1st ed. (UK: Penguin Classics; Reprint edition, 1867).

<sup>27</sup> Sunyoto Usman, *Sosiologi; Sejarah, Dan Metodologi* (Yogyakarta: CIREd, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Gregor Benton and Steve Tsang, 'The Portrayal of Opportunism, Betrayal, and Manipulation in Mao's Rise to Power', *The China Journal* 55 (1 January 2006): 95, doi:10.2307/20066121.

as the opposition and opposed his political policies.<sup>29</sup> In this situation, the political attitude of the *Kiai* experienced fragmentation or division. Some groups (*kiai*) supported Soekarno's political policy of implementing guided or parliamentary democracy, while others rejected it. Those who decided to support Soekarno's political steps mostly came from traditionalist *Kiai* circles, which, in terms of political organization, were under the Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) party. Some of them were KH. Idham Chalid, KH. Achmad Sjaikh, and KH. Saifuddin Zuhri. As for those who refused, the majority came from the modernist Islamic group and were members of the Masyumi Party political organization. The traditionalist *Kiai* political stance, who agreed with Soekarno's political ideas, contained self-motivation to secure their position and get the 'cake' of power. From here, the label of opportunistic politics was attached to them to describe the political stance of the *Kiai*, who tended to be dynamic, go with the flow, and quickly fluid when faced with power.

Meanwhile, some groups present a different analysis of the political dynamics of the *Kiai* during Soekarno's leadership by demonstrating a positive reading. Usually, those with this tendency prefer to be pro, with the political maneuvers of the *kiai* during Soekarno's time being natural when the political situation did not allow them. Unfortunately, most traditionalist *Kiai* chose to take shelter under the *Nahdlatul Ulama* banner regarding organization and party.<sup>30</sup> The character of NU, which tends to be accommodating to differences and diversity, has more or less influenced its political stance. A similar attitude can also be found when they carry out their religious preaching function, emphasizing their movement and struggle to spread Islamic values in a persuasive, cultural, and substantive manner and method. This attitude is very different from other religious mass organizations, especially modernist Islamic groups, which tend to be normative and rigid, making it difficult to adapt to political groups or factions that are ideologically different or even opposed to them.

To confirm and convince their political choices, traditionalist *kiai* usually base their political

decisions on religious texts, which they adopt from the rules of *ushul fiqh*. Likewise, when they chose to support Soekarno's political ideas regarding the guided democracy policy, the *kiai* based their political stance on one of the rules of *ushul fiqh*, which reads, "*ma laa yudraku kulluhu laa yutaraku ba'dhuh*", that something that cannot be obtained in its entirety, then it is not justified to leave everything even if only a part is received.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, in this case, accommodating some government policies by entering the circle of the government system is better than not doing it at all. Leaving everything and becoming an opposition group will have a higher level of risk because if that path is chosen, it will practically place itself outside the system, so it has no power and influence. Thus, the flexible attitude shown by the *kiai* regarding the idea of guided democracy in the New Order style of Soekarno did not contain an opportunistic meaning and attitude—as accused by Martin Van Bruinessen and John Gregory Fealy above—but instead was more of an accommodative-substantive form of thought and attitude to resolve socio-political problems harmoniously and peacefully.

### **Analysis of the Social Role of *Kiai* in the Dynamics of Politics and Democratization in Indonesia:**

Up to this point, many important questions need to be raised in this study. These critical questions revolve around how to understand and articulate politics in the current democratic system in Indonesia. How and what has the democratic political system in Indonesia been implemented so far, especially since the implementation of the multi-party democratic system after the 1998 reform? How can we read and understand the social role of *Kiai* in the dynamics of politics and democratization in Indonesia? Before answering these three questions, the author will formulate an in-depth understanding of politics and democracy. This is important as a methodological step to present an in-depth and systematic analysis of the main issues raised in this study.

Politics has a popular understanding as knowledge about statecraft or statehood that is directly related to the system of government and the basics of

<sup>29</sup> Fealy, *Ulama and Politics in Indonesia: A History of Nahdlatul Ulama, 1952-1967*, 23–40.

<sup>30</sup> Muhammad Ilham Aziz and Sri Windari, 'Moderatisme Politik Islam Indonesia Era Soekarno: Studi Resolusi konflik Indonesia – Malaysia', *Jurnal Historia Madania* 6, no. 1 (1971).

<sup>31</sup> Jainuddin Jainuddin, 'Islam dan Politik Orde Lama; Dinamika Politik Islam Pasca Kolonial Sejak Kemerdekaan Sampai Akhir Kekuasaan Soekarno', *SANGAJI: Jurnal Pemikiran Syariah dan Hukum* 3, no. 2 (14 October 2019): 225–43, doi:10.52266/sangaji.v3i2.470.



governance of how government is run and carried out by the government. In another version, politics at the practical level regarding the constellation of power contains the understanding of every policy, strategy, and so on regarding the country's government or towards other nations. In addition, there is also a view that understands politics as a way to face or handle a problem. Many people agree that politics has the ideal sense of wisdom regardless of the various meanings.<sup>32</sup> Namely, always using one's intellect, both in the form of experience and knowledge, so that a person is critical and always wise when faced with specific problems or issues. By emphasizing wisdom, politics is expected to produce a policy or decision that is indeed based on the defence and struggle of the people so that with it, the great ideals of the state to realize welfare for citizens can be discovered and implemented.<sup>33</sup>

As for the term democracy, if reviewed based on its etymological meaning, the word democracy is formed from two sub-words, namely the word *demos*, meaning people and *Kratos*, which means power or government. In terms of terminology, the most popular understanding of democracy comes from Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865); according to him, democracy is a system of governance carried out by the people, for the people, and from the people. The people play a role as both the subject and the main object or target. Therefore, from the perspective of democracy, setting aside the rights and lives of citizens in specific policies is not only considered to have violated the principles of democracy but also clearly and negated the ideal meaning and understanding of democracy at the substantive level.<sup>34</sup> Thus, if we refer to this understanding, the meaning of politics in a democratic system, both at the theoretical and practical levels, must be understood in the most fundamental sense that the existence or presence of the people must be the basis for every political decision-making, be it economic politics, legal politics, policy politics and so on.

The big question is, how do we read and understand the social role of *Kiai* in the dynamics of politics and democratization in Indonesia? As emphasized in the previous sub-chapter, *kiai* are important

figures in Indonesian society, especially in areas dominated by Muslim communities, such as in Java and Madura. In areas with this social typology, the social role of *kiai* goes beyond the religious realm; far from it, *kiai* is also known to enter relatively different social arenas or fields, including in the political field and the democratization process, both at the level of government institutions and in party organizations. At the institutional level, *kiai* carry out this role through their involvement in some government structures, starting from the legislative structure to the executive, whether they play this role directly or indirectly.<sup>35</sup> In the executive branch, there is Gus Dur, who served as the fourth President of the Republic of Indonesia. Gus Dur occupied the number one seat in Indonesia on October 20, 1999, replacing B.J. Habibie until July 23, 2001. Most recently, the social role of *Kiai* in politics and democratization in Indonesia was reflected in KH. H. Makruf Amin through his political position as vice president.

As for the party organization level, there are quite a few *Kiai* who are intellectual actors behind the birth of large political parties. One of them that still exists today, colouring the political scene in Indonesia, is the National Awakening Party (Indonesian: *Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa*/PKB). This party with the earth symbol was first founded by Gus Dur. Since it was first established on July 23, 1998, PKB has remained under the command of *Kiai*, which is real evidence of their contribution to maintaining and overseeing democratization in Indonesia. Apart from PKB, the contribution of *Kiai* in maintaining political dynamics and democratization in Indonesia through party organizational channels can also be found in a number of other political parties. For example, there are the names of the United Development Party (Indonesian: *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan*/PPP), the Crescent Star Party (Indonesian: *Partai Bulan Bintang*/PBB), the Prosperous Justice Party, and also parties with nationalist ideologies.<sup>36</sup>

This means that at the level of party organizations, the existence and role of *kiai* are not entirely centralized in Islamic-based parties but also spread widely to political parties with nationalist (and

<sup>32</sup> Edited Stephen Mcglinchey et al., *Global Politics in a Post-Truth Age* (E-International Relations Bristol: England, 2022).

<sup>33</sup> Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page, 'Testing Theories of American Politics: Elites, Interest Groups, and Average Citizens', *Perspectives on Politics* 12, no. 3 (September 2014): 564–81, doi:10.1017/S1537592714001595.

<sup>34</sup> Saverinus Rio Jama, 'The Essence of Civil Society in Democracy', *JED (Jurnal Etika Demokrasi)* 6, no. 1 (29 January 2021): 23–34, doi:10.26618/jed.v6i1.4369.

<sup>35</sup> Bruinessen, *NU, Tradisi, Relasi-Relasi Kuasa*.

<sup>36</sup> Lili Romli, 'Partai Islam Dan Pemilih Islam Di Indonesia', *Jurnal Penelitian Politik* 1, no. 1 (2014).

religious) ideologies. Perhaps this explains why in every political event, both at the executive and legislative levels, both national (Presidential Election) and local politics such as the Gubernatorial and Regional Elections, political attitudes and voter waves among Muslim voters in Indonesia are difficult to unite to a particular party. In the case of the PKB, for example, although PKB is identical to a party founded by *kiai* and born from the womb of the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), interestingly, in every political contest in Indonesia, the political attitudes and vote waves of the *nahdiyyin* community (a typical and popular term for the NU community) are not entirely of one voice. Based on research conducted by Litbang Kompas, PKB's electability among NU is only 7.4 percent; this figure is far behind PDIP, which achieved an electability of 22.6 percent.<sup>37</sup>

However, regardless of the description above, the fact that *kiai* have a large social role in the dynamics of politics and the democratization process in Indonesia is undeniable. His contribution as one of the actors in the history of the Indonesian nation and state has existed for a long time, starting before Indonesia's independence and pre-independence until Indonesia achieved its independence as it is today. In the pre-independence era, *kiai* played a significant role in the resistance against the colonizers, both through physical jihad and ideological awareness. The resistance to the Jihad resolution in 1945 which was called for by KH. H. Hasyim Asy'ari is the most real and strong evidence of the social role of *kiai*. Likewise, when Indonesia had the Old Order and New Order, even though it was relatively polarized, the *Kiai* still controlled power to keep democratization in government on track. Some *kiai* carried out this control function by becoming part of the government's opposition (especially those related to *Masyumi*), while others supported the New Order's policies for stability. Even when the Indonesian people struggled to achieve democratic maturity through the 1998 reforms, the *kiai* became one of the main actors in the birth of the revolutionary movement, opposing and overthrowing the authoritarianism of the New Order era under the iron fist of Soeharto, thus giving birth to a democratic system like today.

## Conclusion:

Based on the theoretical analysis of several field data above, as described in depth in the previous sub-discussions, some main points are the conclusions in this study. First, *kiai*, in their position as religious figures in Indonesia, have a fairly large social role in the lives of Indonesian society. Although their social status and role have so far been identical to the religious dimension, both as educators and preachers, on many occasions and facts at the social level, *kiai*'s contribution goes beyond the religious realm, even spreading widely to the political realm and the space of democratization in Indonesia. Second, in Indonesia's political realm and the space of democratization, the real role and contribution of *kiai* can be traced in two aspects, namely cultural and structural aspects. In the cultural aspect, *kiai* play a role as organic intellectuals in strengthening the integration and social cohesion of society so that the democratization process at the grassroots level can be formed and maintained properly. Another cultural role carried out by the *kiai* can also be found in his efforts to bridge the relationship between religion and state, where he makes religion the spirit of nationality and statehood in the political and democratization process in Indonesia, as the spirit of the jihad resolution when fighting and expelling the imperialist countries in 1945. As for the structural aspect, *Kiai* carries out this role through his involvement in some government structures, starting from the legislative structure to the executive, whether he carries out this role directly or indirectly. In the executive section, the names are Gus Dur and KH. H. Makruf Amin, where both of them recorded themselves as figures from the *Kiai* community who succeeded in registering themselves as president and vice president in Indonesia. In addition to the government, the structural role of the *kiai* can also be found in party organizations, in this case, political parties, which are the main pillars of democratization in Indonesia. In this section, the real role and contribution of the *Kiai* community in the dynamics of politics and democratization in Indonesia is clearly illustrated by the birth of significant political parties. One of them still exists today and colouring the political scene in Indonesia is the National Awakening Party (Indonesian:

<sup>37</sup> Kompas Cyber Media, 'Survei Litbang "Kompas", PDI-P Paling Banyak Dipilih Warga NU', *KOMPAS.com*, 5 June 2023,

<https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2023/06/05/09444041/survei-litbang-kompas-pdi-p-paling-banyak-dipilih-warga-nu>.

*Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa/PKB*). In addition to PKB, the contribution of the *Kiai* in maintaining political dynamics and democratization in Indonesia through party organizational channels can also be found in many other political parties. For example, the United Development Party (Indonesian: *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan/PPP*), the Crescent Star Party (Indonesian: *Partai Bulan Bintang/PBB*), and in the old order, we used the name Masyumi Party (Indonesian: *Partai Masyumi*).

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