

# Relation of religion and practical politics: Contextual adoption of constitutional Islamic jurisprudence for Muslim clerics in Indonesia

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Some clerics (*ulama*) in the Islamic world are of the view that practical politics is closely related to Islam, which regulates how an order of state is run. This view historically departs from Islamic constitutional jurisprudence texts that justify political Islam. Likewise, some Islamic boarding schools' (*pesantren*) clerics, better known as *kyai* in Indonesia, are of the view that practical politics is not only a world affair but also an activity based on the application of Islamic legal principles in achieving public welfare. This study aims to determine the academic basis of *pesantren ulama* in making decisions to be active in practical politics in Indonesia. Using a qualitative approach through interviews, the results of this study indicate that the political decisions of *pesantren ulama* are strictly based on the perspective of political Islam and *fiqh* principles that justify the involvement of *ulama* in politics. Furthermore, the conclusion leads to three perspectives in political motivations for *pesantren's ulama*: to gain power, to preach Islamic values, and to demonstrate the existence of *ulama* in modern state administration.

**Contribution:** The contribution of the study is to describe the permissibility of politics as an alternative to preaching and to show the existence and ability of *ulama* in state administration.

**Keywords:** political behaviour; political Islam; *ulama*; pesantren; Islamic constitutional jurisprudence; Indonesia.

## Introduction

The extent to which Islam is associated with practical politics has become an interesting study, along with the spread of secular democracy in the modern political system. Political Islam nowadays runs according to the dynamics in each Muslim-majority country. In Indonesia, political Islam groups accept a secular democratic system, something that encourages the political conduciveness of this archipelagic country, which does not experience religious friction and communal conflict as do its counterparts in the Middle East (Arifianto 2020; Buehler 2009). However, the application of political Islam is very different in different countries. For example, Iran, with its *Velâyat-e Faqih*, has made the clerics (*ulama*) highly influential, having actual roles in the political field outside of their traditional role as community leaders (Varol 2016). Meanwhile, in Pakistan, the influence of the *ulama* has penetrated into the realm of political power, without being solely limited to the socioreligious matters (Bin Mohamed Osman 2009). As a response to democratisation, Islamic political parties have emerged in almost every democratic Muslim-majority country, including Malaysia and Indonesia, with the character of placing *ulama* beside politicians as Islamic party leaders.

Political reforms in Indonesia in 1998 encouraged *ulama* to establish Islamic-based political parties. With diverse educational, social and economic backgrounds, they immediately became active in practical political activities for ideological and pragmatic reasons (Hilmy 2010). Ideologically, some of them are attracted to politics because of their political background and experience, while others are active in politics because of their demands and responsibilities as figures who are considered capable of carrying out political activities to fight for Islamic values in Indonesian politics.

Pragmatically, the participation of *ulama* in political activities has the aim of gaining power (Turmudi 2006). For example, *ulama* who are affiliated with the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah organisations, the two largest Muslim organisations in Indonesia, view that

practical politics is a necessity (Al-Hamdi 2013; Goncing 2015). They are active in politics with the aim of realising a political order based on morality and religious values (Ghofur & Sulistiyono 2015). Previous research (Izzuddin & Susilo 2021; Wahid 2012; Zulkifli 2013) revealed that after the 1998 reform, the role of *ulama* in practical politics became increasingly dominant. Furthermore, Zulkifli (2013) revealed that Islamic boarding schools' (*pesantren*) *ulama* play an important role in national politics, where bureaucrats and politicians ask for their blessings to gain legitimacy. However, the extent to which *ulama* have a role in politics usually depends on the ideology of each political party in which they participate. In general, political Islam in Indonesia is divided into two, namely literal Islam with a Wahhabist ideology and traditional Islam with a conservative Sunni ideology. Nonetheless, all of these schools with their respective political party platforms agree on secular democracy in the Indonesian state system. This has enabled the democratic transition and political reforms since 1998 to proceed in a relatively peaceful and consolidated manner (eds. Künkler & Stepan 2013).

However, the existence of *ulama* on the political stage afterwards did not succeed in promoting the victory of Islamic politics and tended to prioritise Islamic-based legislation, which was less substantial for public welfare in general. Fealy and Bush (2014) stated that in the midst of democratisation in Indonesia, NU clerics faced many challenges to maintain their sociopolitical position. *Pesantren* clerics have also begun to be marginalised from the political stage by politicians in the struggle for positions in either political parties or the government. Furthermore, the challenges for them also arise from Salafist-Wahabist *ulama* who are more solid in Islamic politics (Wahid 2012). Hilmy (2010) stated that traditional *ulama* from NU were quite overwhelmed by activists and Salafi clerics in the struggle for parliamentary votes.

Bush (2009) and Wahid (2012) indicate the dimming social role of *pesantren ulama* in the context of contemporary politics. Hasan (2012) revealed that Salafist-style Islamic politics are easier for constituents to digest because they offer pragmatic solutions through caliphate and pan-Islamist ideologies (Knudsen 2003; Zulkifli 2013). To counter this idea, *pesantren ulama*, especially in Central Java, offer the idea of Islamic nationalism and Islam for all (*rahmatan lil alamin*), which is explored from the principles of Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic law. By involving themselves in political parties and NU, they also contribute to gaining a constituency for local and national politicians. At a minimum, the *pesantren* network can be used to gain support from students and their families.

This study aims to describe how *pesantren ulama* justify political Islam and their involvement in practical politics in Indonesia. This study specifically explores traditional *ulama* affiliated with the NU organisation with a background in jurisprudence. The focus of this study is different from previous research, which only explored the involvement of *ulama* in Indonesian politics in general (Bush 2009; Gillespie

2007; Ichwan 2005), Islamic politics of Salafi groups (Hasan 2006; Rahmat 2008) or the Islamisation of regulations in Indonesia (Buehler & Muhtada 2016; Bush 2008; Ghofur & Susilo 2017; Hasyim 2011; Lindsey 2012; Salim 2008). Originally, this study aims to analyse the political actualisation of *pesantren ulama* with *fiqh* backgrounds and their political behaviour in contemporary Indonesian democracy.

## Literature review: Islamic constitutional jurisprudence and contemporary politics in Indonesia

In Islamic nomenclature, *fiqh* refers to a legal guide extracted by Islamic *ulama* from the Qur'an and the hadiths. As a product of scholarly thought (*ijtihad*), *fiqh* is considered by some to be capable of being adapted to its context. Although the main source is the unchanging holy texts of the Qur'an and the hadiths, *fiqh* can be formulated by several available methods so as to produce legal products to answer every Muslim's needs. This is what makes *fiqh* characterised by being able to change flexibly according to its locus and place, according to the context that accompanies it. One of the familiar methods of reasoning (*ijtihad*) is *maslaha*-oriented *fiqh* and contextual reasoning (Fitra 2016). This context is then considered as the basis of classical *ulama* in developing the method of legislation in Islamic jurisprudence (*ushul fiqh*).

In Islam, the constitutional jurisprudence about politics and state is called *fiqh siyasa* (Al-Farra 1994; Al-Mawardi 1996). Reasoning (*ijtihad*) can use a linguistic basis (*lughawiyya*) and general principles (*qaida fiqhiyya*). The first term refers to the exploration of legislation by using linguistic reasoning, while the latter is based on universal rules that can apply to several laws and problems (Black, Esmaili & Hosen 2013; Coulson 2017; Hallaq 2009a, 2009b; Zarqa 1968). This second approach is then widely used by *ulama* in confronting contemporary problems, including political issues. This is because the *qaida fiqhiyya* is more systematic and practical for *ulama* in finding an answer to a problem or to create a new legal product.

In Indonesian politics, there are two camps of political parties, namely the national and religious camps. The first usually has a platform to fight for public welfare without involving religious elements, while the second uses religious ideas as an offer to the public in an effort to achieve the goal of collective welfare. Indonesian democracy strictly does not use official religion as a constitutional basis but allows religious platforms to be involved in national development. Politically, the idea to harmonise religion and nationalisation culminates in the acceptance of the democratic system as a political system. As Indonesia is a multicultural country, pluralism is an idea implemented by political parties who embrace constituents from various backgrounds. With the support of the religious majority, Islamic political parties have been the most enduring political element in various national elections since the beginning of independence in 1945.

Indonesia has experienced various conflicts and communal violence based on religion, so efforts to implement inclusiveness are implemented and adopted by Islamic political parties in Indonesia. This takes into account that Islam is the majority religion in Indonesia and there are other religions that co-exist with it. In some recent cases, sometimes religion can be used as a tool to create conflict and intolerance for political purposes. Identity politics has strengthened in the last five years, since the demonstration against Ahok (Basuki Tjahaja Purnama), a Christian governor of the state capital Jakarta at the end of 2016. His defeat in the election the following year pushed stronger identity politics in order to defeat political opponents with religious sentiments in the national elections.

The existence of identity politics like this is basically rooted in Islamic politics in Indonesia. Although Islamic political groups are currently developing into many political platforms, in general, political Islam in Indonesia is described by three main groups, namely integrative, secularistic and moderate (Van Bruinessen 2013; Wahid 2012). The first group has an interest in implementing an Islamic caliphate in Indonesia, as inflamed by Hizb ut-Tahrir. The second group believes that Islam seeks to separate religion from the constitution and politics as a necessity of modern democracy. Finally, the third group advocates for the involvement of religious ideas and their sects in national politics, rather than limiting them to socioreligious roles. This last group accelerates the democratic system by establishing political parties to carry out their political agenda.

Salafist and pan-Islamist groups massively intensify socialisation to gain public support, including rapidly adopting technological developments to gain millennial support (Ahyar & Alfritri 2019; Chawki 2010). They also actively implement a hierarchical and integrated cadre to ensure ideological solidarity at all levels. Even though they are a minority, the Salafist group with their ideological platform poses a serious threat to other Islamic groups. On the other hand, other Islamic groups indirectly feel the need to be involved in national politics, considering the strong relationship between these mass organisations and certain political parties. More clearly, the two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia, NU and Muhammadiyah, are culturally linked to several political parties such as the PKB (National Awakening Party), PPP (United Development Party) and PAN (National Mandate Party), where these parties won large constituencies by exploiting cultural relations with these two Islamic organisations (Djuyandi et al. 2019; Noor 2016; Romli 2020).

In general, previous research has seen that the relationship between *ulama* and politics can be mapped into two groups, namely client patrons and religious motivations. First, the patron–client relationship that uses a political sociology perspective with a Weberian approach states that political power with a religious background can be understood rationally with a political context. The position of the *ulama*

with the capacity of knowledge and religiosity as well as the community they have will have a strategic position politically, whether used for their own interests or for the benefit of clients. The community can easily trust the abilities of the *ulama* and appreciate the position achieved in politics. From this perspective, the authority of the *ulama* henceforth can also be used as a strategy in attracting constituent support. *Pesantren ulama* are used as vote getters in general elections, where their role is used by candidates to gain support for votes. This clearly shows the traditional nuances of *pesantren* in every election (Setiawan, Esti & Sidorov 2020; Watson 2018).

Furthermore, from the perspective of political motivation, political relations are built by *pesantren ulama* for dual roles as *pesantren* clerics as well as acting as politicians (Abidin & Dong 2020; Barton, Yilmaz & Morieson 2021; Mietzner & Muhtadi 2020; Pribadi 2014; Rokhmad & Susilo 2017; Suradi & Surahman 2020). The justification is based on the scientific basis of *fiqh* that they have mastered. Apart from achieving political power, establishing political ideas within a religious framework is another motivation (Buehler & Muhtada 2016). Moyser (ed. 2002) states that secular democracy with its egalitarian nature has created a special space for the people, institutions and ideas that make up the religious environment to sustainably engage in politics and public affairs. For people who value collectivity and religiosity in their culture, the power of religion is one of the most influential elements, because they consider true justice to come from God. This is in accordance with Williams (2008), who revealed that the power of religion is very important for religious communities, because for them, law that has nothing to do with religion will be far from true justice.

## Research methods

This research is a qualitative research that was conducted from July 2018 to November 2018 in some *pesantrens* in Central Java. Interviews were conducted with seven *pesantren ulama*, both male and female, to minimise gender bias. In addition to the *pesantren's ulama*, *santri* [students] and supporting communities were also interviewed. This study uses a descriptive analysis developed by Fraenkel and Wallen (2006). In general, the analysis begins by understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the participants, namely the *ulama* and *santri* of the *pesantrens*. This study was conducted to obtain information about the *fiqh* approach in influencing the political behaviour of *ulama*: political motives, political goals and political strategies of the *ulama* in practical politics in their electoral districts.

## Results

This section is to describe the political behaviour of *pesantren's ulama*. As they are patrons of the community, the political behaviour of *pesantren ulama* is less comparable to the political preferences of politicians and bureaucrats. There are many factors for *ulama* in making political choices.

In addition to the political motivation for power, the political behaviour of *pesantren ulama* is driven by the motivation to fight for religious interests in the public sector. The findings show that there are three motivations of *ulama* in practical politics. Firstly, there are political motivations related to the goal of gaining political power in both the legislature and the executive. Secondly, there is the motivation for *da'wah*, where *pesantren ulama* prefer to give political advice rather than being directly active in the political world. Thirdly, they may be seeking social existence to maintain their social network and gain recognition from society.

### To gain political power

Kyai Dimiyati Rois, chairman of the Consultative Council of the National Awakening Party (PKB), revealed that political activities need to be carried out with the intention of doing good for the people in order to be safe in this world and the hereafter. By quoting classical masterpieces, namely *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111) and *al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyyah* by Al-Mawardi (972–1058), he explains that politics is a way to save human life in this world and the hereafter. Therefore, the ideology of political parties must be based on Islamic ideology, because some classical *ulama* stated that the politics of the Muslim community (*umma*) must be built on Islamic law.

According to him, politics is not a dirty business, as understood by some people who oppose it. The many corrupt practices by Indonesian politicians should not prevent the people from being involved in politics. There must be a separation between politics and corruption as two different things: corruption is not only a political problem but a humanitarian problem. For Dimiyati Rois, politics is part of the responsibility of all citizens to the state. The interests to be achieved in politics are not for the interest of a group or an individual but that of humanity:

'Politics must follow faith. If the people's belief is Shi'a, then their political implementation must follow Shi'a teachings. If the people's faith is Khawarij, then the politics is based on Khawarij. Likewise, the Muhammadiyah group will carry out politics in the Muhammadiyah way. So the people of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) also do politics in the NU way. By basing on the *fiqh* principle of *siyasah al-ummah mabniyyatun 'ala aqidatiha* [the politics of the ummah must be built on creed], then politics and creed must be parallel. To solve all problems effectively and solidly, NU citizens need to unite their political preferences to parties that are in accordance with NU rules and not to deviate from political parties that are not in accordance with NU's ideology and teachings.' (Interview with Kyai Dimiyati Rois, male, 73 years old, 31 August 2018)

The similarity of theological belief to party ideology for Dimiyati Rois is very important. He is of the view that if an individual joins a party whose ideology is different from his own, it is a mistake. For example, if a member of NU joins a nationalist party, this cannot be justified. Ideally, NU

members come from parties with NU ideology. However, he acknowledged this as an impossibility because NU was not the only one. So in order to increase humanitarian responsibility, it is the collective obligation of Muslims to unite political platforms based on Islamic principles. Modern politics accommodates Muslim aspirations through political parties.

Another perspective can be drawn from Kyai Yusuf Khudhori, chairman of the PKB Branch of Central Java province, who has a political motive to be directly active as a political party administrator. For him, the position of party leader is more powerful and influential as a policymaker than members of parliament:

'I am not only a supporter of PKB but also a part of the party structure. I have been chairman of the board since the birth of this party. I chose PKB because it was born from the ideology of the *pesantren* and political ideas as a result of the deliberations of the NU *ulama*. They agreed to build their own political platform, initiated by Kyai Cholil Bisri, Kyai Idris Marzuqi, Kyai Hasyim Muzadi, Kyai Abdullah Faqih, and Kyai Muhaiminan Gunardo, Kyai Mustofa Bisri, Kyai Maimun Zubair and Kyai Syukron Makmun.' (Interview with Kyai Yusuf Khudhori, male, 45 years old, 20 August 2018)

The initial idea for its establishment came from *pesantren's ulama*, and it was supported by the National Board of NU. From the national, provincial and district levels, PKB is fostered by *ulama* and NU organisational administrators. This role is felt by the community. Recently, he and PKB politicians rejected the Full-Day School (FDS) programme, a programme that extends the school day to allow students to obtain an extra two days off during the weekend, because it has the potential to make it difficult for nonformal institutions such as *pesantren* to find students and organise learning activities:

'In the FDS case, I controlled PKB to be the only party that firmly rejected the program. I chair meetings and supervise the attendance of members of the legislature and executive and direct the policies to be taken, including possible synergies with external parties. This makes me feel more useful when sitting as party chairman, because I can fully direct and control the policies taken by our party members in the legislature and executive.' (Interview with Kyai Yusuf Khudhori, male, 45 years old, 20 August 2018)

For Kyai Yusuf, *ulama* who are not included in the management of political parties will not be able to execute public policies directly. He added that a cleric's public speech could lose to a legislator who makes policy. For him, preaching can be more effectively carried out with legislation and executing regulations, which he considers to have a greater divine reward than just preaching through public speech:

'Many clerics have lectured on alcohol concerns, but their voices are less heard by the public compared to a policy of banning alcoholic beverages made by members of the legislature. Without ignoring the importance of education and *da'wa*,

political paths must be taken, because the most effective struggle to maintain Islam and morality is more effectively carried out with political strategies.' (Interview with Kyai Yusuf Khudhori, male, 45 years old, 20 August 2018)

This is in accordance with the opinion of Nyai Umi Azizah, regional chair of Muslimat, the women's wing organisation of NU, who also serves as deputy regent of Tegal Regency. For her, the position as deputy regent is very important to determine the future of the people. With a population of 1.5 million, the majority of whom are NU affiliated, Nyai Umi Azizah was able to attract voters to win the local election. She considered her affiliation with NU very important because she was better known as the head of Muslimat than the cadre of the PKB party:

'The presence of *pesantren ulama* at the top of the executive leadership is important because it will determine the political direction of citizens. NU members as a majority of Tegal Regency has the potential to colour all public activities of the district. Therefore, Kyai or Nyai need to be involved in politics and hold executive leadership.' (Interview with Nyai Umi Azizah, female, 58 years old, 24 August 2018)

## To preach Islamic values

Kyai Achmad Chalwani from Pesantren Berjan in Purworejo stated that politics is part of Islamic *da'wa*, namely grounding the teachings of Islam in the life of the nation and state. He considers the existence of *ulama* in various political parties as very important as a board of directors and mentors:

'My foothold in politics is *fiqh siyasa* [constitutional jurisprudence], which is contained in *Al-Ahkam as-Sultaniyyah* by Al-Mawardi and the teachings of *tariqah* by Sheikh Abdul Qadir al-Jailani. They stated that a cleric is recommended to give direction in a society that does not master three things, namely *ilmal-'ulama* [knowledge of ulama], *hikmat al-'ulama* [wisdom of ulama] and *siyasatul umara* [politics of rulers].' (Interview with Kyai Achmad Chalwani, male, 63 years old, 20 August 2018)

Kyai Chalwani has had experiences that make it difficult for him to become involved in parties that are not affiliated with NU. Instead, he was involved in a nationalist party, the Golkar Party. He felt that his community wanted him to be a member of the PKB as a cultural representation of the NU organisation:

'*Ulama* with non-PKB political preferences are difficult to accept in society. Although I was a little shocked at first, after consulting my father-in-laws, Kyai Ahmad Abdul Haq Watucongol, I determined to continue participating in politics through the Golkar Party ...' (Interview with Kyai Achmad Chalwani, male, 63 years old, 20 August 2018)

He recalled that one day, there was a PKB campaign in a neighbouring village that was holding a rally through his village, and some participants who joined the convoy on motorbikes made fun of Kyai Chalwani. In dealing with this case, he relied on classical wisdom from the book of *Nur al-Abshar* by Sheikh Ali Abu al-Hasan as-Syadzili, which explains that the perfection of wisdom of *ulama* can only be

achieved after going through four trials: being insulted by the enemy, being berated by the fool, being ridiculed by friends and being incited by fellow *ulama*.

The decision to be politically involved in non-NU parties was also carried out by several *ulama* in Central Java. Kyai Noor Achmad, former chancellor of an NU university in Semarang, prefers to be involved in politics through the Golkar Party. Facing the difficulties he might face from NU constituents, he consulted an influential cleric, Kyai Sahal Mahfudh, who instead wanted him to remain a member of the Golkar Party and not have to switch to the PKB party.

Likewise, Kyai Subhan Makmun from Pesantren Bulakamba in Brebes believes that politics is part of carrying out religious orders. He who once served as one of the national administrators of NU (PBNU) believes that religious wisdom and political control are important to ensure the common good and harmonious relations between *ulama* and authorities.

Furthermore, Kyai Subhan explained that basically *ulama* must act as politicians who are able to manage various human interests to carry out worship, economic, household and social matters. *Ulama* must be able to ensure the availability of these four basic human needs in a good and balanced manner. He made an analogy with the urban planning of Walisongo, the first group of Islamic missionaries in Indonesia, who lived around the 14th through the 16th centuries:

'In my opinion, *ulama* are essentially politicians (*siyasi*), who must be able to anticipate or regulate the four most important things in a human's life: freedom of thought, restraining emotions, accessing economic resources and fulfilling sexual interests. This has been symbolised by Walisongo in the embodiment of urban planning in Java: pavilions, mosques, people and markets. This is also in accordance with the purpose of sending the prophets to foster humans, and the *ulama* are heirs to the teachings of the Prophet.' (Interview with Kyai Subhan Makmun, male, 62 years old, 24 August 2018)

Kyai Subhan acknowledged that political parties are an effective means to realise public welfare so that *ulama* can actively participate in them. He also recommended that *ulama* participate in parties that match their creed. Kyai Subhan also quoted the same *fiqh* rule as Kyai Dimiyati Rois: *as-siyasah mabniyatun 'ala' aqidatiha*. He considered that the formation of certain political parties will always be related to the ideology being promoted. He considered that NU constituents should start a party that fits their ideological background: *Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah*.

He cites a hadith of the prophet Muhammad saying that the best of people are those who are most useful to others, and he explains that it means to encourage individuals and groups to actively participate in bettering society as the biggest priority:

'The main political priority is not getting a position or authority but fighting for the interests of religion, economy, environment

and community needs. So the main priority for a political party is the benefit of the people.' (Interview with Kyai Subhan Makmun, male, 62 years old, 24 August 2018)

### To present the existence of *ulama*

Kyai Hanif Muslih from Pesantren Mranggen Demak, who was once the regional head of PKB, stated that practical politics for him was a form of obedience to his teacher, Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), an NU figure and the fourth president of Indonesia. Gus Dur asked several clerics, including Kyai Hanif, Kyai Nadhif and Kyai Nur Iskandar Al Barsani Purwokerto, to become administrators of the Central Java branch of the PKB party. Although at first he was not interested in practical politics, Gus Dur's request was finally granted.

He used to not be interested in politics because of the notion that politics is only about the struggle for power. He felt that his activities in the PKB party were carried out on the basis of loyalty to his teacher, something that was emphasised in the teachings of the *pesantren*. Furthermore, he believed that his actions were appropriate and very important considering that power can direct humans on the path of goodness. Lately, he is no longer active in PKB, but he still feels morally responsible for the party's vote and supports the victory of party candidates. For him, if power is achieved by non-NU groups, then the interests of Muslims, especially NU constituents and the teachings of Ahlus Sunnah Wal Jamaah would be ignored. Embracing power can encourage the activity of Islamic *da'wa* and the missionary activities of NU ideology to the wider community.

He holds the *fiqh* principle of '*al-nas 'ala dini mulukihim*' [the people will follow the religion of their ruler]. He elaborated on this principle by encouraging Muslim politicians to control the legislative, judicial, and executive branches. It is very important that these three branches be filled by people who share the same ideology as NU members. If there are no NU members in the three positions, the power will be taken by someone else, and in turn the Indonesian people will not be familiar with the teachings of NU. Because political parties have an influential role in determining legislative and executive positions, it is an obligation to be active in political parties. For him, the direct involvement of *ulama* in practical politics is not something to be avoided but an effort to fight for a Sunni-oriented Islam. He also respects the choices of other *ulama* who are active in non-NU political parties. According to him, NU cadres must be spread across all parties, not only in PKB and PPP, which have been filled with NU members:

'As a large organisation, NU members must be everywhere. It's just that I regret that they haven't been able to unite. If all Muslims are united, of course it will be very beneficial for the wider community, not just the party, because we can look for a qualified figure from among us as leaders.' (Interview with Kyai Hanif Muslih, male, 62 years old, 30 August 2018)

Kyai Hanif further explained that the role of *ulama* in the party must be firm and should not lead to many interpretations for the constituents and the public. This means that if someone joins PKB, he or she must support this party completely and ensure that many people vote for their party.

Similarly, Kyai Alamudin Dimiyati (Gus Alam), a son of Kyai Dimiyati Rois and elected member of national parliament, said that *ulama* and *santri* must be aware of politics, although not all of them have to be directly involved in politics. He explained further that awareness refers to their participation in elections. *Ulama* who understand politics must enter politics, while those who do not understand should become participants:

'There is no standard classification that *pesantren ulama* must be involved in politics. Because if everything was political, it would be troublesome. However, at least realise that politics must be done.' (Kyai Alamuddin Dimiyati Rois, male, 37 years old, 31 August 2018)

He views politics as a way to improve human life. He encouraged *ulama* to be politically aware so that they would not be used by other groups. He based his idea on the opinion of Kyai Wahid Hasyim, *man la ya'rif al-siyasah akalathu*, which means that someone who does not know politics will be eaten by politics.

For Gus Alam, the political context in Indonesia recognises forums for being active in practical politics, either as administrators or sympathisers. He believes that the politics of the *ulama* must be based on the theological beliefs of *Ahlu sunnah wal Jamaah*, which have been formulated in the PKB party. He encouraged *ulama* who wanted to be active in practical politics to choose PKB as their political platform. However, he respects the attitude of other clerics who are members of various other parties. He argues that the political differences that occur between *ulama* lead to different interpretations of the politics of *Ahlu Sunnah wal Jama'ah*.

## Discussion

The results of the study show that the interests of *ulama* in practical politics are more intended as an arena for the struggle for religious interests with politics as a means. The results suggest that several *pesantren ulama* (*kyai*) in Central Java have become main figures in national politics (Rochmat 2014) and have become electoral backbones for Islamic parties such as the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa, PKB) and the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan, PPP), which are culturally affiliated with NU. Some of these figures include, for example, Kyai Maemun Zubair from Pesantren Sarang, Kyai Yusuf Chudhori from the Pesantren Tegalrejo in Magelang, Kyai Chalwani from Purworejo, Kyai Dimiyati Rois from Kendal and Kyai Subhan Makmun from Brebes. Female *pesantren* leaders (*nyai*) from the NU organisation have been also actively engaged in politics, many of whom becoming members of parliament, regional leaders and ministers, such as Nyai Umi Azizah as the Regent of Tegal

Regency with her gender-oriented interests in practical politics. With a mature *fiqh* mastery, they explore *fiqh* for the purpose of achieving common good (*maslaha*) in the political world, and they emerge themselves as figures in national politics.

In addition, as authorities and community leaders, *ulama* are willing to be involved in practical politics for the social and political interests of their constituents. Socially, *ulama* have high social capital in the community and surrounding communities. *Ulama* are an elite group in the midst of society who are respected for their religious insights and social networks. Politically, practical politics is a vehicle for *ulama* to become a political platform for the ummah in the future. This makes the involvement of *ulama* in politics beneficial not only for the interests of the group, but it will also affect the profits of the political actors themselves (Ernas & Siregar 2010).

In terms of religious motivation, the urge to become involved in politics for *pesantren ulama* (*kyai*) is not solely based on political calculations for power, but also the *kyai*'s belief in *fiqh* teachings. The political behaviour of *kyai* is unique compared to politicians because of different backgrounds. *Kyai pesantren* are full of *fiqh*-minded reasoning in making political choices (Wahid 2012). The basic logic is that politics and the involvement of the *kyai* are not forbidden in Islam. In the *fiqh* perspective used by *pesantren's ulama*, Islam has various determinations regarding political involvement, namely obligatory (*wajib*), favoured (*sunnah*), permissible (*mubah*), disliked (*makruh*) and illicit (*haram*), according to each context. The results of the analysis presented below in detail show the motivation of *pesantren ulama* in political activities.

The activeness of *pesantren ulama* in practical politics in Central Java is caused by the desire to achieve political positions, namely political power. This behaviour is based on the principles of *fiqhiyyah* understood by *pesantren's ulama*, such as *siyasa al-ummah mabniyyatun aqidatiha*, or that political actions are based on the beliefs of each group (Wahid 2012). To reach power, they carry out political socialisation like other politicians by organising campaigns, engaging in religious speech, having group discussions, and hosting study forums in their community. In the view of *fuqaha* [Islamic scholars mastering *fiqh*], politics is *fardlu kifaya*, meaning that it is necessary to allow some Muslims to participate in politics to ensure the interests of religion and the people alike (Al-Mawardi 1996). Therefore, participating in political activities is rewarded in this world and the hereafter.

Involvement of *pesantren ulama* in politics departs from political ideals for the public benefit (*maslaha*), namely that the politics of a nation should realise a common goal to create goodness and improve the standard of living of humankind as a whole (Al-Mawardi 1996). However, because democracy requires general elections, the diversity of political parties is a necessity. As a result, politics is simplified to struggle and community service through parties, and it is no longer based

on ideological unity due to the diversity of platforms and preferences. This is in accordance with Weber (1949) regarding the act of instrumental rationality, namely that the social action taken by a person will be based on deliberate considerations and choices related to the purpose of the action and the availability of the tools used to achieve the goal. In this context, the political attitude of *pesantren ulama's* actions is based on the *fiqh* belief that a politician must reach the top of a political position, given the large positive impact that will be felt by the public from the policies of the rulers.

Another motivation for *pesantren ulama* to engage in political activities is preaching and teaching Islamic values in politics. They feel that politics is important, but it is not necessary to serve as leaders of the legislative and executive institutions. This is because one of the main tasks of *ulama* is missionary activity (*da'wa*), which is to convey ideas about religious values as the basis of morality and ethics for policymakers (Hasan 2012). Generally, *pesantren ulama* do not occupy important positions in the legislative or executive institutions, and most of them are sympathisers or nonfunctional cadres. This motivation distinguishes the political behaviour of *pesantren ulama* from those of one of the Islamist parties, the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera, PKS).

In Weber's (1949) theory, such political behaviour can be classified as rational, referring to an action that takes into account that the available means are only for consideration of the action, while the actual goal becomes the absolute value of the action. In the political motivation to promote Islamic values, *pesantren ulama* engage in politics to carry out religious duties by conveying *da'wa* on morality and state-ordered ethics in public institutions. Those in politics with this motivation believe that politics does not have to mean being active as a member of parliament or as a bureaucrat, but rather it can be accomplished elegantly by delivering religious values to policymakers.

Another motivation for doing politics for *pesantren ulama* is to show the social existence and political capacity of the *ulama* to explore their social capital. Within NU circles, social capital is very important, because the majority of party constituents are NU members who are very familiar with the *pesantren* culture. Usually, the patron-client relationship between teachers and students is explored to gain vote support during elections. This social capital is used by *ulama* to encourage their families to be actively involved in politics to fight for Islamic interests. For instance, Kyai Abu Hafsin al Muktafa, the youngest son of Kyai Dimiyati Rois, took advantage of the NU constituency in Pekalongan and Pemalang, two regions that highly respect Kyai Dimiyati Rois. This condition becomes social capital that develops into an unrivalled political force because of the strong cultural and ideological relationship between voters and candidates.

This finding is in accordance with Kusuma and Susilo (2020) and Ubaidillah (2016), who emphasised the relationship between social capital and Islamic politics in Indonesia.

Social networks are used to encourage more support and legitimacy of certain politics. In the context of the political behaviour of *pesantren's ulama*, social capital is built from the network of students and their families to support a *kyai* or his family in winning political contests as members of the legislature or executive. In addition, the *kyais*, with their religious insight, are considered capable of carrying out political functions. Justification through exploration of the principles of constitutional jurisprudence is used to encourage the involvement of *ulama* in politics. The political motivation to fight for the interests of Muslims and Islamic theology is one of the main incentives for *pesantren ulama* to involve themselves in practical politics. With each varying interpretation of Islamic political principles, the degree to which this involvement is manifested by each *kyai* is different, either in terms of practical involvement or political preferences.

## Conclusion

The results show that the role of Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) *ulama* is still very strong in Central Java society, and with the support of culture, they have a special space to participate in practical politics. In general, their political involvement is to safeguard NU ideology and Sunni Islamic theology by preventing the infiltration of transnational Islamic political movements. They generally encourage the unity of the *ulama* to fight for political parties affiliated with NU, but they still pay respect to their fellow *kyai* for choosing the ideological platform of the nationalist party. However, they do not support Islamist political movements. *Pesantren* clerics in Central Java base their political behaviour on the norms of Islamic law, which are extracted from the *qaida fiqhiyyah*, as a religious justification in modern political participation. Furthermore, the political behaviour of *pesantren ulama* is not monolithic. Each *ulema* has their own interpretation of the model, motive and purpose in determining political preferences.

The findings reveal that the political behaviour of *ulama* is driven by three main motivations. The first is to gain power. They are active in political parties because they realise that politics is very important in determining the fate of the ummah and Islam in the future. The second is *da'wa* or to proselytise Islamic values in public sector, where the activity of *ulama* in practical politics is aimed at applying Islamic values as a moral and ethical guide in policymaking. The third is to strengthen the existence of *kyai* as community leaders who are considered capable of carrying out political functions through the use of social capital to gain support from their community. The emotional bond between teacher and student is explored for political purposes.

This result theoretically underlines the existence of the use of religious ideology to justify political behaviour among *pesantren's ulama*. This finding emphasises a special niche of

the electoral base which is explored from theological and ideological studies used by *kyai* as justification for their political involvement. In general, this *fiqh* exploration has contributed to the establishment of democratisation in Indonesia, where *ulama* utilise a democratic system with theological justification.

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## Authors' contributions

I.Y. was the project leader, and together with S.S. was responsible for experimental and project design. The conceptualisation and methodology were carried out by I.Y., while the formal analysis, investigation and data collection were carried out by S.S. I.Y. and S.S. worked together on the original draft and editing.

## Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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## Data availability

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