

Pesantren as Educational Institutions and Social Forces: A Narrative Review of the Role of Ulama in Indonesia's Political Dynamics

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Abstract

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This study aims to examine the role of pesantren as educational institutions and social forces, as well as to analyze the contribution of ulama to social and political dynamics in Indonesia. This study employs a qualitative approach with a literature study design that utilizes various books, scientific journals, and relevant academic sources as data sources. The findings indicate that pesantren have a strategic role as Islamic educational institutions that function not only as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge but also as means of character formation through the integration of cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects. In addition, pesantren serve as social forces capable of building solidarity, maintaining social stability, and empowering communities. This study also demonstrates that pesantren and ulama have a close relationship, in which pesantren serve as the foundation for the formation of ulama who exert influence on the social and political life of society. In this context, ulama act as agents of social change while simultaneously serving as guardians of moral values within the political dynamics of society. However, the involvement of ulama in politics requires balance in order to preserve their integrity and moral independence. Thus, pesantren and ulama constitute important elements in the development of society based on Islamic, social, and national values.

Keywords: Pesantren, Islamic Education, Social Force, Ulama, Islamic Politics.

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INTRODUCTION

Pesantren is one of the Islamic educational institutions that has a long history and an important role in shaping the character of Muslim communities in Indonesia. The existence of pesantren functions not only as a place for learning Islamic sciences but also as a center for moral, spiritual, and cultural development that has been passed down from generation to generation. Amid the increasingly rapid development of globalization and modernization, pesantren continue to demonstrate their existence as educational institutions capable of preserving Islamic values while simultaneously adapting to changing times (Hidayat et al., 2018).

The importance of pesantren becomes increasingly evident when society faces various social challenges, such as moral degradation, the identity crisis among younger generations, and technological developments that influence

patterns of social life. Under such conditions, Islamic education has a strategic role in shaping individuals who are not only intellectually competent but also possess spiritual maturity and good moral character. In essence, Islamic education is oriented toward the holistic development of human beings, encompassing cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects (Mujiburrohman & Shodiq, 2025). Therefore, pesantren constitute one of the institutions that remain relevant in addressing the educational needs of modern society (Nata, 2021).

In addition to functioning as educational institutions, pesantren are also closely associated with the role of ulama as central figures in community life. Ulama serve not only as educators and disseminators of religious teachings but also as social leaders who influence the formation of societal views, behaviors, and decisions. Through their scholarly authority and exemplary conduct, ulama are able to act as intermediaries between religious values and the evolving social realities within society (Yaqin, 2022). This role positions ulama as important actors in maintaining social stability and strengthening the religious life of the community (Saepulah, 2022).

In the Indonesian context, pesantren and ulama occupy highly strategic positions in national development. Based on data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, the number of pesantren in Indonesia reaches tens of thousands and is distributed across various regions, both rural and urban. The existence of these pesantren indicates that they function not only as religious educational institutions but also as centers for social development and community empowerment. State recognition through Law Number 18 of 2019 concerning Pesantren further strengthens the position of pesantren as part of the national education system (Dhofier, 2019). Furthermore, the development of pesantren in Indonesia demonstrates their ability to adapt to the continuously changing needs of society (Asniah et al., 2023). However, amid technological advancements, the currents of globalization, and rapid social change, pesantren and ulama face various challenges in maintaining Islamic values while at the same time responding to the needs of modern society.

Nevertheless, pesantren and ulama also face various challenges in carrying out their roles. Pesantren are required to preserve traditional values while simultaneously keeping pace with developments in science and technology. On the other hand, the involvement of ulama in social and political life often creates complex dynamics, particularly regarding efforts to maintain moral independence amid diverse political interests. These conditions indicate that the roles of pesantren and ulama need to be understood not only from an educational perspective but also from a broader social and political perspective (Mulyadi, 2024). This challenge is important to examine so that pesantren can continue to perform their educational and social functions optimally in the contemporary era (Ma'arif, 2021; Herningrum et al., 2020).

Various studies have examined pesantren as Islamic educational institutions as well as the role of ulama in the social life of society. However, most of these studies tend to discuss these two aspects separately. Studies that integrate discussions of pesantren as educational institutions and social forces with the role of ulama in political dynamics in Indonesia remain relatively limited. Therefore, a more comprehensive study is needed to understand the relationship between

pesantren, ulama, and political dynamics as part of the social reality of Indonesian society that continues to evolve.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this article aims to examine pesantren as educational institutions and social forces, as well as to analyze the role of ulama in political dynamics in Indonesia through a literature study approach. This study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the contributions of pesantren and ulama to Indonesian society and their relevance in addressing various contemporary challenges.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a library research design aimed at examining in depth the role of pesantren as educational institutions and social forces, as well as the contribution of ulama to political dynamics in Indonesia. The qualitative approach was selected because it is capable of providing an in-depth understanding of social phenomena through the interpretation of various relevant sources of information (Sugiyono, 2018). The data used in this study were derived from various scientific literatures, such as accredited national journals, books, and academic publications relevant to the topic under investigation. Data collection was conducted through documentation by tracing, reading, and reviewing written sources related to the research theme. According to Zed (2025), library research is a research method that utilizes various library sources as the primary source of data in obtaining information relevant to the object of study. Furthermore, the data were analyzed using a descriptive-analytical technique, namely by describing, interpreting, and synthesizing various pieces of information obtained from the sources to produce a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The analysis was carried out systematically through the processes of data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing in order to obtain findings that are relevant and scientifically accountable (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2019). This approach was chosen because it is capable of providing a systematic and in-depth description of pesantren as educational institutions and social forces, as well as the role of ulama in political dynamics in Indonesia based on theoretical perspectives and the findings of previous studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Thus, this method is expected to produce a comprehensive, objective, and relevant analysis in accordance with the objectives of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Pesantren as Islamic Educational Institutions

Pesantren are among the oldest Islamic educational institutions in Indonesia and possess distinctive characteristics in a learning system based on Islamic values, traditions, and the character development of santri. As educational institutions, pesantren function not only as places for the transmission of religious knowledge (tafaqquh fi al-din) but also as centers for the regeneration of ulama and the preservation of Islamic scholarly traditions that have developed over a long period. The educational process in pesantren emphasizes the formation of a holistic personality through the inculcation of moral values, discipline, and independence. This indicates that pesantren have

an educational orientation that is not merely cognitive in nature but also encompasses affective and spiritual dimensions. Thus, pesantren play an important role in shaping generations who not only understand religious knowledge but are also able to implement it in their daily lives (Harun, 2018).

The learning traditions in pesantren, such as the study of kitab kuning through the sorogan and bandongan methods, constitute distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from other educational institutions. These methods function not only as means of knowledge transmission but also as mechanisms for preserving the heritage of classical Islamic scholarship, which possesses high historical and academic value. In addition, the personal and exemplary relationship between the kyai and the santri constitutes an important component of the educational process in pesantren. Such interactions create a learning environment that is oriented not only toward mastery of knowledge but also toward the internalization of Islamic values in the lives of santri. Therefore, pesantren are not merely educational institutions but also spaces for character formation and the cultivation of a strong religious culture within society.

Along with the development of the times, pesantren have undergone various dynamics and transformations in responding to the demands of modernity and the increasingly complex needs of society. Many pesantren have begun to integrate formal educational curricula by incorporating general subjects such as science, technology, and foreign languages without abandoning their traditional identity. This transformation demonstrates that pesantren possess a high capacity for adaptation in responding to social changes and global developments. The integration of traditional and modern educational systems has become one of the strategies adopted by pesantren to remain relevant within the national education system. This is further supported by state recognition of pesantren as part of the national education system that contributes significantly to human resource development (Azzahra, 2020; Bakti, 2023).

Furthermore, education in pesantren does not focus solely on intellectual aspects but also includes moral and spiritual development as the primary foundation for the character formation of santri. The communal and religious environment of pesantren provides social experiences that cultivate empathy, responsibility, and concern for society. Santri are required not only to understand religious texts but also to practice the values contained within them in their daily lives. Thus, pesantren can be understood as holistic educational institutions because they are capable of integrating the mastery of knowledge, character formation, and the internalization of religious values in a balanced manner. Therefore, the existence of pesantren remains relevant as educational institutions that contribute to producing generations who are not only intellectually competent but also morally and spiritually mature (Hidayat et al., 2018).

2. Pesantren as a Social Force

Pesantren function not only as religious educational institutions but also have a strategic role as a social force within society. The existence of pesantren

often serves as the center of various social activities that contribute to shaping patterns of thought, behavior, and value systems that develop within the surrounding environment. This can be observed through the involvement of pesantren in various social activities, such as da'wah, moral development, and community empowerment based on Islamic values. Through these activities, pesantren not only transmit religious teachings but also foster social awareness and collective solidarity within society. Thus, pesantren play a role in creating a harmonious social order through the internalization of moderate and inclusive Islamic values (Aras et al., 2025).

In addition, the social strength of pesantren is greatly influenced by the role of the kyai as a charismatic leader who possesses strong social legitimacy. The kyai functions not only as an educator but also as an authoritative figure who serves as a reference in various social and religious matters. The high level of public trust in the kyai enables pesantren to exert significant influence in shaping public opinion and social attitudes. In this context, pesantren can be understood as effective agents of social change through cultural and religious approaches. The close relationship between pesantren and society also enables pesantren to act as mediators in resolving various social problems that emerge within the surrounding community. This demonstrates that the social strength of pesantren is not merely symbolic but also functional in social life (M. Irwan et al., 2026).

Furthermore, in contemporary developments, pesantren demonstrate a high level of adaptability as social forces that are responsive to the dynamics of the times. Pesantren are no longer limited to traditional education but also play active roles in economic empowerment and strengthening community capacity. Various programs, such as entrepreneurship training, the management of pesantren cooperatives, and the development of microenterprises, provide tangible evidence of the contribution of pesantren to improving community welfare. This role illustrates that pesantren are capable of transforming into productive and solution-oriented social institutions in responding to socio-economic challenges. Therefore, pesantren function not only as educational and religious institutions but also as social forces that play a strategic role in sustainable community development (Pratama et al., 2025).

3. The Role of Ulama in Social and Political Life

In the social context, ulama occupy a strategic position as agents of change who function not only as transmitters of religious teachings but also as promoters of social solidarity and shapers of societal values. Through their scholarly authority and exemplary conduct, ulama are capable of building collective awareness and strengthening social cohesion within society. This role is reflected in various religious, educational, and community empowerment activities oriented toward the values of justice, togetherness, and public welfare. Ulama also frequently act as mediators in resolving social conflicts, thereby contributing to the maintenance of stability and harmony in social life. In this context, ulama function not only within the spiritual sphere but also make tangible contributions to shaping social structures based on moderate Islamic values (Azra, 2020a; Wahid, 2020).

Moreover, the role of ulama in social life cannot be separated from the existence of pesantren as the primary base of religious and social activities. Pesantren managed by ulama function not only as educational institutions but also as centers of community empowerment that promote the strengthening of the social and economic capacities of the ummah. Through cultural and religious approaches, ulama are able to establish close relationships with society and become references for various aspects of life. This demonstrates that ulama possess strong social authority that is not merely symbolic but also functional in social life. Therefore, ulama can be understood as important actors in building a sustainable and just social order (Azra, 2020b; Wahid, 2020).

In the political sphere, ulama also exert significant influence on the dynamics of national and state life. Ulama frequently serve as figures who provide moral legitimacy to political authority while simultaneously acting as intermediaries between the government and society. This role is reflected in the involvement of ulama in fostering political awareness among the public through religious values that emphasize justice, ethics, and social responsibility. In addition, ulama play active roles in religious organizations and social movements that influence the direction of public policy. In this context, the relationship between religion and the state cannot be separated from the role of ulama as guardians of moral values in political practice (Burhani, 2021; Shihab, 2020).

However, the involvement of ulama in politics also generates complex dynamics. On the one hand, the presence of ulama in the political sphere can strengthen the ethical and moral dimensions of governance. On the other hand, excessive involvement in practical politics has the potential to create conflicts of interest and diminish the independence of ulama as guardians of society's moral values. Therefore, a balance is required between the role of ulama as spiritual leaders and as socio-political actors. Ulama are expected to maintain their integrity and da'wah orientation so as not to become trapped in political pragmatism that may reduce their moral authority. Through a proportional approach, ulama can continue to serve as constructive social forces while making positive contributions to ethical and civilized political development (Burhani, 2021).

4. The Relationship between Pesantren, Ulama, and Political Dynamics in Indonesia

Pesantren, ulama, and politics are three elements that have a close relationship within Indonesian society. Pesantren function as educational institutions that shape the character, religious knowledge, and social leadership of santri. From the pesantren environment emerge ulama who possess scholarly authority and strong social influence within society (Harun, 2018; Hidayat et al., 2018). This authority positions ulama not only as educators and spiritual guides but also as figures capable of influencing public perspectives and behavior in various aspects of life, including social and political affairs (Azra, 2020; Wahid, 2020).

In the political dynamics of Indonesia, the involvement of ulama cannot be separated from the social position they acquire through pesantren. Public

trust in ulama often leads to their involvement in the development of political awareness, the provision of moral legitimacy for public policies, and participation in various social and religious organizations. At the same time, ulama are required to maintain their independence and moral functions in order to avoid becoming entangled in practical political interests that may diminish their religious authority (Burhani, 2021; Shihab, 2020).

Based on the findings of the literature review, it can be understood that pesantren function not only as Islamic educational institutions but also as social forces that produce ulama as agents of change within society. The close relationship between pesantren and ulama enables both to make significant contributions to shaping the social and political life of Indonesia. Therefore, the existence of pesantren and ulama remains relevant in supporting the development of a society grounded in religious, ethical, and national values.

CONCLUSION

Pesantren as Islamic educational institutions have a highly strategic role in shaping the character and intellectual development of santri through a learning system that integrates cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects. The existence of pesantren functions not only as centers for the transmission of religious knowledge but also as spaces for personality formation based on the values of morality, independence, and discipline. In their development, pesantren have demonstrated a high capacity for adaptation by integrating modern educational systems without abandoning their traditional identity, thereby remaining relevant in responding to the dynamics of changing times.

In addition to serving as educational institutions, pesantren also function as social forces that make tangible contributions to building a harmonious and sustainable social life. Through various social activities, da'wah, and community empowerment programs, pesantren are able to strengthen social solidarity and shape value systems oriented toward justice and togetherness. In this regard, ulama, as leaders of pesantren, occupy a central position as agents of social change who not only provide spiritual guidance but also play active roles in fostering social cohesion and addressing various societal issues.

In the political context, ulama exert significant influence as guardians of moral values and ethics in national and state life. The involvement of ulama in politics reflects the close relationship between religion and power, in which ulama serve as intermediaries between society and the government while also providing moral legitimacy for public policies. Nevertheless, this role requires a balance to ensure that ulama maintain their integrity and independence as moral authorities. Therefore, pesantren and ulama can be understood as strategic forces that play important roles not only in the fields of education and social development but also in fostering an ethical and civilized political order.

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