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Adaptive Traditionalism in Islamic Politics: The Political Thoughts of KH. Wahab Chasbullah and the Transformation of Nahdlatul Ulama's Strategy

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Abstract

Islamic traditionalism is often portrayed as a static and conservative orientation that resists socio-political change and modern political engagement. This article examines the political thought of KH. Wahab Chasbullah and its role in shaping Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) strategic responses to the changing dynamics of Indonesian politics. Employing a qualitative library research design with a historical-interpretive approach, this study analyzes KH. Wahab's political ideas through the concepts of Islamic traditionalism and pragmatic conservatism. The findings demonstrate that Wahab developed an adaptive form of Islamic traditionalism—an approach that seamlessly integrated religious authority with modern organizational and political strategies. Rather than rejecting change, his pragmatic conservatism enabled NU to preserve its religious traditions while responding strategically to shifting political configurations and state structures. The article therefore challenges the notion of Islamic traditionalism as a form of static conservatism and argues that adaptive traditionalism can function as a mode of political action that sustains religious continuity while facilitating organizational and political transformation.

Keywords: Adaptive traditionalism, Nahdlatul Ulama; political mobilization, patron-client relations, Wahab Chasbullah

Abstrak

Tradisionalisme Islam sering digambarkan sebagai suatu orientasi yang statis dan konservatif, menolak perubahan sosial politik dan keterlibatan politik modern. Artikel ini mengkaji pemikiran politik KH. Wahab Chasbullah dan perannya dalam membentuk respons strategis Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) terhadap dinamika politik Indonesia. Menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif melalui studi Pustaka dengan pendekatan historis-interpretatif, studi ini menganalisis gagasan politik KH. Wahab melalui konsep tradisionalisme Islam dan konservatisme pragmatis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa KH. Wahab mengembangkan bentuk tradisionalisme Islam yang adaptif, pendekatan yang mengintegrasikan otoritas keagamaan dengan strategi organisasi dan politik modern. Alih-alih menolak perubahan, konservatisme pragmatis memungkinkan NU untuk melestarikan tradisi keagamaannya sambil merespons secara strategis terhadap konfigurasi politik dan pergeseran struktur negara. Oleh karena itu, artikel ini menantang anggapan tradisionalisme Islam sebagai bentuk konservatisme statis dan berpendapat bahwa tradisionalisme adaptif dapat berfungsi sebagai mode tindakan politik yang mempertahankan kesinambungan nilai keagamaan sekaligus memfasilitasi transformasi organisasi dan politik.

Kata kunci: Tradisionalisme Adaptif, Nahdlatul Ulama, Mobilisasi Politik, Relasi Patron-Klien, Wahab Chasbullah

Introduction

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), established in 1926, is among Indonesia's largest socio-religious organizations and has exhibited notable resilience amid shifting socio-political and religious landscapes. Its contributions to civil society warrant close examination, particularly regarding its capacity to adapt and transform within the context of the modern Indonesian state. The application of traditional Islamic values through social movements, pesantren education, cadre development, political engagement, economic and health initiatives, and advocacy for social, humanitarian, and democratic causes underscores NU's significance in shaping Indonesia's civil society. Nevertheless, a central academic debate persists: how does an organization rooted in traditionalism operate with such flexibility and pragmatism in navigating evolving configurations of state power?

Conventional political theory often equates religious conservatism with ideological rigidity or passive isolationism. However, the Islamic traditionalism practiced by NU is characterized by adaptability and relevance to contemporary challenges. This adaptive quality is closely linked to the contributions of NU's intellectuals, particularly KH. Wahab Chasbullah (1888-1971), who served as both an intellectual and organizational leader within NU and played a significant role in national politics. As a founding Kiai of NU in 1926, Wahab's early activism constituted a strategic religious response to the global spread of "Wahhabization" in Arabia, which threatened religious freedoms (Ismail, 2011). Analyzing his political thought is essential, as he effectively bridged traditional Islamic scholarship with modern organizational strategies, thereby shaping the Islamic public sphere and national development.

Although the literature thoroughly records Kiai Wahab's biographical milestones—including the founding of Taswirul Afkar (1914), Nahdlatul Wathan (1916), Nahdlatut Tujjar (1918), and the establishment of MIAI in 1937 as a cross-organizational Islamic forum (Supriyadi, 2015) these accounts are predominantly descriptive. The central academic issue that remains insufficiently addressed is the lack of conceptual analysis regarding the transformation of traditional theological frameworks into resilient political mechanisms.

Kiai Wahab's controversial political decisions—such as leading NU's withdrawal from the Masyumi Party in 1952 due to perceived marginalization of NU voices (Supriyadi, 2015), endorsing Sukarno's "NASAKOM" concept despite criticism as a "*Nasakom kiai*" (Rifai, 2010), and guiding the independent NU Party to become the third-largest force in the 1955 election (Feith, 1957)—should not be interpreted solely as historical incidents or acts of opportunistic pragmatism.

Rather, these actions exemplify a deeply embedded "pragmatic conservatism" grounded in traditional Islamic jurisprudence. This pragmatic-conservative orientation has served as the political blueprint underpinning NU's sustained flexibility in state

engagement. By moving beyond descriptive biography to a systematic analysis of political mobilization, this article examines how the traditional patron-client relationship between kiai and santri was transformed into a resilient political apparatus. Accordingly, the study analyzes Kiai Wahab's political thought within the framework of Islamic traditionalism to develop a theoretical model illustrating how religious tradition can sustain historical continuity while adapting to socio-political change.

Existing studies on KH. Wahab Chasbullah generally falls into three strands. The first strand examines his ideas normatively by emphasizing the integration of Islam and nationalism, tolerance, and religious moderation (Arif & Al-Amin, 2021; Qudsiyah & Mahadun, 2023). The second strand focuses on historical and biographical dimensions, highlighting his role in the establishment of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and the Indonesian national movement (Kusumoningtyas, 2025; Masfiah, 2017). The third strand portrays Wahab as an inclusive religious figure and emphasizes his socio-religious contributions (An-Najmi, 2022). Although these studies differ in emphasis, they share a common tendency to treat Wahab primarily as a religious thinker, nationalist figure, or organizational founder.

Consequently, previous scholarship has paid limited attention to how Wahab's Islamic traditionalism functioned as a political resource that enabled NU to adapt to changing configurations of state power. In particular, the relationship between kiai and santri has generally been understood as a socio-religious bond rather than as a mechanism of political mobilization and organizational consolidation. This article addresses this gap by reconceptualizing the kiai-santri relationship within the framework of political mobilization. It argues that Wahab's adaptive traditionalism operated through moral-cultural patronage networks that transformed religious authority into social and political resources, thereby enabling NU to maintain continuity of tradition while strategically responding to shifting political structures in Indonesia.

By doing so, this study contributes to the literature on Indonesian Islamic politics by demonstrating that Islamic traditionalism can operate not merely as a religious identity, but also as an adaptive political strategy and a mechanism of collective mobilization.

Within the framework of Islamic traditionalism, this study addresses the following research question: How did the political thought of KH. Wahab Chasbullah shapes Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) strategic responses to the changing dynamics of Indonesian politics. This question is significant because contemporary socio-religious organizations, including NU, continue to face challenges arising from democratization, globalization, and national issues such as intolerance, radicalism, and social inequality. Examining Wahab Chasbullah's political thought provides an important historical and theoretical perspective on how Islamic traditionalism can remain relevant amid socio-political transformations.

This article argues that, as an intellectual leader, organizational architect, and the first "political kiai" in NU's history, Wahab Chasbullah developed an adaptive form of Islamic traditionalism that linked the authority of the ulama with modern political strategies. His adaptive traditionalism operated through pragmatic conservatism and moral-cultural patronage networks, enabling NU to maintain religious continuity while strategically adapting to changing state structures and political configurations.

Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how Wahab Chasbullah's political thought transformed Islamic traditionalism into a political strategy that shaped NU's organizational development, patterns of social mobilization, and responses to the dynamics of Indonesian politics.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of Wahab Chasbullah's political thought and the NU movement employs the framework of Islamic traditionalism, with particular emphasis on the concepts of conservatism and the patron-client tradition between kiai and santri.

Islamic Traditionalism and Conservatism

According to William A. Graham (1993), tradition (*traditum*) refers to beliefs and practices transmitted from the past and accepted as authoritative by a community. In the Islamic context, traditionalism emphasizes the authority of revelation, the Prophetic tradition, and the practices of earlier generations of Muslims as interpreted through established chains of religious authority. A central characteristic of Islamic traditionalism is “connectedness” (*ittiṣāliyyah*), namely the continuity between contemporary religious life and its historical sources, whereby tradition functions simultaneously as a source of legitimacy, continuity, and transformation (Graham, 1993).

This understanding is reinforced by Sayyed Hossein Nasr, who views Islamic tradition as the historical manifestation of divine revelation encompassing religion (*al-dīn*), the Prophetic example (*al-sunnah*), and genealogical continuity (*silsilah*) (Rumadi, 2015). Likewise, Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri argues that tradition includes intellectual, material, inherited cultural, and universal humanitarian dimensions (Rumadi, 2015). Thus, Islamic traditionalism should not be understood merely as the preservation of past customs but as a living system of beliefs and practices continuously reproduced and reinterpreted within society (Rumadi, 2015).

In practice, Islamic traditionalism is commonly associated with reverence for classical religious authority, the maintenance of rituals and local religious traditions, and educational institutions such as *pesantren*, where the study of classical Islamic texts and jurisprudence occupies a central position (Bruinessen, 2013). Within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), this orientation manifests in a strong commitment to the authority of *pesantren*, *kitab kuning*, and *kiai* figures. Although early scholars such as Geertz (1976) characterized NU as “conservative” or *kolot*, conservatism in the NU context does not imply resistance to change (Geertz, 1976).

Martin van Bruinessen (1994) argues that NU's conservatism represents a style of religious interpretation and practice that seeks to preserve classical traditions of *fiqh*, Sufism, and Ash'ari theology while remaining responsive to changing social and political circumstances (Bruinessen, 1994). Similarly, Graham (1993) distinguishes traditionalism from static conservatism by emphasizing that adherence to inherited authority does not necessarily entail rejection of innovation. Rather, tradition can provide a normative foundation for adaptation and renewal (Graham, 1993).

The epistemological basis of this orientation is encapsulated in one of NU's most influential legal maxims: *al-muḥāfaẓatu 'alā al-qadīm al-ṣāliḥ wa al-akhdzu bi al-jadīd al-aṣlah* (preserving the good from the past while adopting new and better alternatives). This principle indicates that continuity and change are not treated as contradictory categories within NU's traditionalism. Beneficial religious traditions are maintained, while new ideas, institutions, and strategies may be adopted when they better serve public welfare (*maṣlahah*). Consequently, NU's conservatism is better understood as a form of adaptive traditionalism that combines fidelity to religious authority and historical continuity with pragmatic responsiveness to evolving social and political contexts.

“Clientelism,” Patron-Client Culture

According to James C. Scott, clientelism is “a dyadic bond, involving a largely instrumental friendship, in which an individual of higher socioeconomic status (the patron) uses his or her influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, to an individual of lower status (the client), who in turn reciprocates by offering support and assistance...” (Scott, 1972). Scott emphasized the importance of face-to-face relationships between patron and client, which foster trust and reinforce personal loyalty. Beyond individual relationships, patron-client networks may also operate through intermediaries and hierarchical structures that produce vertical relations of power (Scott, 1972).

Reciprocity is a fundamental prerequisite of patron-client relations, although the distribution of benefits may disproportionately favor the patron. A patron may possess authority and even coercive power, yet the relationship cannot be sustained without reciprocal obligations between both parties. According to Scott, patron-client relations are characterized by four features: inequality, personal and face-to-face interaction, reciprocity, and a flexible whole-person relationship that is neither purely coercive nor contractual (Scott, 1972).

In the NU context, the kiai's superior religious knowledge, moral authority, and perceived spiritual charisma position them as religio-cultural elites within society (Ma'arif, 2010). Consequently, the kiai-santri relationship can be understood as a vertical, personal, and unequal patron-client relationship that is legitimized by religious norms and moral bonds. The pesantren ethos of *sami'nā wa aṭa'nā* (we hear and we obey) transforms this relationship into a durable form of social and political capital. At the micro level, obedience to the kiai is rooted in religious legitimacy, moral authority, and affective ties developed through long-term interactions within pesantren life. However, when institutionalized through pesantren and organizational networks, this moral-cultural patronage acquires macro-political functions. The authority of the kiai becomes political capital that facilitates collective action, coordinates political preferences, and mobilizes large constituencies in response to changing political circumstances. Patronage in NU should be understood not merely as a spiritual relationship but also as a robust mechanism of political mobilization. This framework is particularly relevant for explaining how Kiai Wahab Chasbullah transformed kiai-santri networks into an organized political force that supported the establishment of the NU Party, strengthened the political representation of the Nahdliyin community, and enabled strategic negotiations with state authorities under different political regimes.

These two concepts are analytically complementary. Islamic traditionalism explains the normative foundations of religious authority, historical continuity, and the

preservation of classical Islamic traditions within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Patron-client relations, meanwhile, explain how such religious authority is converted into social and political capital through kiai-santri networks, generating social cohesion, organizational consolidation, and collective political mobilization. By combining these perspectives, this study examines how KH. Wahab Chasbullah transformed traditional religious authority into political resources that enabled NU to respond strategically to changing configurations of state power. In this framework, NU's adaptive traditionalism is understood as the dynamic interaction between continuity and change: preserving religious authority and inherited traditions while pragmatically mobilizing organizational resources and adjusting to shifting political circumstances.

Research Method

This study utilizes a qualitative library research design with a historical-interpretive approach. According to Creswell and Poth (2024), qualitative research aims to understand meanings, processes, and social phenomena as situated within specific contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2024). This approach is suitable for interpreting the ideas, strategies, and socio-political meanings embedded in KH. Wahab Chasbullah's political thought and for examining its implications for the transformation of Islamic traditionalism within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), rather than for statistically measuring political phenomena.

The study relies on both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist of KH. Wahab Chasbullah's writings on politics and statehood, particularly *Kaidah Berpolitik dan Bernegara*, as well as official documents of Nahdlatul Ulama that are relevant to the organization's political development. The secondary sources include scholarly books, journal articles, biographies, and studies on Nahdlatul Ulama, Islamic traditionalism, Indonesian Islamic politics, patron-client relations, and political mobilization.

The collected materials were analyzed using historical interpretation and qualitative content analysis. Data were coded and interpreted through the analytical framework of Islamic traditionalism and patron-client relations to explain how religious authority, kiai–santri networks, and organizational resources were transformed into mechanisms of political mobilization and strategic adaptation within changing configurations of Indonesian politics.

The analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) identifying Wahab's ideas on Islamic tradition and politics, (2) tracing their manifestation in NU's organizational and political practices, and (3) interpreting these findings through the concepts of Islamic traditionalism and patron-client relations.

Result and Discussion

Adaptive Traditionalism in KH. Wahab Chasbullah's Thought

KH. Wahab Chasbullah was born in Jombang, East Java, in 1888 into a pesantren family closely associated with KH. Hasyim Asy'ari and the Tambakberas Islamic boarding school. His formative experiences in pesantren education and his studies in Mecca for approximately five years cultivated a strong commitment to Islamic traditionalism while simultaneously exposing him to broader intellectual and political networks, including the Mecca branch of Sarekat Islam.

The traditionalism of KH. Wahab Hasbullah is deeply rooted in *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) with a basis in the Shafi'i school of thought, Islamic boarding schools, yellow books, and the authority of ulama. KH. Wahab's nationalist thinking was shaped by his *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) background, which fostered a moderate style of thought, based on the principles of the middle path (*al-tawassuṭ*), balance (*al-tawāzun*), justice (*al-i'tidāl*), and tolerance (*al-tasāmuḥ*) (Arif & Al-Amin, 2021). NU officially affirms four sources of law (Qur'an, Sunnah, ijma', qiyas) within the corridor of the school of thought, while the decisions of the congress are codified in Ahkam al-

Fuqahā' (NU Online, 2012). In this framework, Wahab's conservatism is not a rejection of change, but rather a commitment to maintaining the continuity of religious traditions and the interests of the Nahdliyin community.

Upon returning to the Dutch East Indies in 1914, he became active in Sarekat Islam in Surabaya and introduced educational reforms through the establishment of Madrasah Mubdil Fan, which transformed the traditional halaqah model into a more systematic madrasah system (Barton & Fealy, Greg, 1996; Rifai, 2010). These experiences indicate that Wahab did not perceive tradition as a fixed and isolated inheritance. Rather, he viewed Islamic tradition as a living resource that could be reorganized institutionally to respond to new social and political circumstances.

This adaptive orientation became more evident through Wahab's efforts to establish social, intellectual, and economic institutions among traditional Muslims. Together with KH. Mas Mansur, he founded Tashwirul Afkar in 1914 as a forum for discussing religious, social, and nationalist issues among kiai, santri, and nationalist activists. More than an intellectual association, Tashwirul Afkar represented an attempt to create a discursive space in which traditional Islamic thought could engage with modern ideas without abandoning its normative foundations. Likewise, Nahdlatut Tujjar sought to strengthen the economic position of Muslim traders under colonial rule, while Nahdlatul Wathan and Syubban al-Wathan served as organizational vehicles for cadre formation and youth mobilization (Anam, 1985; Fealy, 2003; Noer, 1982; Rifai, 2010). These initiatives demonstrate that Wahab's traditionalism was inherently organizational and mobilizational. He recognized that the preservation of religious authority depended not only on doctrinal continuity but also on the construction of social institutions capable of mobilizing collective resources.

The establishment of these organizations also transformed the relationship between kiai and santri into a durable moral-cultural patronage network. In contrast to clientelism, which is based primarily on material exchange, the kiai-santri relationship

was grounded in religious legitimacy, trust, and long-term social obligations. Such patronage generated social cohesion and organizational loyalty that could later be converted into political resources. In this respect, Wahab's adaptive traditionalism operated by transforming religious authority into mechanisms of social mobilization and organizational consolidation.

The same strategic logic can be observed in Wahab's response to the growing influence of Islamic reformism in the early twentieth century (Triyanto & Damm, 2018). The expansion of reformist ideas inspired by Middle Eastern purification movements encouraged Wahab to consolidate traditional ulama through the formation of the Hijaz Committee in 1926 (Haidar, 1994; Rifai, 2010). The committee sought to defend the authority of the four Sunni schools of law in the Hijaz and subsequently became the foundation for the establishment of Nahdlatul Ulama. Analytically, the creation of NU should not be understood merely as a defensive reaction against reformism. Rather, it represented Wahab's strategy of institutionalizing Islamic traditionalism by creating an organizational structure capable of preserving religious traditions while simultaneously engaging with global Islamic developments and changing colonial political conditions. NU's conservatism, maintaining tradition and protecting community interests, was also evident in its decision to join the Masyumi Party in 1945, along with other Islamic organizations, namely Muhammadiyah, Persis, and others. This external support gave NU political legitimacy at the national level immediately after independence. NU's presence in Masyumi enabled it to gain broader political support. He also strengthened his network by forming the Indonesian Muslim League (LMI) as a forum for NU to network with modernist Islamic movements other than Masyumi, namely Persis and Al-Irsyad (Rifai, 2010). Both before and after the election, KH. Wahab continued to maintain intensive contact with political-business circles to negotiate NU's position on the division of power, both executive and legislative. He was also one of the NU politicians who maintained intensive contact with President Soekarno, earning him the nickname "Soekarno's kiai" (Rifai, 2010).

Since the Sukarno era, KH Wahab has been a pioneer in NU's acceptance of Pancasila. This stance facilitated NU's adaptation at the beginning of the New Order, when the Soeharto government demanded loyalty to the state ideology. This decision was made during the debates in the Constituent Assembly in the 1950s and reaffirmed through the 1926 Khittah in 1984 through Wahab's intellectual legacy. This adaptation was a tactic to maintain NU's relevance in Indonesian politics while simultaneously safeguarding the organization's safety from regime pressure. With Wahab's legitimacy, NU could fit into the New Order's political configuration without being suspected of ideological opposition. Thus, NU's patronage and clientele during Wahab's era were integrative, maintaining community cohesion, facilitating political alignments, and connecting tradition with the demands of the modern nation-state. NU's patronage during Wahab Hasbullah's era was effective because it was rooted in Islamic traditionalism, the moral authority of kiai (Islamic scholars), and long-term social relationships. Therefore, NU's patronage and clientele are better understood as traditional leadership relations rather than political clientelism in the modern sense. The relationship between kiai and santri is moral, cultural, and symbolic, rooted in scientific authority, religious charisma, and the social closeness of the pesantren.

The adaptive political orientation continued in subsequent periods when Wahab encouraged NU's participation in national politics through Masyumi and later supported the establishment of the NU Party in 1952. These decisions reveal that Wahab's political thought cannot be reduced to religious conservatism alone. Instead, they illustrate an adaptive form of Islamic traditionalism in which religious authority, kiai-santri patronage, and organizational resources were strategically employed to secure political representation and enable NU to respond pragmatically to changing configurations of state power in Indonesia. This adaptation is also clearly visible in NU's attitude during the Guided Democracy era. One of the principles of *usl fiqh* that is used as a reference is the principle of "*mā lā yudraku kulluhu lā yutraku ba'duhu*", if something cannot be achieved completely, then do not abandon it even if it can only be achieved partially. Based on this

principle, NU views that involvement in the Guided Democracy system is still better than being outside the system altogether (Jainuddin, 2019). KH. Wahab confirmed Soekarno's position with the title waliy *al-amr al-darūri bi al-shawkah*. This title was given because: (1) the position of *al-imām al-‘azam* should ideally only be one in the entire Islamic world, led by a *mujtahid mutlaq*, but figures with that qualification have not existed for centuries; (2) because the conditions are not met, the obligation to appoint *al-imām al-‘azam* is dropped, so that each country is obliged to appoint an emergency imam; (3) Soekarno, as a Muslim Head of State who prays, marries, swears an Islamic oath, and is democratically elected, is legally called waliy *al-amr* even though his status is emergency. Thus, Soekarno has full power (*al-shawkah*) and must be obeyed by his people (Chasbullah, 2015). Meanwhile, in the context of the New Order, Barton and Fealy emphasized that NU's traditionalism actually allows for contextual flexibility in facing modernity and a strong state (Barton & Fealy, Greg, 1996). NU, as part of cultural Islam, developed due to its ability to adapt to the restrictions on political Islam during the New Order era.

During the New Order era (1966–1998), NU faced a state regime that was very strong, centralistic, and depoliticized towards Islam. The state suppressed Islamic political parties, forced party fusion (PPP), and tightly controlled the political space of civil society (Fealy, 2003). In this context, NU conservatism developed as a survival strategy rather than an ideology of resistance to change. The decision of the 27th NU Congress in Situbondo in 1984 to return to the 1926 khittah that was influenced by Wahab's thought, was a crucial moment that demonstrated how NU traditionalism operated in context. NU redefines politics, from electoral and party politics to national politics oriented towards the public good. Herein lies the protective and adaptive nature of NU conservatism.

As the social and political context changed, NU expanded its role beyond its purely religious function, actively engaging in education, social, cultural, and economic fields.

This expansion marked NU's transformation from an organization originally perceived as a traditional Islamic boarding school community to a modern organization firmly rooted in Islamic tradition. This modernization was not realized by abandoning tradition, but rather by embracing it as a normative and cultural foundation for institutional development. This adaptation strategy was evident in the strengthening and expansion of autonomous organizations, such as Ansor, Muslimat, IPNU, IPPNU, and PMII, which functioned as spaces for cadre development, social participation, and articulation of the interests of diverse generations and social groups, while ensuring NU's continued role in the ever-changing dynamics of Indonesian society (Rambe, 2022).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that KH. Wahab Chasbullah's political thought shaped Nahdlatul Ulama's (NU) strategic responses to changing political environments by transforming Islamic traditionalism into an adaptive mode of political action. Rather than treating tradition as a rigid or purely doctrinal orientation, Wahab employed religious authority, kiai–santri patronage networks, and organizational resources as mechanisms for social mobilization and political adaptation. Through pragmatic conservatism, he enabled NU to preserve its traditional religious identity while strategically engaging with different configurations of state power, ranging from the colonial period and Guided Democracy to the early New Order.

The findings suggest that adaptive traditionalism in NU should be understood not merely as a form of religious conservatism but as a political strategy that converts moral-religious authority into organizational capacity and collective mobilization. In this respect, the article contributes to the literature on Indonesian Islamic politics by showing that Islamic traditionalism can function simultaneously as a source of legitimacy, a mechanism of mobilization, and a resource for strategic adaptation.

This study has several limitations. It focuses primarily on the political thought of KH. Wahab Chasbullah and relies predominantly on documentary and library sources.

Consequently, it does not examine in detail how his ideas were interpreted and practiced by later generations of NU leaders or how patronage networks evolved in contemporary political settings. Future research could therefore undertake comparative studies of political thought among NU figures or employ archival and field-based approaches to investigate the transformation of kiai–santri networks and adaptive traditionalism in contemporary Indonesian politics.

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