

The Politics of Purity and Religious Authority: Interpreting Conflict in Nahdlatul Ulama

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji eskalasi konflik kelembagaan di lingkungan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) menjelang Muktamar Ke-35 pada 2026 dengan argumen bahwa krisis tersebut menandai sesuatu yang lebih dari sekadar kontestasi di antara elite yang bersaing. Sebaliknya, krisis ini mencerminkan renegosiasi yang mendalam atas otoritas keagamaan dalam organisasi Muslim terbesar di Indonesia. Kami menafsirkan perpecahan ini sebagai titik temu dari tiga ketegangan yang saling berkaitan: benturan antara kepemimpinan spiritual yang berbasis pada sikap takzim dan tuntutan tata kelola birokratis yang semakin meluas; pelanggaran simbolik terhadap batas moral yang disakralkan; serta friksi struktural yang muncul ketika prestise keagamaan yang telah terakumulasi dikonversi menjadi modal ekonomi dan politik melalui usaha di sektor ekstraktif. Mosi tidak percaya Syuriyah, kontroversi seputar undangan terhadap akademisi yang berpandangan pro-Israel, serta perselisihan mengenai konsesi pertambangan batu bara masing-masing menyingkap kegelisahan yang lebih mendalam terkait identitas organisasi, akuntabilitas kelembagaan, dan landasan kepemimpinan yang sah. Meskipun sejarah NU selama satu abad menunjukkan ketahanan kelembagaan yang luar biasa melalui rekonsiliasi yang dimediasi kiai, jaringan kekerabatan, dan sanad keilmuan yang sama, kami berpendapat bahwa krisis saat ini memberikan tekanan yang belum pernah terjadi sebelumnya terhadap mekanisme tradisional penyelesaian konflik tersebut. Secara metodologis, penelitian ini menggunakan analisis yang berpusat pada diskursus terhadap pernyataan publik, laporan media, dan penuturan dari kalangan internal melalui podcast; karena itu, interpretasi yang kami ajukan harus dipahami sebagai bersifat heuristik dan menghasilkan hipotesis, bukan sebagai gambaran definitif mengenai pengalaman akar rumput. Kami berpendapat bahwa konflik saat ini tidak seharusnya dipahami sebagai pertentangan sederhana antara tradisi dan modernitas. Sebaliknya, konflik tersebut merepresentasikan pergulatan yang

terus berlangsung mengenai makna dan legitimasi otoritas keagamaan ketika NU berupaya menyelaraskan aspirasi birokratis, diplomatik, dan ekonominya yang semakin meluas dengan otoritas moral yang berakar pada warisan pesantren.

Kata Kunci: *Nahdlatul Ulama, Otoritas Keagamaan, Konflik Kelembagaan, Islam Indonesia, Transformasi Organisasi*

Abstract

This article examines the escalating institutional conflict within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) ahead of its Thirty-Fifth Congress in 2026, arguing that the crisis signifies more than a contest among competing elites. Rather, it reflects a profound renegotiation of religious authority within Indonesia's largest Muslim organization. We interpret this schism as a convergence of three interrelated tensions: the collision between deference-based spiritual guardianship and the expanding imperatives of bureaucratic governance; the symbolic transgression of a sacred moral boundary; and the structural frictions that emerge when accumulated religious prestige is converted into economic and political capital through extractive enterprise. The Syuriah's vote of no confidence, the controversy surrounding the invitation of a pro-Israel academic, and disputes over coal-mining concessions each illuminate deeper anxieties concerning organizational identity, institutional accountability, and the foundations of legitimate leadership. Although NU's century-long history demonstrates remarkable institutional resilience through kiai-mediated reconciliation, kinship networks, and shared scholarly lineages, we argue that the current crisis places unprecedented strain on these traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution. Methodologically, this study adopts a discourse-centered analysis of public statements, media reports, and insider podcast accounts; consequently, our interpretations should be understood as heuristic and hypothesis-generating rather than definitive accounts of grassroots experience. We contend that the present conflict should not be understood as a simple opposition between tradition and modernity. Rather, it represents an ongoing struggle over the meaning and legitimacy of religious authority as NU seeks to reconcile its expanding bureaucratic, diplomatic, and economic aspirations with the moral authority rooted in its pesantren heritage.

Keyword: Nahdlatul Ulama, Religious Authority, Institutional Conflict, Indonesian Islam, Organizational Transformation

Introduction

To the casual observer, or to the political analyst working within a narrowly electoral frame, the tensions that gripped the senior leadership of the Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) in the run-up to the organization's Thirty-Fifth Congress (Muktamar) are readily reduced to a familiar story: a contest for the chairmanship, friction between rival political actors, or a dispute over access to economic resources. Indeed, when the

Syuriah -- NU's supreme advisory council of religious scholars -- issued a vote of no confidence and moved to depose the sitting chair of the Tanfidziyah (executive board) in late 2025, before an *islah* (reconciliation) was brokered at Pesantren Lirboyo in December of that year, the episode was widely narrated in the Indonesian press in precisely these terms: a leadership crisis to be resolved, a schedule to be reset, a congress to be relocated and rescheduled (CNN Indonesia 2025b; Media Indonesia 2025b; Saputra 2025).

This article argues that such a reading, however intuitive, forecloses a more consequential line of inquiry. Read through the lens of cultural and political anthropology, the escalation within PBNU is better understood not as an electoral skirmish but as a cultural event in the sense elaborated by Sahlins (1985) and Sewell (2005): a rupture in ordinary structure that simultaneously reveals and reworks the deep symbolic order underlying an institution's operation. Importantly, this article approaches the 'cultural event' primarily through its public, discursive, and institutional manifestations. We analyze how the conflict was articulated, justified, and contested in official PBNU statements, media reportage, and elite podcasts, rather than claiming direct access to the subjective experiences of ordinary Nahdliyin or the private deliberations of the *kiai*. Our use of anthropological concepts -- charisma, taboo, and habitus -- is therefore heuristic: these categories illuminate the symbolic grammar through which the conflict was publicly performed and debated. They generate a set of analytical propositions that require subsequent ethnographic validation through sustained fieldwork at the grassroots and within pesantren networks. We state this epistemological boundary at the outset to avoid overclaiming what a study of public documents can reliably establish.

Nahdlatul Ulama should not be read merely as a religious ormas (civil-society organization) in the narrow sociological sense inherited from Weberian models of bureaucratic association. It is better understood as a vast communal-religious formation with its own cosmology, its own normative order, its own customary organizational law, and -- crucially for this analysis -- its own mechanisms of cultural self-defense. When the Syuriah moved to formally censure the Tanfidziyah leadership and suspend national cadre-formation programs, this was not an empty political maneuver. It constituted an autonomous cultural response -- an organizational immune reaction -- triggered by the perception that the cosmic order and sacred values that have sustained a century of *jam'iyah* (associational) harmony faced disruption from within.

A Century of Internal Dynamics

The 2025–2026 crisis is often narrated, in the press, as an unprecedented rupture. Set against the longer arc of NU's institutional history, however, it is better understood as the latest instance of a recurring pattern: episodes of acute internal conflict, followed by kiai-mediated reconciliation, that have punctuated the organization's history since its founding a century ago.

Nahdlatul Ulama was established in 1926 by KH Hasyim Asy'ari, its foundational charter -- the Qanun Asasi invoked throughout this article -- articulating both a theological orientation (Ahlu-sunnah wal Jama'ah) and an organizational structure dividing religious authority (the Syuriah) from executive administration (the Tanfidziyah), a bifurcation this article has argued remains the structural fault line at the heart of the present crisis (van Bruinessen 1994; Dhofier 1980). Internal contestation over the proper boundary between these two bodies is not new: the Komite Hijaz controversy of the late 1920s, concerning NU's stance toward the Saudi state's control over the Hijaz and the practice of the four Sunni legal schools there, already required senior kiai to mediate between competing factional interpretations of the organization's proper external posture (Nugroho 2025) -- a template of taboo, boundary-policing, and kiai-mediated resolution recognizable in the Peter Berkowitz controversy examined in this study.

NU's most consequential structural rupture came in 1952, when the organization withdrew from Masyumi, the Muslim political federation it had helped found, to become an independent political party in its own right (Fealy 1997, 1998) -- the first instance of NU's leadership choosing to prioritize its own institutional and political autonomy over a broader coalition, a precedent for the boundary disputes between religious and political identity that resurface in this study's analysis of the PBNU-PKB relationship. This tension between NU-as-religious-organization and NU-as-political-actor reached its most significant resolution in 1984, when the National Congress at Situbondo, under the leadership of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), adopted the Khittah 1926 declaration, formally withdrawing NU from direct party politics and returning it to its founding orientation as a socio-religious organization (Bush 2009; Barton 2002) -- the very khittah that Gus Ipul's "sterilization" campaign, discussed in this study, invokes in seeking to separate PBNU from PKB.

Gus Dur's subsequent chairmanship produced the clearest twentieth-century precedent for state interference in NU's internal succession politics: at the 1994 Muktamar in Cipasung, West Java, the Suharto regime actively sought to influence the outcome of NU's leadership contest against Gus Dur (Barton 2002), an episode of state pressure on a Muktamar that PBNU actors themselves invoke today in explaining their wariness of any perceived presidential involvement in the 35th Congress. Fachry Ali, a social-political

observer who personally attended five NU congresses between 1989 and 2010, offers a vivid illustration of how this contest played out symbolically: with Gus Dur's access to Suharto himself closed off, he deliberately positioned himself to greet Vice President Try Sutrisno in full public view as the latter was departing the congress venue, a calculated gesture signaling to assembled kiai and delegates that he retained standing and access at the highest levels of state power despite the regime's opposition to his candidacy (Bakar 2026c; NU Online 2026). Fachry, who has separately warned that unresolved factionalism at the 35th Congress risks a fracture akin to Indonesia's failure to resolve political conflict after the 1955 general election -- a failure that fed directly into regional separatist movements such as PRRI/Permesta -- frames the stakes of the present Congress in explicitly historical terms: without genuine reconciliation, not merely a change of leadership, powerful regional kiai may simply begin operating independently of PBNU's formal structure altogether, a condition he terms "local anarchism" (anarkisme lokal) (Bakar 2026a).

The author's own scholarly engagement with this history spans two further congresses directly relevant to the present crisis. The 30th Congress, convened at Pesantren Lirboyo, Kediri, in late 1999 -- documented by the author together with Syafiq Hasyim (Hasyim and Darmadi 2000) -- took place at the same pesantren where the 2025 *islah* between Gus Yahya and Miftachul Akhyar would later be brokered, and grappled with a structurally similar question: how a large traditionalist organization should position itself amid a period of rapid national political transformation, in that instance the aftermath of Suharto's fall and Gus Dur's own ascent to the presidency. The 33rd Congress, held in Jombang in 2015 and documented by the author alone (Darmadi 2016), took place partly at Pesantren Tambakberas -- the very venue selected for the present 35th Congress -- and already registered the significance of the Denanyar pesantren as a shared political base for Gus Ipul and Cak Imin, the cousins whose rivalry is analyzed in this study, well over a decade before that rivalry entered national controversy.

The most immediate precedent, however, is the 34th Congress, held at Universitas Lampung on 24 December 2021, at which Gus Yahya defeated incumbent chair Said Aqil Siradj by a decisive margin -- 337 votes to 210, with one vote declared invalid -- to become Tanfidziyah chair, running in tandem with Miftachul Akhyar's election as Rais Aam (Maarif Online Banyuwangi 2021; Abror 2021). Notably, field observations by Hasyim and Hui (2022) document that state involvement in NU's leadership races, while most dramatic at Cipasung in 1994, has in fact recurred at nearly every congress since: Gus Dur himself, as sitting president, signaled support for a preferred successor at the 1999 Congress; Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA) officials

backed candidates at the 2010 Makassar and 2015 Jombang congresses, though their preferred candidates lost on both occasions; and at the 2021 Lampung Congress itself, MORA maintained a heavy institutional presence widely read as favoring Gus Yahya, whose own younger brother, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, was serving as Religious Affairs Minister at the time. This pattern lends further weight to the article's broader argument regarding the entanglement of national elite politics with NU's internal authority contests: such entanglement is not an aberration specific to the present crisis but a structural feature of NU congresses reaching back at least three decades. Public expectation at the time, as this article has noted via Savic Ali's retrospective account, was that this pairing would deliver organizational stability. That the two men's divergent paradigms, temperaments, and leadership dispositions instead produced, within four years, the most severe authority crisis in NU's recent history is the central empirical puzzle this article seeks to explain -- one that this century-long historical pattern suggests is less an aberration than a recurrence of NU's oldest and most persistent institutional tension: the negotiation of authority between charismatic religious legitimacy and the practical demands of organizational governance.

Reframing the Analytical Lens

To move beyond the limitations of narrowly pragmatic or elite-centered political analyses, this article is guided by three interrelated questions. First, how does the clash between a traditionalist-orthodox model of santri leadership, associated with the Syuriah, and a modernist-globalist orientation, associated with the Tanfidziyah, generate a crisis of authority within PBNU's institutional governance? Second, why did an international political controversy surrounding the symbolic register of Israel produce such an intense cultural rupture and widespread moral outrage among the Nahdliyin grassroots? Third, how does the conversion of religious and social capital into economic capital -- most visibly through PBNU's involvement in extractive industries, particularly coal mining -- create a disjuncture of habitus within an organization historically grounded in moral and spiritual authority?

The significance of this study lies in its effort to reframe the conflict beyond conventional narratives of factional rivalry or elite political competition. Rather than adjudicating the moral standing of competing actors or determining who was more principled, pragmatic, or politically justified, the analysis adopts an anthropological stance of cultural relativism. It approaches the actions, decisions, and forms of resistance advanced by different factions within PBNU as culturally intelligible and socially

meaningful, shaped by distinct habitus, historical trajectories, and normative commitments. The central analytical concern, therefore, is not to establish moral culpability but to understand how competing conceptions of legitimate authority are produced, contested, and defended within a shared religious tradition.

More broadly, this article contributes to the anthropological study of religious institutions by examining how large, historically rooted organizations negotiate the structural tensions generated by organizational expansion, bureaucratization, and economic diversification. It argues that the contemporary crisis within PBNU reflects not merely a leadership dispute but the broader institutional strains that emerge when an organization whose legitimacy has long rested on moral-spiritual authority is increasingly required to operate as a modern bureaucratic, economically engaged, and globally connected institution (cf. Eickelman and Piscatori 1996; Hefner 2000).

Scholarship on Conflict and Authority within Nahdlatul Ulama

Academic engagement with NU's internal conflicts and authority structures has a substantial history, predating the present crisis by several decades. The foundational text remains Zamakhsyari Dhofier's (1980) doctoral study of the pesantren tradition, which first systematically theorized the kiai's charismatic authority as the organizing principle of NU's social world -- a framework this article draws on directly in this study. Martin van Bruinessen's (1994) study of NU's internal power relations extended this analysis into the political domain, arguing that NU's structure has always contained an inherent tension between the religious authority of the Syuriyah and the practical political ambitions exercised through the Tanfidziyah -- a tension this article suggests has resurfaced, in intensified form, in the 2025–2026 crisis.

The mid-1990s produced the first major English-language scholarly treatment of NU as a political and religious institution: Greg Barton and Greg Fealy's (1996) edited volume, which gathered contributions from the field's leading specialists -- Fealy himself, Douglas Ramage, Andrée Feillard, Mitsuo Nakamura, and van Bruinessen -- to examine NU's political history and religious thought from the New Order transition through the mid-1990s. Fealy's (1998) doctoral dissertation subsequently offered the most detailed institutional history of NU's early political period, tracing the organization's fraught relationship with state power between 1952 and 1967 -- a period that, like the present one, saw serious tension between NU's religious core and its political entanglements. Andrée Feillard's (1995, 1999) parallel body of work examined NU's relationship with the Indonesian military and state

more broadly, offering an important comparative baseline for understanding how NU has historically negotiated pressure from external power centers, as distinct from the primarily internal authority crisis examined in this article. More recent scholarship has shown that post-Reformasi Islamic authority operates in an increasingly competitive field in which established organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah face challenges from newer preachers, movements, and media ecosystems (Arifianto 2020).

Robin Bush's (2009) monograph provides perhaps the closest historical analogue to the present study: an account of NU's internal political struggles and factional dynamics from the 1980s through the post-Suharto period, with particular attention to how competing interpretations of the organization's *khittah* (its 1926 non-partisan charter) have repeatedly become the discursive battleground on which internal factional disputes are fought -- precisely the dynamic visible in the *Fiqh al-Hadharah* controversy and the Gus Ipul–Cak Imin rivalry analyzed in this research. Greg Barton's (2002) biography of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) offers a complementary account of an earlier period of acute NU leadership crisis, during Wahid's chairmanship and subsequent presidency, when similar tensions between reformist executive leadership and traditionalist clerical authority produced comparable -- though ultimately non-fatal -- strain on organizational unity. Fealy and Bush's (2014) later article, examining the broader political decline of traditional ulama authority in Indonesia, provides a useful diagnostic frame for the present crisis's longer arc: the gradual erosion of purely charismatic-religious authority in the face of modern bureaucratic and electoral pressures, a process this article interprets through Weber's authority typology.

Where the present article seeks to extend this literature is in its integration of symbolic anthropology (Douglas) and practice theory (Bourdieu) -- frameworks largely absent from the existing NU historiography, which has tended toward institutional and political-historical analysis -- to account for a conflict substantially propelled by symbolic taboo violation (the Israel-related controversies) and capital conversion into extractive industry, phenomena without close precedent in NU's twentieth-century institutional history. Worth noting, too, is that NU's own actors reach for a similar register in explaining the conflict to themselves: one widely circulated NU Online opinion piece by Nugroho (2025) explicitly frames the Syuriyah's intervention not as punishment but as *tazkiyah an-nafs* (spiritual purification), invoking the *pesantren* maxim that whoever is not disciplined by his parents will be disciplined by time, and situating the present rupture within a chain of prior NU conflicts stretching back to the 1930s *Komite Hijaz* controversy, the 1940s *Masyumi* split, and the 1984 return to *Khittah*. This

emic framing corroborates, from within the tradition itself, this article's central claim that NU conflict functions as a recurring cultural mechanism of self-correction rather than simple institutional breakdown.

Finally, this article extends the author's own prior ethnographic engagement with NU's congress cycle, previously documented in accounts of the organization's 30th Congress at Pesantren Lirboyo (Hasyim and Darmadi 2000) and 33rd Congress in Jombang (Darmadi 2016) -- the latter of which had already identified the Denanyar pesantren's role as a shared political base for the Gus Ipul-Cak Imin kinship rivalry examined in this study, well over a decade before that rivalry became a matter of national controversy.

Methods, Positionality, and Epistemological Scope

This article draws on a corpus of publicly available primary and secondary sources rather than original ethnographic fieldwork: official PBNU communications, Indonesian and international news coverage (NU Online, Tempo, CNN Indonesia, Kompas, Detik, Al Jazeera, and policy-analysis venues including Fulcrum/ISEAS and Indonesia at Melbourne), leaked or circulated internal documents, and public statements by the principal actors. The events analyzed here -- Syuriah-Tanfidziah dispute, the Berkowitz controversy, the PT BUMNU mining concession, and the Gus Ipul-Cak Imin rivalry -- are unfolding contemporaneously with this writing (2025–2026); where facts remain contested, we flag their provisional status explicitly.

Because we rely on media and documentary sources rather than sustained participant observation, this study is better positioned to analyze the public, discursive, and institutional dimensions of the conflict -- how actors framed their positions, which symbolic registers were invoked, and how authority claims were publicly legitimated -- rather than to offer an authoritative account of grassroots Nahdliyin experience or private elite deliberation. Our theoretical framework (Weber, Douglas, Bourdieu, Coser) is accordingly used heuristically: to interpret publicly observable patterns of contestation and to generate testable propositions about the underlying cultural logics at work.

We explicitly position this article as a hypothesis-generating study. The claims regarding "cultural shock" among the grassroots, the "habitus disjuncture" experienced by ordinary members, and the "safety-valve" function of kiai mediation at the village level are analytical inferences drawn from elite discourse and media framing. They await empirical validation through future ethnographic fieldwork -- with rank-and-file Nahdliyin, observation of local pesantren responses, and network analysis of regional kiai -- which the authors acknowledge is necessary to confirm, refine, or falsify the patterns identified here. This study thus aims to set the research

agenda for the post-Muktamar period rather than to deliver definitive conclusions about subjective religious experience.

Dadi Darmadi has previously published ethnographic accounts of NU's 30th Congress at Lirboyo (Hasyim and Darmadi 2000) and the 33rd Congress in Jombang (Darmadi 2016), the latter already noting the Denanyar pesantren's role as a shared political base for Gus Ipul and Cak Imin. This article accordingly extends a longer scholarly engagement with NU's congress cycle. However, those prior engagements involved direct observation in ways the present, contemporaneously unfolding crisis does not permit; the authors bring observational familiarity with several sites and networks discussed here, but this paper's claims rest on the documentary record explicitly cited, not on privileged insider knowledge.

Results and Discussion

The Clash of Authority Regimes

Within Nahdlatul Ulama's social structure, the Syuriyah -- the organization's supreme advisory council of religious scholars -- occupies the apex of NU's cosmology of power. Drawing on Weber's (1978) tripartite typology of legitimate domination, the authority held by Rais Aam KH Miftachul Akhyar and the senior kiai of the Syuriyah is best characterized as a relatively pure instance of charismatic authority: authority grounded not in a formal decree or Western managerial credential, but in communal recognition of personal piety, mastery of the classical texts (*kitab kuning*), moral rectitude, and an unbroken chain of scholarly transmission (*sanad*) tracing back to the organization's founders.

In the anthropology of the pesantren, the relationship between organizational functionaries and senior kiai is structured by an internalized doctrine of absolute deference, *sami'na wa atha'na* ("we hear and we obey"). The Syuriyah functions as spiritual guardian and custodian of the Qanun Asasi, NU's foundational charter. Consequently, Syuriyah decisions carry a heightened sacral dimension: organizational custom subordinates individual ego to the kiai's blessing (*restu*). It follows that the Syuriyah holds, as a matter of cultural prerogative, the highest-order right to issue a vote of no confidence or to intervene in executive policy whenever the organization's direction is perceived to have strayed from its moral-spiritual course.

By contrast, under the chairmanship of KH Yahya Cholil Staquf (Gus Yahya), the Tanfidziyah -- NU's executive board -- operated on an entirely different footing: Weberian legal-rational authority. Gus Yahya brought a modernist-globalist paradigm committed to large-scale institutional transformation within PBNU, treating NU no longer merely as a traditional

religious fellowship but as a modern institution requiring technocratic management, standardization, and bureaucratic efficiency.

This bureaucratic rationalization found concrete expression in ambitious programs such as the Akademi Kepemimpinan Nasional Nahdlatul Ulama (AKN NU, National Leadership Academy), which sought to institute competency standardization, cadre certification, and strict meritocratic leadership development across the organization's tiers. When challenged by internal opposition, the Tanfidziyah camp retreated to the fortress of formal legality, insisting that its leadership mandate had been secured through the highest deliberative forum -- the Mukhtamar -- and therefore could not simply be overturned by a partial, day-to-day advisory ruling.

The open conflict that engulfed PBNU's senior leadership is best understood as a crisis of overlapping authority. It erupted when the legal-rational logic deployed by the Tanfidziyah aggressively crossed into the sensitive domain of Syuriah charismatic authority. From an anthropological standpoint, the Tanfidziyah was publicly accused of having failed at *tabayun* (cultural confirmation) -- neglecting the *pesantren* custom that requires the explicit blessing of senior *kiai* before consequential strategic decisions are taken.

The precipitating episode is now a matter of public record. In mid-August 2025, AKN NU invited the American academic Peter Berkowitz -- a Stanford-affiliated scholar and former State Department official publicly associated with pro-Israel positions -- to address the program's most senior cadre cohort (Antara 2025). On 20 November 2025, the Syuriah's Rapat Harian (attended by 37 of its 53 members) issued a formal ultimatum giving Gus Yahya three days to resign, citing both the Berkowitz invitation and alleged financial mismanagement as violations of NU's foundational charter and internal regulations (PBNU 2025). Gus Yahya refused, convening PWNU chairs in Surabaya to reject the ultimatum's legitimacy; the Syuriah responded by formally removing him effective 26 November 2025, 00:45 WIB (Doyle and News Agencies 2025; CNN Indonesia 2025a; Saputra 2025). Gus Yahya retaliated two days later by removing Secretary-General Saifullah Yusuf (Gus Ipul) and Treasurer Gudfan Arif from their posts. The dispute escalated further amid claims -- voiced by PBNU's deputy secretary-general -- that digital sabotage had blocked Rais Aam Miftachul Akhyar's electronic signature on the organization's internal document-management platform, itself a small but telling sign of how thoroughly the conflict had penetrated even NU's routine administrative infrastructure. Mediation by a Forum Sesepuh of senior *kiai* (including figures from Lirboyo and Ploso) culminated in an *islah* at Pesantren Lirboyo on 25 December 2025, in which both camps agreed not to resolve the leadership question directly but to accelerate the

Muktamar instead (Kartika 2025; CNN Indonesia 2025b; Triono 2025; Ramadhan 2025).

Read anthropologically, this sequence dramatizes the underlying fracture precisely: the Tanfidziyah leaned on structural legality (the organization's bylaws, AD/ART), while the Syuriah asserted moral supremacy (santri-kiai ethics). The collision between these two logics eroded the traditional checks and balances between the two boards, transforming what began as a managerial disagreement over a single speaker invitation into a full-blown legitimacy crisis threatening the integrity of the organization's senior leadership structure. As Fealy's (2025) commentary on the crisis observes, the dispute ultimately raises an unresolved constitutional question at the heart of NU's identity: whether final authority rests with the ulama or with the five-yearly congress of the broader membership -- a question this article's Weberian framing is designed precisely to illuminate.

This Weberian reading finds striking emic corroboration from within PBNU's own leadership. In a May 2026 podcast appearance, PBNU media chief Savic Ali explicitly downplayed the mining dispute as a minor factor and instead identified the conflict's dominant driver as a clash of character and disposition between Miftachul Akhyar and Gus Yahya, describing the Rais Aam's expectation of deference in almost exactly the terms this research has used: an insistence on *sami'na wa atha'na* akin to a parent's expectation of a child's obedience, set against Gus Yahya's disposition toward rational deliberation, which Savic characterized as subversive to NU's tradition of unquestioning deference to its ulama. That a senior PBNU insider, entirely independently of this article's theoretical apparatus, reached for language so closely mirroring Weber's charismatic-legal-rational distinction lends considerable weight to the analytical framework proposed here. Savic's remarks are also notable for a further, more personal claim: in the same podcast appearance, he recounts having privately cautioned Gus Yahya about the risk of exactly this kind of rupture as early as 2022, shortly after Gus Yahya and Miftachul Akhyar's joint victory at the 34th Congress in Lampung, citing the evident divergence in the two men's paradigms, temperaments, and leadership styles even at that early stage (Kompas.com 2026a).

An anthropological account centered on authority and taboo should not obscure a further layer of context that a purely internal reading risks flattening. Hermawan (2025a), writing for the ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute's Fulcrum platform, has suggested that the Syuriah's move against Gus Yahya cannot be fully separated from a broader realignment of elite loyalties following Indonesia's transition from the Jokowi to the Prabowo administration: Gus Yahya was seen by some critics as having cultivated closer proximity to the Prabowo government, at a moment when several

Jokowi-era allies within NU's orbit faced diminished standing. On this reading, the authority crisis analyzed above was not simply an internal contest between charismatic and legal-rational logics, but was also entangled with, and arguably accelerated by, shifts in national executive power that extended well beyond NU's own institutional boundaries -- a dynamic that resonates with the mining-concession politics discussed below, where competing investor networks were similarly described as aligned with rival centers of government patronage.

This article does not attempt to adjudicate the relative weight of this national political-economy dimension against the cultural and symbolic dynamics that are its primary focus; doing so would require a different kind of evidence than the public, discursive record this study relies on (see Methods, Positionality, and Epistemological Scope above). It is flagged here in the interest of analytical honesty: the "cultural event" this article describes was unfolding inside a wider field of national elite politics that likely shaped its timing and intensity, even if the present analysis is deliberately centered on the cultural logics -- authority, taboo, capital -- through which that event was experienced and contested by NU's own actors.

Notably, NU's wariness of executive interference in its congresses has a specific historical precedent that PBNU actors themselves invoke. Savic Ali, in the same May 2026 podcast appearance discussed above, explained the kiai's resistance to any perceived presidential involvement in the 35th Congress by reference to the 1994 Mukhtamar at Cipasung, where Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) faced direct pressure from the Suharto regime seeking to influence NU's leadership succession. This historical memory suggests that the anxieties this article has analyzed as internal to the present crisis are, in an important sense, continuous with a much older institutional trauma regarding the boundary between religious authority and state power -- one this article's Weberian framework, focused as it is on internal NU dynamics, does not fully capture, but which future research extending this analysis could productively address (Kompas.com 2026a).

A related observation from Fachry Ali further complicates this article's Weberian binary of charismatic versus legal-rational authority. In the same NU Online appearance, Fachry argues that identifying a single locus of control within contemporary NU has become genuinely difficult: authority, in his account, is no longer anchored in one figure or institution but operates through multiple, increasingly anonymous centers of influence operating simultaneously ("pengendali NU kian anonim"). If accurate, this observation suggests that the Syuriah-Tanfidziyah authority contest analyzed in this article, however illuminating as an account of the crisis's formal structure, may itself be a simplification of a more diffuse and less legible distribution of

actual influence within the organization -- a limitation this article acknowledges rather than resolves, given its reliance on public documentation over the kind of extended fieldwork that could map such diffuse networks directly (Bakar 2026b).

The Political Cosmology of Foreign Relations and NU's Collective Consciousness

Within Nahdlatul Ulama's cultural universe, solidarity with the Palestinian cause is not merely an optional foreign-policy stance. It has crystallized into part of the organization's collective consciousness (Durkheim 1995) and a sacrosanct component of Nahdliyin moral identity. Institutionally, PBNU has fortified this boundary through a "one-gate" system for international engagement -- a policy Gus Yahya articulated explicitly on 16 July 2024, in direct response to an earlier controversy discussed below, requiring that any relationship with foreign actors be centrally cleared through PBNU's leadership rather than pursued by individual cadres or affiliates. This sits alongside a standing prohibition, first issued under Gus Yahya's predecessor KH Said Aqil Siroj in September 2021 through Surat No. 4207/C.1.034/09/2021 (PBNU 2021) and formally reaffirmed by PBNU in July 2024 through Surat No. 2020/PB.03/A.1.03.08/99/07/2024 (PBNU 2024), barring cooperation with a named list of organizations -- including the Leimena Institute, the Institute for Global Engagement, and the American Jewish Committee -- on the grounds of their perceived Zionist affiliation (Indiraphasa 2024; Attar 2024).

In symbolic-anthropological terms, this arrangement constructs a sacred space within the santri value system. The narrative of defending Palestine functions as a symbol of the purity of Islam Nusantara's humanitarian struggle -- a boundary understood as absolute, policing the group's moral perimeter against contamination by global political interests seen as incompatible with the organization's dignity (*marwah*).

Notably, this taboo predates and sits somewhat in tension with the organization's own internationalist turn under Gus Yahya, whose *Fiqh al-Hadharah* ("civilizational jurisprudence") doctrine has explicitly promoted dialogue with a wide range of interlocutors -- including, at points, pro-Israel and Israeli figures -- in pursuit of a negotiated Israeli-Palestinian peace grounded in Sunni jurisprudence. This is itself an anthropologically significant fact: the crisis did not simply pit a fixed doctrine against a violation, but exposed a fault line within NU's own repertoire, between an elite-level pragmatic internationalism and a grassroots-level absolute taboo.

When, in mid-2025, the AKN NU program invited Peter Berkowitz to address its most senior cadre cohort, it produced a severe publicly articulated cultural shock, as narrated in media and Syuriyah statements (Antara 2025).

This reaction was compounded by the collective memory of an earlier episode: in July 2024, five young NU-affiliated figures had met with Israeli President Isaac Herzog during a visit organized by a pro-Israel NGO, a meeting that provoked immediate condemnation from PBNU leadership, including Gus Yahya himself, and led to the five being sanctioned by their respective NU-affiliated bodies (Tempo.co 2024).

Mary Douglas's (2002) analysis of pollution and taboo offers a productive lens here. For Douglas, dirt or pollution is not defined by any inherent property of the polluting object; it results from an object's presence within a structure or location where it does not belong -- "matter out of place." The presence of a figure associated with pro-Israel positions at the very apex of NU's leadership formation program was received, by the Syuriyah and by much of the grassroots, as precisely this kind of category violation. What the Tanfidziyah framed internally as pragmatic civilizational diplomacy was received by much of the jam'iyah as a defilement of the organization's symbolic purity -- a transgression of a sacred cultural taboo committed, in the eyes of critics, in pursuit of international recognition and legitimacy, at the cost of the moral order long safeguarded by the senior kiai.

The discursively constructed moral injury, invoked by opposition factions, subsequently underwent a process of symbolic instrumentalization. Critical and oppositional factions within the Syuriyah leveraged the moment to pursue a broader delegitimation of Gus Yahya's leadership. Older material -- most notably photographs of his 2018 visit to Jerusalem, where he had met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as part of a stated mission of interfaith engagement on behalf of Palestinian advocacy -- was recirculated widely in public discourse as internal political currency, despite Gus Yahya's own repeated insistence that the visit had been conducted transparently, with the knowledge of NU's senior kiai at the time, and in service of the Palestinian cause rather than in opposition to it (Azmi 2025).

Anthropologically, a sensitive cultural-religious issue was converted into potent practical political ammunition. Opposition factions no longer confined their criticism to administrative shortcomings; they escalated to an attack on moral legitimacy itself. By framing the Tanfidziyah as having violated organizational taboo and disregarded Palestinian suffering, the Syuriyah camp constructed a powerful sociological justification for the vote of no confidence, the suspension of AKN NU, and -- ultimately -- the push to accelerate the Muktamar as a mechanism for cleansing the organization of this perceived "symbolic contamination."

Reading the Berkowitz episode in isolation risks understating its significance. Arifianto and Ramadhito (2026), writing in *New Mandala*, situate it as the most visible manifestation of a much longer-running, deliberately engineered institutional strategy: NU's promotion of "Humanitarian Islam" as a global brand of moderate, pluralist Islam intended for foreign, rather than domestic, audiences. This framework -- distinct from Islam Nusantara, the more domestically oriented framework associated with Gus Yahya's predecessor Said Aqil Siroj -- was not a grassroots theological development within NU at all, but was substantially architected by C. Holland Taylor, an American former telecommunications executive with no prior background in Indonesian Islam, who holds a formal appointment as Gus Yahya's Special Adviser for International Affairs and co-founded the Center for Shared Civilizational Values, NU's de facto international secretariat. It was Taylor's removal from this advisory role, alongside the broader Berkowitz controversy, that the Rais Aam sought during the November 2025 crisis discussed in this study -- a detail that only becomes fully legible against this longer institutional history. Recent scholarship has also treated Humanitarian Islam as a transnational institutional project and examined both its peace-building ambitions and the challenges of sustaining international partnerships (Loo and Suryana 2024; Tania et al. 2024).

Read this way, the Berkowitz affair was neither NU's first nor most severe controversy arising from this internationalist strategy. In 2019, senior PBNU official Robikin Emhas joined a Chinese government-funded delegation to Xinjiang and publicly denied, upon return, the existence of the detention camps documented in international reporting -- a position NU was later compelled to partially retract following international criticism. In 2022, the R20 religious dialogue forum, organized as part of Indonesia's G20 presidency, saw Taylor invite Ram Madhav, a senior leader of India's Hindu-nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, to participate formally in the summit's organization -- a partnership Madhav subsequently invoked to help justify a hijab ban in BJP-controlled Karnataka, precisely the kind of instrumentalization the "Humanitarian Islam" project's own architects claimed to oppose. The R20 was also co-sponsored by the Muslim World League, a Saudi Arabia-based organization promoting a Wahhabist theological orientation NU had formally rejected since its 1926 founding; PBNU's leadership reportedly overruled its own internal legal-affairs body, which had recommended against the partnership on precisely these theological grounds, in order to protect the funding relationship -- a decision that bears directly on this article's analysis of habitus disjuncture in PBNU's financial governance, extending it from the mining concession to the organization's international fundraising as well. Separately, PKB, NU's

affiliated political party, holds membership in the Centrist Democrat International, an international bloc whose vice presidents have included Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán, a figure widely associated with Islamophobic rhetoric (Arifianto and Ramadhito 2026).

Against this backdrop, the 2018 meeting between Gus Yahya and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu -- discussed above -- appears less as an isolated diplomatic gesture than as one node within a broader, sustained pattern of engagement with ideologically heterogeneous, often illiberal international partners, arranged at the invitation of the American Jewish Committee as part of Taylor's wider network of neoconservative and religious-freedom-oriented contacts. This longer history suggests a modification to this article's argument: the Berkowitz controversy was not simply a single taboo violation triggering an otherwise dormant grassroots sensitivity, but the point at which an accumulated pattern of contradictory international entanglements -- individually controversial, but previously contained -- finally became politically unsustainable, giving Gus Yahya's opponents a credible and richly documented basis on which to press their attack. As Arifianto and Ramadhito argue, a religious organization whose authority derives fundamentally from domestic grassroots legitimacy cannot indefinitely conduct an autonomous foreign policy over the heads of its own constituency without eventually depleting the very authority such international visibility was meant to enhance -- a structural observation that complements, without displacing, this article's more specifically anthropological analysis of taboo and symbolic contamination (Arifianto and Ramadhito 2026).

The Mining Controversy and Financial Transparency

In the anthropology of religious economy, PBNU's move under the current Tanfidziyah leadership can be characterized as a case of religious corporatization. The establishment of PT Berkah Usaha Muamalah Nusantara (BUMNU) to manage a government-allocated coal-mining concession -- the former Kaltim Prima Coal (KPC) asset, previously held by the Bakrie Group's PT Bumi Resources -- is illuminated by Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital conversion. PBNU's executive leadership has attempted a large-scale conversion: transmuting social capital (the organization's vast Nahdliyin membership) and symbolic capital (NU's religio-political influence) into real economic capital, in service of organizational financial independence. Recent scholarship similarly frames the concession policy as a new site of state patronage and potential civil-society dependency, raising questions about organizational autonomy as religious organizations enter extractive governance (Pulley 2026).

However, on entering the capitalist field of extractive industry, PBNU was immediately drawn into a broader vortex of macroeconomic interest. Public reporting, including Ulil Abshar Abdalla's own account in a 27 November 2025 appearance on Kompas.com's Gaspol! podcast (Kompas.com 2025), points to a precise fracture: Gus Yahya favored replacing PBNU's incumbent mining investor with one aligned to the Prabowo administration, reasoning that it was preferable to align with the government's preference than to contest it, while Gus Ipul insisted on retaining the investor relationship established during the Jokowi era, honoring a prior commitment regardless of that investor's diminished standing with the new government. Tension came to a head when Gus Yahya, acting in his capacity as BUMNU's chief executive, delayed signing the annual mining work plan and budget (RKAB) ahead of a year-end deadline. It is worth noting, following Fulcrum/ISEAS commentary (Halimatusa'diyah and Garadian 2024; Hermawan 2025b; Media Indonesia 2025a), that this is not the only axis of contestation over NU's mining involvement: a separate, generational split has emerged between NU's elite leadership defending the organization's mining interests and younger, environmentally conscious Nahdliyin -- organized through groups such as the Front Nahdliyin untuk Kedaulatan Sumber Daya Alam (FNKSDA) -- who oppose NU's participation in extractive industry on ecological grounds. While this generational fault line lies outside this article's primary focus on the Syuriah-Tanfidziah authority conflict, it signals that the "habitus disjuncture" described here may not be limited to a single axis of contestation.

This mining-centered narrative is not, however, uncontested within PBNU's own leadership. Gus Ipul himself, in a 7 May 2026 appearance on the same podcast, explicitly rejected the characterization of a mining-related tug-of-war involving himself and Gus Yahya: "kalau disebut-sebut... ini adalah berita yang menyesatkan" ("if it's being said [that mining is the cause]... this is misleading news"). He pressed the point further on structural grounds rather than merely denying it rhetorically, noting that Gus Yahya simultaneously chaired the PBNU cooperative holding 99 percent of the mining company's shares, served as the company's director, and held the PBNU chairmanship itself -- asking, in effect, from whom he could plausibly be said to be seizing anything. Gus Ipul insisted that his own dispute lay with the Syuriah under Miftachul Akhyar rather than with Gus Yahya over mining interests. This disagreement among PBNU's own senior figures about the conflict's basic causal structure is itself analytically significant: it suggests that the "mining as root cause" narrative, however widely circulated, may function as much as a simplifying public frame as a settled description of the conflict's internal logic -- a caution this article takes seriously in declining to

adjudicate a single definitive cause. Notably, PBNU media chief Savic Ali has himself proposed, in a subsequent appearance on the same podcast (16 May 2026), that the mining concession would be better returned to the government altogether, precisely in order to remove this recurring source of internal friction -- itself a striking acknowledgment, from within PBNU's own leadership, of the corrosive effect the corporatization process analyzed in this study has had on organizational cohesion (Kompas.com 2026a, 2026b).

A further, more allegation-heavy account comes from Islah Bahrawi, executive director of the Jaringan Moderat Indonesia, in a 20 January 2026 episode of the Akbar Faizal Uncensored podcast. Bahrawi claims to have personally conducted due diligence on a mining-management proposal submitted to PBNU by PT Anugerah Perdana Nusantara, and states that its terms -- including a roughly 70-30 profit split favoring the operator and deposit and infrastructure costs borne by PBNU -- were unfavorable to the organization. He further alleges a connection between the concession and Boy Thohir, the businessman brother of a sitting cabinet minister, and suggests that funds flowed into PBNU's accounts on multiple occasions beginning in January 2024. These are serious claims that, as of this writing, rest on a single commentator's account rather than documentary confirmation, and this article does not treat them as established fact; they are noted here because they illustrate how thoroughly the mining concession has become a site of public suspicion extending well beyond PBNU's own leadership, regardless of which specific allegations eventually prove accurate. This same suspicion is registered even in mainstream media framing: a Media Indonesia video report on the crisis (25 November 2025) explicitly posed the question of whether the conflict's official justifications -- the Berkowitz invitation, financial governance -- were the real story, or whether other dynamics were at work, without resolving the question either way. That such a basic ambiguity about causation persists across insider accounts, investigative commentary, and mainstream reporting alike is itself an anthropological data point: it suggests the conflict's meaning remains genuinely contested and unsettled even among its closest observers, rather than converging on any single agreed narrative (Akbar Faizal Uncensored 2026; Vicky 2025).

The horizontal conflict between Syuriyah and Tanfidziyah was sharpened by an internal financial audit -- conducted by the public accounting firm Gatot Permadi, Azwir, and Abimail (GPAA) for fiscal year 2022 -- that surfaced a transfer of Rp100 billion into PBNU's Bank Mandiri account. According to the audit and subsequent reporting, the funds originated from the Batulicin Enam Sembilan Group, a company affiliated with then-PBNU Treasurer Mardani H. Maming, arriving in four tranches on 20–21 June 2022;

the day after the transfers were completed, the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) named Maming a suspect in a separate, unrelated bribery case concerning mining permits issued during his tenure as regent of Tanah Bumbu (Aslendra 2025; Harahap 2025; Amaliyah 2025).

It bears emphasis that the money-laundering (TPPU) characterization of this transfer has been directly disputed by PBNU's own leadership on evidentiary grounds independent of factional loyalty. The public accounting firm that conducted the underlying 2022 audit, GPAA, formally resigned as PBNU's auditor on 2 December 2025, stating that its still-unfinished draft findings had been leaked and altered before being circulated as though final. PBNU Deputy Secretary-General Najib Azca went further, arguing that the TPPU label was invalid absent any court finding against Maming on money-laundering grounds specifically, and that using an incomplete audit as grounds for a chairman's removal was procedurally premature. This episode is itself analytically significant: it shows the conflict's financial dimension was contested not only between factions but over the epistemic status of the evidence itself -- a second-order dispute about what counts as verified fact within the organization's own governance process (Firmansyah 2025; Tempo.co 2025).

Anthropologically, this controversy suggests a collision between two distinct financial habitus, a proposition that requires empirical testing at the level of local NU branches. In the inherited disposition of traditional NU communities, the circulation of money around religious leaders is customarily read through a spiritual idiom -- as *hibah* (gift), charitable giving, or the pursuit of *berkah* (blessing) -- in which the material provenance of funds is often bracketed in favor of collective benefit. By contrast, elements within the *Syuriah*, increasingly adopting a modern critical-audit orientation, questioned the moral legitimacy of accepting funds from a figure who was, at that very moment, facing separate legal jeopardy.

This governance fracture was widened further by scrutiny, from *Syuriah*'s internal oversight team, of unresolved accountability reporting for the organization's largest public events -- including the NU Centennial celebration and the residual funds from the 2022 Religion 20 (R20) international forum in Bali, drawn substantially from Muslim World League contributions to that event. This is a clear instance of what Bourdieu (1977, 2000) termed hysteresis: a condition in which a field changes faster than the habitus and instruments of internal control available to its actors can adapt (Amaliyah 2025).

As the *Tanfidziyah* moved at high speed to convene globally scaled events and manage the accompanying capital flows, PBNU's still semi-traditional oversight structures lagged, producing a functional stutter. The lack of clarity

in residual-fund reporting does not, in itself, establish personal corrupt intent; it more directly reflects an institutional failure to adopt transparent checks and balances commensurate with the scale of the organization's new financial activity. For the senior kiai of the Syuriah, however, this administrative opacity was read as a serious threat to PBNU's moral integrity -- reinforcing the case for a vote of no confidence and a wholesale restructuring of the executive leadership.

Kinship Politics and the Polarization of the Mukhtamar Trajectory

Political anthropology cannot fully account for the structure of power within Nahdlatul Ulama without reference to kinship politics -- authority networks rooted in kiai family lineages and pesantren dynasties. One of the clearest expressions of this dynamic is the long-running rivalry between PBNU Secretary-General Saifullah Yusuf (Gus Ipul) and PKB Chairman Muhaimin Iskandar (Cak Imin), first cousins whose blood relation has, if anything, sharpened rather than softened their political rivalry over the claim to represent NU's mass constituency.

Within the current PBNU leadership, Gus Ipul has aligned with Gus Yahya in pursuing an organizational "sterilization" drive intended to draw a firmer line between PBNU as a moral-religious institution and PKB as a vehicle of practical party politics. From Cak Imin's camp, this move has been read not as principled adherence to NU's founding khittah (its 1926 charter of non-partisan religious purpose) but as a covert factional maneuver aimed at weakening his own political network's standing among grassroots Nahdliyin.

The irony of this rivalry runs deeper than the immediate dispute suggests. PKB was co-founded in 1999 by Abdurrahman Wahid together with Cholil Bisri, Mustofa Bisri, and Ma'ruf Amin (Hasyim 2022) -- and Cholil Bisri is Gus Yahya's own father, meaning the current chairman's drive to separate PBNU from PKB is pursued by the son of one of the party's founders. Nor is the sterilization drive itself unprecedented: Hasyim Muzadi pursued a strikingly similar policy of NU-PKB distance during his own PBNU chairmanship (1999–2010), likewise invoking khittah as justification, with PKB's electoral fortunes visibly tracking the relationship's warmth -- the party fell to seventh place in the 2009 general election amid the cool Muzadi-era relationship, before recovering to fourth place in 2019 once relations warmed again under Said Aqil Siradj. This history suggests the present dispute is best read not as a novel invention of the Gus Yahya-Gus Ipul leadership but as the latest iteration of a recurring structural tension between NU's institutional non-partisanship and PKB's dependence on Nahdliyin electoral support, one that significantly predates the current crisis: as early as 2022, Cak Imin himself publicly dismissed Gus Yahya as lacking

meaningful influence over NU's grassroots, indicating that this animosity considerably predates the 2025–2026 rupture analyzed in this article (Hasyim 2022; Utama and Pramono 2025).

This rivalry reached a boiling point as preparations advanced for the Thirty-Fifth Congress, ultimately set for Pesantren Tambakberas, Jombang, in August 2026. In June 2026, Cak Imin publicly described the Gus Yahya–Gus Ipul leadership as the most regressive in the organization's history, calling for a thorough clean-out of politicians holding dual positions within PBNU's structure. Gus Ipul, for his part, responded with characteristic santri equanimity, declining to contest the criticism directly and stating simply that the current leadership had worked to the best of its ability, leaving ultimate judgment to the democratic will of the Nahdliyin at the Congress (Tempo.co 2026a, 2026b; Kompas.com 2026c).

This exchange illustrates how the political geography of the Jombang Congress became an arena of open contestation between a faction perceived as aligned with government bureaucratic networks and a faction rooted in the organization's own central executive -- a contestation that, notably, unfolded in full public view via press conferences and social media rather than behind closed doors, itself a departure from NU's older norms of settling elite disputes privately. This dynamic is not unrelated to the national political-economy dimension discussed earlier in the analysis of authority regimes: both the Gus Ipul–Cak Imin rivalry and the Syuriah–Tanfidziyah authority dispute unfolded against the same backdrop of shifting elite alignment following Indonesia's presidential transition, even as this article's primary analytical focus remains on the cultural logics internal to NU itself.

Despite the sharpness of this factional split -- encompassing a vote of no confidence, threats of dismissal, and open verbal exchanges among senior figures -- political anthropology registers a striking anomaly: NU has almost never fractured into permanently separate organizations. This institutional resilience is illuminated by Lewis Coser's (1956) theory of the safety-valve function of social conflict. Coser argued that within tightly bonded social groups, conflict itself can serve to clear away accumulated tension, allowing the group to reestablish equilibrium rather than shatter entirely.

Within NU, this safety valve takes the form of binding traditional spiritual and cultural ties: shared scholarly lineage (sanad) between teachers and students, collective reverence for the graves of NU's founders in Jombang, and the mediating authority of senior kiai who stand outside the immediate dispute. The joint plenary and Munas–Konbes decisions that ultimately restored stability ahead of the Congress -- following the November–December 2025 crisis and the Lirboyo *islah* -- stand as concrete evidence of this safety valve at work. Respect for communal harmony functions as a cultural antidote to

elite political ego, repeatedly drawing rival factions back to the table of reconciliation to preserve the unity of the jam'iyah as a whole (Media Indonesia 2025b; Triono 2025).

Conclusion

NU at the Crossroads of Modernity

The anthropological analysis developed across the preceding sections of this article suggests that the escalating conflict within PBNU's senior leadership ahead of the Thirty-Fifth Congress in Jombang cannot be reduced to an ordinary contest for power or material resources. It is better understood as a manifestation of the growing pains characteristic of a large traditional organization navigating a critical transitional phase -- one in which the jam'iyah is compelled to adapt to global modernity, technocratic governance, and the demands of capitalist economic self-sufficiency, without forfeiting its moral-spiritual compass.

The sequence of events examined here -- the Syuriah's vote of no confidence, the controversy surrounding the invitation of a pro-Israel academic to NU's senior cadre program, the dispute over PT BUMNU's mining concession and its associated financial transparency questions, and the long-running kinship rivalry between Gus Ipul and Cak Imin -- together reveal an acute collision between cultural fields. The Tanfidziyah has moved rapidly, deploying an expansive legal-rational logic to project NU onto the stage of global corporate diplomacy. The Syuriah, in turn, has acted as a cultural antibody, reasserting the primacy of charismatic authority and defending the organization's symbolic purity against what grassroots Nahdliyin perceived as violations of communal taboo.

Sustaining the Soul of the Jam'iyah

This study's central anthropological reflection is that Nahdlatul Ulama's greatest strength lies not in the rigor of its modern bureaucratic rules or the scale of the economic capital it now commands, but in the depth of its cultural tradition and the resilience of its spiritual networks. The modernization and corporatization efforts spearheaded by the Tanfidziyah -- coal-mining management, cadre standardization -- are not administratively misguided in themselves; the risk lies in habitus disjuncture, which emerges when such efforts proceed without due regard for the ethical foundations of the pesantren tradition: tabayun, deference to senior kiai, and the primacy of communal consultation.

This article closes with a theoretically informed caution rather than settled optimism. Our analysis, grounded in Coser's safety-valve framework and NU's century-long pattern of kiai-mediated reconciliation, suggests that

the organization's cultural repertoire is heavily predisposed toward eventual resolution -- even after severe elite ruptures. The joint plenary decisions, the *Lirboyo islah*, and the ongoing deference to senior *kiai* all point toward the activation of this mechanism at the Thirty-Fifth Congress.

However, as Fachry Ali has warned -- drawing a parallel to Indonesia's post-1955 political fragmentation -- this safety valve cannot be assumed to operate automatically. We therefore propose the following testable hypothesis for future ethnographic and political-science research: If the Thirty-Fifth Congress produces a genuine reconciliation that includes meaningful power-sharing between the *Syuriah* and *Tanfidziyah* factions, NU's historical resilience will be confirmed. If, conversely, the Congress merely replaces the chair without addressing the underlying structural tension -- or if powerful regional *kiai* begin operating independently of PBNU's formal structure (a condition Fachry terms 'local anarchism') -- this crisis will mark a qualitative shift toward organizational fragmentation unprecedented in NU's history.

Determining which outcome obtains -- and, more importantly, understanding how rank-and-file *Nahdliyin*, regional *pesantren* networks, and local *kiai* actually navigate these elite-level tensions -- requires precisely the kind of extended fieldwork this study, by its methodological design, cannot provide. We offer this analysis not as the final word, but as a conceptual roadmap for the empirical investigations that must follow the *Muktamar*

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