

Nahdlatul Ulama-State Alliance? State Patronage, Extractive Industry, and Religious Civil Society in Indonesia

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Abstract

In studies of the relationship between Islamic thought and the Indonesian state, focus has largely been brought to the nation's two largest civil society organisations: Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah. With robust networks of universities, schools, and hospitals, both Islamic organisations are deeply embedded in the social and political fabric of Indonesian national life. Most recently, the two organisations have come under scrutiny for accepting mining concessions from the government of Joko Widodo, a policy maintained by the current president, Prabowo Subianto. This paper begins by providing a review of existing scholarship to analyse how academics have understood the political and social formations of Indonesian Islam. To address more recent developments, Indonesian news sites are incorporated as sources alongside scholarly literature to examine changes in the relationships among NU, Muhammadiyah, and the Indonesian state. Amid concerns of democratic backsliding, I advance the concept of ulama-state alliance in the Indonesian context. Hence, I argue that the changing nature and scale of financial ties between the Indonesian government and its two largest civil society organisations risk a narrowing of civil society. Lastly, what has developed within mining concessions might lead to a decline in the dynamism of Islamic thought in Indonesia.

Keywords: Muhammadiyah, mining concessions, Nahdlatul Ulama, ulama-state alliance



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I . INTRODUCTION

It has become something of a cliché among Western observers to begin papers or chapters on Indonesia by counterposing the size of its population to the attention it has received in popular imagination and academia. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim country and that its major Islamic civil society organisations are also the world's first and second-largest—Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah.¹ With memberships of around 90 million² and 40 million³ respectively, NU and Muhammadiyah play a major role in the lives of Indonesians. Significantly, this influence extends far beyond their official memberships, as both organisations are essential parts of the larger Indonesian social and political fabric through their operations of universities, schools, hospitals, and agricultural groups, as well as through the affiliation of many government officials with one organisation or the other. Neither is their influence confined to Indonesian borders, as Muhammadiyah has branches in Malaysia and the United States and provides international disaster relief. At⁴ the same time, NU has developed its unique brand of “Humanitarian Islam” as a “global strategy to recontextualise the teachings of orthodox, authoritative Islam.”⁵

As Indonesia's most culturally significant civil society organisations, NU and Muhammadiyah's Islamic scholars are influential not only at the local level but also play a major role in national governance, particularly through the Council of Indonesian Ulama (MUI) and through cultivated relationships with political figures. NU has received particular attention for its close relationship with the Indonesian state, with academic Greg Fealy noting that NU leaders worked in tandem with former Indonesian president Joko Widodo (popularly known as Jokowi) throughout his tenure. As Fealy writes in an opinion piece for the Australian National University's *New Mandala*, Widodo's relationship with NU, both as an organisation and with specific scholars, contributes to an “increasingly blurred boundary between the state and civil society.”⁶

¹ Gustav Brown, “Civic Islam: Muhammadiyah, NU and the Organisational Logic of Consensus-Making in Indonesia.” *Asian Studies Review* 43, no. 03 (2019): 14, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10357823.2019.1626802>

² The Religious Freedom Institute, *2020 Indonesia Religious Freedom Landscape Report*, (Washington DC: The Religious Freedom Institute, 2020), 16, https://www.baytarrahmah.org/media/2020/RFI_Indonesia+Landscape+Report+ONLINE.pdf

³ Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah, “Sejarah Muhammadiyah: Perjuangan Ulama Besar K.H. Ahmad Dahlan Mendirikan Muhammadiyah,” Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah, 2025, <https://muhammadiyah.or.id/sejarah-muhammadiyah/#:~:text=Ideologi%20Muhammadiyah%20adalah%20Islam%20Berkemajuan,awal%20mula%20Muhammadiyah%20berdiri%2C%20KH.>

⁴ Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah, “Assets to Muhammadiyah Internationalization,” Persyarikatan Muhammadiyah, 2023, <https://en.muhammadiyah.or.id/assets-to-muhammadiyah-internationalization/>

⁵ “Humanitarian Islam,” Bayt ar-Rahmah li ad-Da'wa al-Islamiyyah Rahmatan li al-'Alamin, 2025, <https://baytarrahmah.org/>

⁶ Greg Fealy, “Nahdlatul Ulama and the Politics Trap,” *New Mandala*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.newmandala.org/nahdlatul-ulama-politics-trap/>

This article will explore this “blurred boundary” in the context of the controversial transition from Widodo to his successor, Prabowo Subianto. To do so, the relationship between Indonesia and its two most significant Islamic organisations is analysed using Ahmet T. Kuru’s ulama-state alliance model to argue that increased financial partnership between NU and Muhammadiyah and the Indonesian state risks a decline in the dynamism of Indonesian Islamic thought and scholarship.

In order to carry out the analysis described above, this paper is divided into three major sections. The first is a literature review which outlines the most common theoretical frameworks through which scholars have engaged with Indonesian Islam at large and the relationship between ulama and the Indonesian state in particular. The second is a history of the relationship between NU and Muhammadiyah and the Indonesian state, which provides an overview of Islamic organisations during Dutch colonisation, the eras of Sukarno and Suharto, and since democratisation in 1998, to elucidate the throughlines in Indonesian politics and economics that influence organisational behaviour. The third section will engage not only with previous scholarship but also with Indonesian news sources to elaborate on the state’s contemporary material conditions, highlighting the economic foundation of rentierism and how NU and Muhammadiyah benefit from and support the politico-business oligarchy.⁷ Analysis will focus particularly on the mining concessions granted by Widodo to NU and Muhammadiyah and the continuation of this policy by the current president, Prabowo Subianto. By applying the ulama-state alliance model and advocating its application in the Indonesian context, this final section hopes to elucidate the consequences of extensive relationships between Islamic civil society and the state to Islamic thought as an independent space of inquiry.

II. PORTRAYING INDONESIAN SOCIETY AND ITS ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS ORGANISATIONS

This article utilises historical process tracing and secondary analysis of selected case studies to make a theoretical case for the potential emergence of an Indonesian ulama-state alliance. Analysis largely relies on academic articles, books, and chapters, though news articles were also cited in order to incorporate more recent developments. This article aims to address two research questions: *How has the historical and economic development of the Indonesian state produced the conditions necessary for a potential ulama-state alliance? And does the acceptance of mining concessions by NU and Muhammadiyah constitute a risk to ideological independence?*

This study was fundamentally limited by its author’s lack of fluency in Indonesian. The analysis, therefore, relies on English-language sources, potentially limiting its scope and theoretical depth. When Indonesian-language sources were necessary, the text was translated using DeepL. Future research by Indonesian scholars

⁷ See Section V.2.

is thus necessary to develop a richer understanding of the effects of state patronage on the independence of Indonesian ulama.

Regarding the literature on the predominant mode of analysis of Islam in Indonesia, it has been typological classifications. This precedent was set by Clifford Geertz's *santri-abangan-priyayi* trichotomy, which divided Javanese Muslims into the orthodox Muslims concerned with Islamic doctrine (*santri*), followers of a syncretic blend of Islam and pre-Islamic Javanese beliefs (*abangan*), and the Javanese gentry or nobility influenced by Hinduism and Buddhism (*priyayi*). The *santri* were further divided into traditionalists, largely rural Muslims who maintained traditional Islamic practices, and modernists, a product of the Islamic reform movement and the spread of Wahhabism.⁸ Known as the *aliran* (stream) model, the central thesis of Geertz's argument was that these divisions could be used to predict and analyse political behaviour: the *priyayi* were associated with the nationalist party, Partai Nasional Indonesia (PNI), *abangan* with the communist party, Partai Komunis Indonesia (PKI), traditionalists with NU, and modernists with the Muhammadiyah-dominated Masyumi Party.⁹

As Geertz's trichotomy fell out of favour with the dissolution of the *priyayi* as a class, many academics argued that *aliran* politics as a whole no longer functioned as an analytical tool.¹⁰ This was further supported by the emergence in the late 20th century of neo-modernism as an Islamic movement, a term originating in the writings of the scholar Fazlur Rahman.¹¹ In Indonesia, prominent neo-modernists came from both NU and Muhammadiyah, a phenomenon which scholar Greg Barton argued represented "the resolution of half a century of antagonism between modernists and traditionalists."¹² Barton's contemporaries similarly argued that new dichotomies had replaced *aliran* politics. Additionally, William Liddle, for instance, argued that the new division in Indonesian Islam was between moderate Islam and militant Islam, which separated "non-Muslims, syncretism, traditionalist and liberal modernist Muslims" from "conservative modernist Muslims."¹³ Most recently, Robert Hefner's *Civil Islam* developed a dichotomy between Muslims who supported Suharto and those who formed the largest constituency in the 1990 protests, which led to his removal. The latter form a democratic,

⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Religion of Java* (New York: The Free Press, 1960; Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1976), 130. Citations refer to the University of Chicago edition.

⁹ Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Geertz's Trichotomy of *Abangan*, *Santri*, and *Priyayi*: Controversy and Continuity," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 11, no. 02 (2017): 339. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2017.11.2.329-350>

¹⁰ Burhani, "Geertz's Trichotomy," 330.

¹¹ Greg Barton, "Neo-Modernism: A Vital Synthesis of Traditionalist and Modernist Islamic Thought in Indonesia," *Studio Islamika Indonesian Journal for Islamic Studies* 2, no. 03 (1995): 6. <https://journal.uinjkt.ac.id/index.php/studia-islamika/article/view/827/704>

¹² Barton, "Neo-Modernism," 7.

¹³ Robin Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power within Islam and Politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 13.

humanitarian and eponymous “civil Islam,” while the former, created by Suharto to suppress Muslim dissent, form “regimist Islam.”¹⁴

In contrast to this typological trend, Luthfi Assyaukanie has argued that Muslims' relationship with the Indonesian state has shifted according to their attachment to three ideal forms of democracy: the Islamic Democratic State, the Religious Democratic State, and the Liberal (Secular) Democratic State.¹⁵ Assyaukanie argues that these three models roughly correspond to three generations of Indonesian Muslims, each emerging after the failure of the previous one, responding to the political realities of each period in Indonesian history. According to Assyaukanie, the value of this approach is that it avoids a static understanding of ideological tendencies. Supplanting political ideology with visions of political utopia instead allows for the inclusion of argumentation and development within the analytical model.¹⁶

Studies of Indonesian ulama, in particular, have largely focused on the MUI as the official forum for the state's employment of Islamic scholars.¹⁷ Analysis of the relationship between ulama and the Indonesian state has thus tended to exclude state patronage of nominally independent ulama, including those associated with NU and Muhammadiyah. Conversely, studies on NU and Muhammadiyah ulama are often limited to a specific regional context or rely on local case studies to draw broader conclusions about organisational behaviour.¹⁸ The present study thus utilises the ulama-state alliance concept as an analytical framework to fill a gap in the literature regarding how the Indonesian state's material conditions affect the scholarship of nominally independent ulama. This emphasis on the interrelation between dominant ideas and modes of production further distinguishes the ulama-state alliance framework from both ideological typology and political utopia, allowing for a broader analysis in scope and drawing inspiration from the historical development of other Muslim-majority states.

In *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison*, Kuru argues that the intellectual and economic development of Muslim states was constrained by an “alliance between orthodox Islamic scholars (the ulema) and military states.”¹⁹ Kuru argues that this ulama-state alliance emerged from the material conditions of the 11th-century Seljuk Empire, as an independent intelligentsia supported

¹⁴ Luthfi Assyaukanie, *Islam and the Secular State* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009), 19.

¹⁵ Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12.

¹⁶ Assyaukanie, *Islam and the Secular State*, 8.

¹⁷ Norshahril Saat, *The State, Ulama, and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018); Syafiq Hasyim, “The Council of Indonesian Ulama (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) and Religious Freedom,” *Irased's Discussion Papers*, no. 12 (December 2011). www.irased.com

¹⁸ M. Khusna Amal, Uun Yusufa, and Muhammad Faiz, “Towards a More Illiberal Pluralism? Reexamination of the Nahdlatul Ulama's Turn Against Islamic Fundamentalist Groups in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Journal of Islam in Asia* 12, no. 01 (June 2024), <https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v2i1i1>; Musawar Musawar and Gatot Suhirman, “Khilāfah in the View of Nahdhatul Ulama (NU), Muhammadiyah, and Nahdhatul Wathan (NW) Ulema in Lombok,” *Al-Jami'ah Journal of Islamic Studies* 59, no. 02 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2021.592.317-346>

¹⁹ Ahmet T. Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment: A Global and Historical Comparison* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), xvi..

by a thriving bourgeois class was supplanted by a military-dominated political economy and by the state's sponsorship of scholarship.²⁰ Kuru further argues that the modern prevalence of authoritarianism and underdevelopment in Muslim-majority countries can be attributed to the institutionalisation of this alliance, as neither secular nor Islamist leaders have had an interest in promoting an independent bourgeois and intelligentsia which could counteract rentierism, militarism, corruption, and poor educational policy.²¹

The first condition which contributed to the ulama-state alliance in the Seljuk empire was the *iqta* system, which brought agricultural and tax revenue under military control. For Kuru, the increased militarisation of the economy and the concomitant marginalisation of independent merchants wrought by this system were key factors in reducing the number of independent Islamic scholars, as they were forced to seek government patronage rather than support from an independent bourgeois class. The second condition was the state sponsorship of *madrasas* (Islamic schools) with the explicit goal of homogenising Islamic faith, which, in the case of the Seljuk empire, meant producing Sunni ulama who could predominate over opposing thinkers such as Shiis, rationalist theologians, and philosophers.²² This ulama-state alliance model spread throughout the Islamic world in subsequent centuries, which Kuru argues “left a legacy of authoritarianism and socioeconomic underdevelopment” which has been impossible to supplant due to the sustained marginalisation of intellectuals and the bourgeoisie.²³

Importantly, this lack of recovery and continued intellectual and economic stagnation is evident both in countries which maintained an Islamic political and legal system, such as Saudi Arabia, and those which developed secular models after colonisation, such as Turkey. Kuru argues that this consistency is due to the specific characteristics of secularism, which emerged in postcolonial Muslim states, namely, rule by former military officers and policies of state control over the economy. This “authoritarian secularis[m],”²⁴ as well as the Islamic resurgence in the 1980s which bolstered the public influence of ulama, maintained state systems which were anti-intellectual and anti-bourgeois.²⁵ The potential emergence of an ulama-state alliance in Indonesia is thus predicated on the accommodative behaviour of NU and Muhammadiyah with secular, authoritarian state systems, in addition to increased government control over Islamic education and ideology.

As one of the Muslim world's few democracies,²⁶ Indonesia largely falls outside the scope of Kuru's original study. The unique development of Islam within the archipelago, as well as Indonesia's recognition of five official religions in addition to

²⁰ Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 227.

²¹ Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 61-63.

²² Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 4.

²³ Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 229.

²⁴ Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 8.

²⁵ Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 8.

²⁶ “Data Page: Democracy index”, part of the following publication: Bastian Herre, Lucas Rodés-Guirao and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “Democracy,” *Global Change Data Lab*, 2024, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu>

Islam, means that its cultural and legal landscape resists easy categorisation. Its geographic location outside the MENA region also means it does not share the same history or the same contemporary policy diffusion as Kuru's analysis. Indonesia, however, has undergone its own political and religious development, which has the potential for the institutionalisation of an ulama-state alliance. The first and most important factor in this development is Indonesia's material conditions, as an entrenched politico-business oligarchy and the predominance of the extractive industry in Indonesia's economy have prevented the emergence of a bourgeois class which can function independently from the state.²⁷ The second factor is the development and subsequent mitigation of the traditionalist-modernist divide on an elite level—a divide which scholars such as Robin Bush argue has driven the political behaviour of ulama throughout Indonesia's history.²⁸ With the emergence of neo-modernism and direct state involvement in promoting the ideology of "religious moderation,"²⁹ ulama from NU and Muhammadiyah have become an integral component of state legitimacy on both an international and domestic stage. This paper thus does not put forth a new form of typology nor expand on Assyaukanie's models, but rather presents the case that the very process of argumentation, which is necessary to the progressive development of political ideology and utopia, is being increasingly tied to and directed by the material interests of the Indonesian government.

III. HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING OF INDONESIAN ISLAM

A. Pre-independence: Colonisation of "Islam"

In his summary of the development of Islam in Java, Clifford Geertz highlights the founding of Muhammadiyah in 1912 as the beginning of "the time of organisations."³⁰ Muhammadiyah, he writes, was a "vigorously modernist Islamic society,"³¹ and its establishment led to the flourishing of orthodox Islamic faith throughout the island of Java, which had been previously dominated by a system of traditional Islamic schools (*pesantren*) organised around the authority of traditional scholars (ulama/*kyai*). Around the same time as the founding of Muhammadiyah, Sarekat Islam (SI) was established as Indonesia's first mass political party. Schisms within these groups defined the ideological divisions of Indonesian society: discontent with Muhammadiyah's modernist reforms led to the 1926 establishment of NU as a traditional, *pesantren*-based Islamic organisation,³²

²⁷ Richard Robison and Vedi R. Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia: The Politics of Oligarchy in An Age of Markets*, (London: Routledge Corzen, 2004).

²⁸ Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power*, 14.

²⁹ Sekar Ayu Aryani et al., "Synergy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah in Driving Religious Moderation to Achieve Indonesia's SDGs Targets," *Profetika Journal Studi Islam* 25, no. 02 (2024): 450.

³⁰ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 124.

³¹ Geertz, *The Religion of Java*, 124.

³² Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance Without Liberalism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 49.

while SI collapsed in the mid-1920s due to conflict between Islamic nationalists and a coalition of Marxists and secular nationalists.³³ The traditionalist–modernist divide, as well as the animosity between Islamic organisations and communism, shaped Islam’s relationship to the state. Furthermore, the organisations’ discordance meant that secular nationalists, organised under the PNI, presented a far more unified front against the Dutch and later Japanese occupation.³⁴

Unlike the Dutch, the Japanese were quick to draw Muslims into governance structures, founding Masyumi as an umbrella Islamic political organisation and embedding it in government through the establishment of the Office for Religious Affairs, which eventually became the Ministry of Religious Affairs (MORA).³⁵ As Jeremy Menchik writes, “control over MORA and its penetration into every level of government has allowed [Islamic organisations] to shape the meaning of religion and its place in public life.”³⁶ In addition to its powerful influence on ideology through the management of religious education, law, and policy, MORA was from the outset a source of material benefit to NU and Muhammadiyah. Holding official posts in the government ministry allowed for “patronage, funding, and contracts”, which could be used to benefit organisation members.³⁷ This system continues to drive the potential consolidation of an ulama-state alliance to this day.

B. The Sukarno Era: Political Policy in the Early Independence Era

On August 17, 1948, Sukarno and Vice President Mohammad Hatta declared independence in Jakarta. In November, Masyumi declared itself as an official Islamic party, encompassing both NU and Muhammadiyah. During Sukarno’s presidency, the Muslim organisations were driven by the ideal of the Islamic Democratic State, advocating for a state founded on Islamic principles and for the adoption of *shariah*.³⁸ By 1952, however, the traditionalist–modernist divide proved insurmountable, and NU withdrew from Masyumi to form its own independent party. The precipitating event was a conflict over which organisation would hold the minister position in MORA, underscoring the importance of this source of patronage to organisational stability. Bush argues, however, that the more fundamental cause was a perceived lack of respect for NU ulama by Muhammadiyah, and that NU began to pursue a close relationship with the state primarily to assert dominance over Masyumi.

In 1959, separatist movements outside of Java and the party system’s inability to reconcile the question of how Islam should be incorporated into the state prompted

³³ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 38.

³⁴ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 38.

³⁵ Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 77.

³⁶ Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 77.

³⁷ Bush, *Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power*, 47.

³⁸ Assyaukanie, *Islam and the Secular State*, 71.

Sukarno to dissolve the body and institute his executive-heavy “Guided Democracy.”³⁹ For proponents of an Islamic Democratic State, Guided Democracy represented “the twin evils of Soekarno’s dictatorship and communist totalitarianism.”⁴⁰ During this period, Masyumi was outlawed, and NU’s influence was heavily suppressed.⁴¹ Greg Fealy has observed that NU displays two types of behaviour: accommodative and militant, and that its accommodative behaviour during Guided Democracy served to maintain state patronage of the *pesantren* system and the employment of NU members as bureaucrats.⁴²

Guided Democracy came to an end with the ousting of Sukarno in 1965 and the subsequent installation of Suharto. Crucially for the landscape of Indonesian politics, this usurpation took place through the massacre of communists — not, not only members of the PKI but also members of allied parties, trade unions, youth organisations, and the left-leaning intelligentsia.⁴³ The animosity between the PKI and the Muslim parties, which had grown out of the SI schism and further entrenched throughout Sukarno’s rule, produced “extraordinary fervour”⁴⁴ amidst the Muslim parties, particularly NU, which stretched “down to its grade schools.”⁴⁵ When violence began in October 1965, it was the NU’s regional militias (Banser) and youth militias (Ansor) which carried out many of the massacres with military orchestration and assistance.⁴⁶ This period in Indonesian history has had fundamental repercussions for its Islamic organisations and for the state at large. As Jeremy Menchik writes, “intolerance and nation building are part of a mutually constitutive process.”⁴⁷ By allying themselves with the military and against the Indonesian communists, NU and Muhammadiyah helped to establish the boundaries of the Indonesian nation and NU defined itself as a militant ally of the state, a role which it continues to play against modern leftist or opposition movements.⁴⁸

C. The Suharto Era: Depoliticise Islam Policy

Although the 1967 ascension of Suharto took place amidst the devastation of Indonesian communism, he did not immediately elevate Islamism or the Islamic parties in its place. In the interest of further depoliticising Islam on the national stage, Suharto mandated

³⁹ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 44.

⁴⁰ Assyauckanie, *Islam and the Secular State*, 76.

⁴¹ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 46.

⁴² Greg Fealy, *Ijtihad Politik Ulama: Sejarah NU 1952-1967* (Yogyakarta: Lembaga Kajian Islam dan Sosial, 2003) as cited in Anang Gunaifi Alfian, “Capitalism and Religious Behavior: The Case of Tumpang Pitu Gold Mining in Banyuwangi,” *Al-Albab* 8, no. 01 (2019), 25. <https://doi.org/10.24260/alalbab.v8i1.1207>

⁴³ John Roosa, *Buried Histories: The Anticommunist Massacres of 1965-1966 in Indonesia* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2020), 88.

⁴⁴ Theodore Friend, *Indonesian Destinies* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 100.

⁴⁵ Friend, *Indonesian Destinies*, 100.

⁴⁶ Roosa, *Buried Histories*, 249.

⁴⁷ Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 68.

⁴⁸ Amal, Yusufa, and Faiz, “Towards a More Illiberal Pluralism.”

that all mass organisations adopt the principles of Pancasila as their “sole foundation,”⁴⁹ and merged all Islamic parties into the Parti Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP).⁵⁰ The founding of the MUI, an umbrella organisation for ulama from NU, Muhammadiyah, and several smaller Islamic organisations, and a national body for issuing fatwas, similarly served to promote Pancasila among organisational leadership and to constrain NU, which Suharto perceived as a potential political challenger.⁵¹ It was during this period that Indonesian Muslims began to advance Assyauckanie’s second ideal model of polity; the “Religious Democratic State.”⁵² Assyauckanie characterises its proponents as the “new *santri*,”⁵³ leaders of which were largely affiliated with Muhammadiyah and devised the model in concert with Suharto’s Pancasila thought to “justify the model of polity built by the New Order regime.”⁵⁴

Despite these efforts to marginalise Islam’s influence in politics, Suharto’s New Order collaborated significantly with NU, Muhammadiyah, and other Islamic organisations in the public sphere, both as a concession to influential Muslim coalitions and as a counterbalance to growing secular modernist criticism. Religious instruction was made compulsory at every level of public and private schooling, and regions with particularly significant PKI influence were targeted by civil society organisations for Islamic outreach programs, with the construction of new mosques and Islamic schools sponsored by MORA.⁵⁵ In the armed forces, meanwhile, Suharto elevated “regimist” Muslims to positions of high command, including his son-in-law Prabowo Subianto.⁵⁶ Suharto’s developmentalist agenda produced drastic economic growth across the country and the consequent emergence of an educated middle class, resulting in the flourishing of Islamic print media and a “burgeoning new class of literate Indonesian Muslims who were keen on mainstream religious revitalisation.”⁵⁷

As in other secular authoritarian countries during this time, this Islamic resurgence reignited public support for ulama and for the Islamization of public life. In countries with an existing ulama-state alliance, this entrenched the marginalisation of creative intellectuals and the bourgeoisie.⁵⁸ In Indonesia, it did so while reinforcing the traditionalist-modernist divide. NU withdrew from the PPP and reverted its organisational focus from party politics to social and religious welfare,⁵⁹ envisioned by its leaders as a “vehicle of grass-roots development and pluralist tolerance.”⁶⁰ The

⁴⁹ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 75.

⁵⁰ Norshahril Saat, *The State, Ulama, and Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), 111.

⁵¹ Saat, *The State, Ulama, and Islam*, 113.

⁵² Assyauckanie, *Islam and the Secular State*, 98.

⁵³ Assyauckanie, *Islam and the Secular State*, 99.

⁵⁴ Assyauckanie, *Islam and the Secular State*, 98.

⁵⁵ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 80.

⁵⁶ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 151.

⁵⁷ Feener, *Muslim Legal Thought in Modern Indonesia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 107.

⁵⁸ Kuru, *Islam, Authoritarianism, and Underdevelopment*, 8.

⁵⁹ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 121.

⁶⁰ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 162.

modernist Masyumi coalition emerged as the most dominant Muslim representation in politics, but its ideological orientation had shifted markedly from its origins as a project of “merchants and small industrialists,”⁶¹ a group that underwent economic collapse during the last years of Sukarno. Instead, the new *santri*, which formed the Muslim middle class in the 1980s and 1990s, were not an independent bourgeois but rather employed in “education, bureaucracy, and government-dependent business” and, as a result, hesitant to engage in politics that would endanger their relationship to the state. This convergence of cultural revival with the dependence of Muslim elites on the state marks the beginning of a potential ulama-state alliance in Indonesia, as Islamic participation in government became tied to legitimising Suharto’s authoritarian, secularist rule, while MORA began to exert more direct influence on Islamic education and organisation.

D. Democratisation Turn in Reformasi Era: The Coming of Islamic Organisation

In 1997, the Asian Financial Crisis sent shockwaves through the global economy. In Indonesia, the downturn was the swiftest and deepest, resulting in economic devastation, compounded by widespread corruption and cronyism that had taken hold throughout the New Order.⁶² Mass protests following the crash led to Suharto’s resignation in May 1998 and to the appointment of his vice president and protégé, BJ Habibie.⁶³ Multiple observers have highlighted the role of Islamic organisations in Suharto’s removal and Indonesia’s democratization process. As Menchik writes, “NU and Muhammadiyah are a key reason why Indonesia is a democratic overachiever. The organisations’ commitment to tolerance has been vital during the transition from authoritarianism.”⁶⁴ Significantly, however, the lack of revolutionary change meant that many Suharto-era characteristics remained in Indonesia’s political landscape. Most importantly, reformers were unable to completely dismantle the military’s dominance over politics and the economy, which had been fostered throughout the New Order through the monopolisation of resources by oligarchical “politico-business families.”⁶⁵ As Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall write, democratisation produced an “elite-biased democracy,” in which the interests of authoritarian-era economic and political elites are structurally protected.”⁶⁶

As part of *Reformasi*, NU and Muhammadiyah began to restore their political influence by establishing new political parties. Though members of NU and

⁶¹ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 105.

⁶² Bradley R. Simpson, *Economists With Guns: Authoritarian Development and U.S.-Indonesian Relations, 1960-1968* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 258.

⁶³ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 209.

⁶⁴ Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia*, 15.

⁶⁵ Robison and Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia*, 11.

⁶⁶ Eve Warburton and Edward Aspinall, “Explaining Indonesia’s Democratic Regression: Structure, Agency and Popular Opinion,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 41, no. 2 (2019): 257, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26798854>

Muhammadiyah are free to vote for any party, the National Awakening Party (PKB) was founded by NU leadership and retains close ties with the organisation. At the same time, Muhammadiyah is associated with the National Mandate Party (PAN).⁶⁷ In 1999, elections led to PKB's success and to the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid, Indonesia's preeminent neo-modernist thinker, NU chairman, and longtime challenger of both Suharto and Habibie.⁶⁸ Wahid for Assyaukanie was the prototypical adherent of the third model of utopia, the "Liberal Democratic State,"⁶⁹ a staunch defender of pluralism and an opponent of government regulation of religion, which is required for the Religious Democratic State.⁷⁰ For Hefner, he was the visionary behind civil Islam and the greatest challenger of regimist Islam.⁷¹ Wahid, however, would prove unable to enact reforms which could address ongoing economic instability, corruption, and the rise in Islamic separatist movements during this period.⁷² Meanwhile, in response to his championship of neo-modernism, NU and Muhammadiyah ulama associated with MUI reestablished the council as a "guardian of Islamic morals and orthodoxy" and in 2005 issued a *fatwa* which "denounced 'liberalism, secularism, and religious pluralism.'"⁷³

The 10-year presidency of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, a former Suharto-era general, further entrenched the influence of ulama and MUI's advisory role in government. Early in his tenure, Yudhoyono appointed Ma'ruf Amin as an advisor, an NU scholar who had been an architect of MUI's 2005 *fatwa* and would later be chosen as Widodo's vice president. Yudhoyono's cabinet also contained multiple NU and Muhammadiyah-affiliated ministers.⁷⁴ Yudhoyono's presidency reinvigorated the ideal of the Religious Democratic State and expanded the state's regulation of religion to include "prosecutorial vigilance against those who deviate from state-sanctioned religious norms"⁷⁵ As Warburton and Aspinall argue, Yudhoyono's presidency marked the "stagnation" of Indonesia's democratization process as a result of the "change-within-continuity" which had characterised the *Reformasi* period. It was only with the 2014 election of Widodo, however, that Indonesia transitioned from stagnation to regression.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Abdullah M. Al-Ansi and Rinikso Kartono, "The Role of Islamic Organizations 'Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama' in Forming National Politics in Indonesia," *Polit Journal: Scientific Journal of Politics* 3, no. 02 (2023): 90-92. <https://doi.org/10.33258/polit.v3i2.895>

⁶⁸ Amy L. Freedman, "Political Viability, Contestation, and Power: Islam and Politics in Indonesia and Malaysia," *Politics and Religion* 2, no. 01 (2009): 116. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048309000054>

⁶⁹ Assyaukanie, *Islam and the Secular State*, 143.

⁷⁰ Assyaukanie, *Islam and the Secular State*, 157.

⁷¹ Hefner, *Civil Islam*, 162.

⁷² Freedman, "Political Viability, Contestation, and Power," 116.

⁷³ Robert W. Hefner, *Islam and Citizenship in Indonesia: Democracy and the Quest for an Inclusive Public Ethics* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 147.

⁷⁴ Alexander R. Arifianto, "From Ideological to Political Sectarianism: Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah, and the State in Indonesia," *Religion, State & Society*, (2021): 7. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2021.1902247>

⁷⁵ Hefner, *Islam and Citizenship in Indonesia*, 153.

⁷⁶ Warburton and Aspinall, "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression," 269-70.

In the 2014 and 2019 elections, Widodo was understood as the pro-democracy candidate when compared to his opponent, Prabowo Subianto. Throughout his time in office, however, his developmentalist agenda and expansion of military power began to prompt comparisons to the New Order.⁷⁷ Increasing polarisation between pluralist and Islamic groups prompted repressive measures by Widodo's administration, while Islamic political opposition pushed the president even closer to NU, Muhammadiyah, and the MUI.⁷⁸ In 2019, Widodo formalised this relationship by adopting religious moderation as a government initiative. This program has seen both NU and Muhammadiyah work closely with MORA to organise religious education programs.⁷⁹ Widodo formed a particularly close relationship with NU, endorsing its ideology of "Islam Nusantara" (archipelagic Islam) as the model for religious moderation over Muhammadiyah's "Islam Berkemajuan" (progressive Islam), which reinvigorated sectarian tensions between NU and Muhammadiyah.⁸⁰ NU's Ansor groups once again served as militant state allies, clashing with more conservative Islamic groups on the street, while Muhammadiyah took actions to ally itself with these state opponents and generally took a more critical approach to Widodo's administration. In response, Widodo granted NU a disproportionate amount of ministerial positions in his 2014 and 2019 cabinets, in addition to providing direct support to the organisation through microcredit programs and the redistribution of state land to NU's Islamic schools.⁸¹

Prior to leaving office in 2024, Widodo amended Indonesia's mining law to allow religious organisations to hold mining licenses and subsequently granted concessions to both NU and Muhammadiyah. Also in 2024, Widodo endorsed his former political opponent in Subianto's third bid for president. With Subianto's overwhelming victory and the alteration of election age limitations to allow Widodo's son, Gibran Rakabuming Raka, to serve as vice-president, concerns over rising authoritarianism prompted both street protests within Indonesia and critical analyses from outside observers.⁸² Since his election, Subianto's continuation of Widodo's policies has earned the two administrations the moniker "Jokowi dynasty." Although Subianto's history as a "regimist Muslim" during the new *santri* movement in the 1990s has produced much closer relationships with the scholars and political leadership of Muhammadiyah, the president has maintained an enmeshed relationship with both religious organisations. One example of this enmeshment is Subianto's inclusion of NU and Muhammadiyah leaders as supervisors of Indonesia's new sovereign wealth fund Danantara, which will manage over 900 billion U.S. dollars in state-owned assets.⁸³ With this development

⁷⁷ Warburton and Aspinall, "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression," 276.

⁷⁸ Warburton and Aspinall, "Explaining Indonesia's Democratic Regression," 270.

⁷⁹ Sekar Ayu Aryani et al., "Synergy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Muhammadiyah in Driving Religious Moderation to Achieve Indonesia's SDGs Targets," *Profetika Journal Studi Islam* 25, no. 02 (2024), 450. <https://doi.org/10.23917/profetika.v25i02.8536>

⁸⁰ Arifianto, "From Ideological to Political Sectarianism," 8.

⁸¹ Arifianto, "From Ideological to Political Sectarianism," 10.

⁸² See for instance Dan Slater, "Indonesia's High-Stakes Handover," *Journal of Democracy* 35, no. 02 (2024).

⁸³ "Prabowo Minta NU hingga Muhammadiyah Ikut Awasi BPI Danantara," [Prabowo Asks NU and Muhammadiyah to Supervise BPI Danantara], *Tempo*, February 15, 2025.

coming on the heels of the acceptance of the mining concessions by both organisations, it is imperative to investigate the role that religious civil society plays in Indonesia's democratic backsliding and the potential for a stronger alliance between the government and Islamic scholars.

IV. AN ALLIANCE IN PROGRESS

A. Economic Foundations and Political Ramifications

In the early 1970s, rentier state theory emerged to explain the political characteristics of oil-rich states, first in Iran and later across the Arabian Peninsula.⁸⁴ Originated by Hossein Mahdavy in his article "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: the Case of Iran," a rentier state is defined as a country which "receive[s] on a regular basis substantial amounts of external rent defined as rentals paid by foreign individuals, concerns or governments to individuals, concerns or governments of a given country."⁸⁵ In the case of Indonesia, most studies utilising this framework place its rentierism period during the oil boom of the 1970s, with patronage and rent distribution behaviours resulting in stricter authoritarian rule and greater state capacity under Suharto.⁸⁶ In the post-Suharto era, analysis of the Indonesian economy rarely categorises the state as rentier or semi-rentier.⁸⁷ Although Indonesia receives substantial income from rents on oil, coal, and natural gas, the share of revenue from the extractive sector has declined since the oil boom. Rentier state theory has, however, been adapted to new contexts through the inclusion of different types of rents (as in literature interrogating the emergence of "immigration rentier states"⁸⁸) and through renewed theoretical dynamism as classical rentier states transition into "post-rentier states."⁸⁹ Within this broader movement towards a reconceptualisation of rentierism, Diana Suhardiman has argued that post-Reformation Indonesia functions as a rentier state

<https://www.tempo.co/politik/prabowo-minta-nu-hingga-muhammadiyah-ikut-awasi-bpi-danantara-1207511>

⁸⁴ Scott Walker, "Rentier State Theory 50 Years On: New Developments," *Frontiers in Political Science* 5, (2023), 1. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2023.1120439>

⁸⁵ Hossein Mahdavy, "The Patterns and Problems of Economic Development in Rentier States: The Case of Iran," in *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East from the Rise of Islam to the Present Day*, ed. M. A. Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970; New York: Routledge, 2014), 428. Citations refer to the 2014 edition.

⁸⁶ Tenny Widya Kristiana, "The Rentier State, Authoritarian Regime, and Mass Media: Indonesia Under Suharto During the Oil Boom Period," *Malaysian Journal of International Relations* 8, no. 01 (2020): 52-54, <https://doi.org/10.22452/mjir.vol8no1.4>; Benjamin Smith, "The Oil Booms and Beyond: Two Exporting States Confront Crisis," in *Hard Times in the Lands of Plenty: Oil Politics in Iran and Indonesia* (Cornell University Press, 2007), 132-37.

⁸⁷ Ahmet T. Kuru, "Authoritarianism and Democracy in Muslim Countries: Rentier States and Regional Diffusion," *Political Science Quarterly* 129, no. 03 (2014), 415, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43828435>

⁸⁸ Hélène Thiollot, "Immigration Rentier States," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 50, no. 03 (2023), 3-4.

⁸⁹ Andrew Kirkpatrick, "After the Resource Curse: The Unexplored Possibility of the Post-Rentier State," *International Studies Perspectives* 19, no. 2 (2018), 190. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26491187>.

through its reliance on foreign loans and the predominance of a project-based approach to development, which encourages bureaucratic rent-seeking rather than project funding.⁹⁰

Similarly, Olle Törnquist has argued that an analysis of rentierism in Indonesia is best predicated on the “appropriation of rent based on the monopolisation of public administration and resources.”⁹¹ In Indonesia, Törnquist writes, the very transition to a capitalist mode of production was based upon “political rent and finance capitalists who [cooperated] with private capitalists,”⁹² a condition he counterposes with both rational, state-led development and the ideal transition to capitalism in which producers develop from feudal control into capitalists largely independent from the state.⁹³ In other words, rent-seeking practices and their connection to political authoritarianism and corruption can be seen as the bedrock of Indonesian development, rather than as the product of specific income ratios or tax burdens. Rentierism thus encompasses not only external patronage but also political rents, observable in the oligarchic dominance over the economy that emerged during the Suharto era and retained significance post-democratisation through patron-client relations between business oligarchs and political candidates.

Following Suhardiman and Törnquist, the conceptualisation of Indonesia as a rentier state is useful for resisting narratives of change that posit that post-Suharto Indonesia transitioned from autocracy to either a democratic state or a “criminal and crony” state.⁹⁴ Rentier state theory, in contrast, allows a focus on historical continuities, particularly the preservation of New Order systems and levers of power. Given the entwinement of Islamic organisations with Indonesian state-building and political machinations, it is these very continuities which allow for the potential emergence of an ulama-state alliance. This section will address the rentierist practices which have predominated in the Indonesian economy since democratisation, outlining the significance of patron-client relationships in modern Indonesian politics and presenting an overview of how the dynamic between decentralisation and central government control encourages corruption and rent-seeking behaviour.

As multiple scholars of Indonesian politics have argued, democratic backsliding since the 2010s has been driven by a political system built upon oligarchic control and elite collusion.⁹⁵ The roots of this condition stretch back to the Suharto era, during which

⁹⁰ Diana Suhardiman, “The Indonesian State in Transition” in *Bureaucracy and Development: Reflections from the Indonesia Water Sector* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2015), 37.

⁹¹ Olle Törnquist, *What’s Wrong With Marxism? On Capitalists and State in India and Indonesia*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1989): 102.

⁹² Törnquist, *What’s Wrong With Marxism?*, 104.

⁹³ Törnquist, *What’s Wrong With Marxism?*, 79.

⁹⁴ Suhardiman, “The Indonesian State in Transition,” 10.

⁹⁵ Prawira Yudha Pratama, Budiman, and Mia Sarmiasih, “A Comparative Political Analysis Between the New Order Regime and The Reformed Era in Indonesia: A Case Study of Oligarchy Politics in the Mining Industry of East Kalimantan,” *Jurnal Studi Pemerintahan* 10, no. 03 (2019): 195, <https://doi.org/10.18196/jgp.103105>; Marcus Mietzner, “Elite Collusion in Indonesia: How It Has Both Enabled and Limited Executive Aggrandizement,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 712, no. 01 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027162241309436>

the state operated under “administrative patrimonialism,” a system in which the political class extracts rents from a politically disorganised business class.⁹⁶ After democratisation, however, it became increasingly clear that the business class had entrenched itself within the preexisting political organisation through the formation of conglomerates and the development of “politico-business families” who held high-level positions in both government and industry.⁹⁷

Although subsequent reformers Habibie and Wahid placed the eradication of political corruption high on their agendas, and indeed presided over the prosecution of multiple high-level corruptors, including some from the Suharto family, a lack of comprehensive institutional reform meant that political corruption, rather than being eradicated, took a less centralised form.⁹⁸ As independent political parties emerged, the campaign financing system became a key avenue for business oligarchs to exert influence over political figures. With the increasingly high costs of political campaigns, business oligarchs have gained senior leadership positions in national parties, from which they can orchestrate policies that benefit their interests.⁹⁹

Corruption and rent-seeking practices have also been exacerbated by the political decentralisation process, with observers noting that economic and political influence shifted from “a big bandit to a small bandit.”¹⁰⁰ As Suhardiman explains, the Regional Autonomy Act Number 22 of 1999 and the Fiscal Decentralisation Act Number 25 of 1999 formally allowed regions to undertake their own development projects, and yet failed to decentralise tax revenue or develop equitable funding schemes between research-rich and research-poor regions. In practice, this meant that less wealthy regional governments remained dependent on project-based funding from the central government¹⁰¹. At the same time, resource-rich regions became hotbeds for patron-client dynamics within lucrative sectors.¹⁰² The increase in political power now held by regional governments also led to the emergence of corruption at the local level, previously concentrated at the national level. With local parliament members in charge of approving development project proposals, bureaucratic rent-seeking and embezzlement of project funding became widespread as the parliament members received benefits such as luxury cars and trips abroad in exchange for approving inflated budget proposals.¹⁰³

The inclusion of religious civil society within systems of elite collusion and patron-client relations has been instrumental for the development of a potential ulama-

⁹⁶ Robison and Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia*, 42.

⁹⁷ Robison and Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia*, 190.

⁹⁸ Robison and Hadiz, *Reorganising Power in Indonesia*, 214.

⁹⁹ Marcus Mietzner, “Dysfunction by Design: Political Finance and Corruption in Indonesia,” *Critical Asian Studies* 47, no. 04, (2015): 592, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2015.1079991>

¹⁰⁰ Pratama, Budiman, and Sarmiasih, “A Comparative Political Analysis Between the New Order Regime and The Reformed Era in Indonesia,” 196.

¹⁰¹ Suhardiman, “The Indonesian State in Transition,” 22-23.

¹⁰² Greenpeace et al., “Coalruption: Shedding Light on Political Corruption in Indonesia’s Coal Mining Sector,” Bersihkan Indonesia, 2015, 7-8. <https://auriga.or.id/resources/reports/24/coalruption-shedding-light-on-political-corruption-in-indonesia-s-coal-mining-sector>

¹⁰³ Suhardiman, “The Indonesian State in Transition,” 25.

state alliance. At the local level, Gandung Ismanto and Idris Thaha have found that political candidates from PKB and PAN pursued political office solely to channel development funds back into their organisations.¹⁰⁴ On a national level, the embrace of NU and Muhammadiyah by Widodo has been tied to a specific ideological project: legitimising the state's anti-religious extremism policies and advancing religious moderation in its place. The political career of Ma'ruf Amin is particularly indicative of this trend, as Amin collaborated with Widodo to produce 12 policies aimed at increasing government support for and regulation of Indonesia's traditional *pesantren*, which had previously operated independently of government oversight.¹⁰⁵

The further reduction of NU and Muhammadiyah's organisational independence through their acceptance of mining concessions thus bears examination within the context of the mining sector's economic significance and the resultant rampant political corruption and rent-seeking practices. The granting of these concessions marks the potential institutionalisation of an Indonesian ulama-state alliance, in which Islamic organisations advance a hegemonic form of moderate religious thought in order to legitimise the Indonesian state against its domestic Islamist opposition, in exchange for direct financial concessions and access to resources controlled by the politico-business oligarchy.

B. The Case of Mining

Extractive industries are a significant sector of the Indonesian economy, with coal in particular experiencing massive growth throughout the 2000s. In 2005, coal production stood at around 154 million tonnes (Mt), tripling to 474 Mt by 2013.¹⁰⁶ Growth again took off in 2017, with production increasing from 461 Mt to 775 Mt in 2023.¹⁰⁷ In 2023, coal briquettes were Indonesia's single largest export commodity, accounting for 13% of the country's total exports, valued at 38.8 billion dollars.¹⁰⁸ To a large degree, this explosive growth has been driven by extensive government subsidies, including the transfer of liabilities, goods and services provided at below-market prices, income or price supports, and government revenue foregone.¹⁰⁹ Atteridge, Aung, and Nugroho have

¹⁰⁴ Gandung Ismanto and Idris Thaha, "Banten: Islamic Parties, Networks and Patronage," in *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots*, ed. Edward Aspinall and Mada Sukmajati (NUS Press, 2016), 143.

¹⁰⁵ Muhammad Saifulloh, "Pesantren as a Political Object Law era of President Joko Widodo," (paper presented at the International Collaboration Conference on "Law, Sharia and Society: Toward a Peaceful and Justice Society (The Role of Islam in Humanitarian Law)," Solo, June 26-28 2024): 324-339.

¹⁰⁶ Aaron Atteridge, May Thazin Aung, and Agus Nugroho, "Contemporary Coal Dynamics In Indonesia," Working paper no. 2018-04 (Stockholm Environmental Institute, April 2018), 9. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.27690.29128>

¹⁰⁷ "Indonesia Coal Production," CEIC Data, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/indonesia/coal-production>

¹⁰⁸ "Indonesia," Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed April 24, 2025, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/idn>

¹⁰⁹ Greenpeace et al., "Coalruption," 21.

determined two factors which incentivise this expansion and the political support of mining on a local level: First, the relationship between political decentralisation and the allocation of mining rents and second, the “intertwined nature of coal mining and Indonesian politics”¹¹⁰ as exemplified by the funding of electoral campaigns by mine owners.

Both of these factors also influence the behaviour of religious organisations as they engage with the politics of the mining industry, producing changes in religious behaviour and elite-level alliance between organisational leadership and mining corporations. This section will first explain the significance of the mining industry as a venue for expressing the tension between central government authority and decentralisation. It will then present a case study of the localised influence of mining projects on religious organisations and examine how the overlap of NU and Muhammadiyah national elites with the mining sector contributes to an emerging ulama-state alliance. Finally, NU and Muhammadiyah’s mining concessions will be analysed with a focus on the difference between each organisation’s emerging relationship with the state.

Given the economic significance of the extractive industry, the mining sector is a particularly contentious forum through which the tension between regional autonomy and the central government is addressed. With regards to the extractive industry, the most significant decentralisation occurred with Law Number 4 of 2009 on Mineral and Coal Mining, which allowed district governments to issue Mining Business Licenses (IUPs) within district borders, provided that the land had been approved for mining activity by the central government.¹¹¹ After this legislation was passed, corruption in the mining sector seemed to increase, with local politicians now building “webs of patronage” in which mining companies supported their election campaigns in exchange for land rents.¹¹²

In 2020, however, President Widodo reversed this decentralisation with the Law Number 3 of 2020 Concerning Mineral and Coal Mining, which returned nearly all licensing power to the central government.¹¹³ Not only is this rollback of regional autonomy indicative of the central government’s resistance to decentralisation in the interest of maintaining financial dependence regarding development projects and state control over resources,¹¹⁴ but it is also a case study in the influence of politico-business oligarchy. Under the new law, criminal sanctions for corruption in permit issuance have

¹¹⁰ Atteridge, Aung, and Nugroho, “Contemporary Coal Dynamics In Indonesia,” 10.

¹¹¹ Atteridge, Aung, and Nugroho, “Contemporary Coal Dynamics in Indonesia,” 11.

¹¹² Greenpeace et al., “Coalruption,” 8.

¹¹³ Marpi Yapitar et al., “Legal Consequences of Takeover of Authority in Mineral and Coal Mining by the Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources of the Republic of Indonesia,” (paper presented at the International Conference on “Changing of Law: Business Law, Local Wisdom and Tourism Industry,” Warmadewa University, Bali, Indonesia, July 26, 2023), 1539-1541. https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-180-7_158

¹¹⁴ Suhardiman, “The Indonesian State in Transition,” 24.

been removed, while sanctions have been added against individuals who “disturb” mining activities.¹¹⁵

The Minister of Energy and Mineral Resources now holds licensing power. Current minister Bahlil Lahadalia is himself a major shareholder in several mining companies and was previously investigated by the Indonesian news site Tempo for privileging his companies in the license cancellation process as Minister of Investment.¹¹⁶ By accepting mining concessions from the central government, NU and Muhammadiyah are thus entering into a direct patron-client dynamic within a system of politico-business oligarchy, and acting as privileged partners of the Indonesian state in its consolidation and defence of capital.

There is little pre-existing scholarly work on the interaction between religious organisations and coal mining, in particular. However, several studies do exist on NU's response to gold mining activities within the Banyuwangi regency in East Java. Anang Alfian has argued that the mining project served as a forum through which a global capitalist entity shaped religious behaviour, with traditionalist leaders responding to capitalism as an ethical problem. Formal opposition by the local NU organisation and by its grassroots membership was undermined by its own elite, some of whom personally benefited from the mine.¹¹⁷ Alkatiri and Kuwang have shown that religious civil society organisations in Banyuwangi, particularly NU, have suppressed the anti-mining movement and manufactured consent for the mine through coercion and by incorporating pro-mining rhetoric into religious teaching at mosques and *pesantrons*.

Similarly to Alfian, Alkatiri and Kuwang found that many *kyai* received political and financial support in return for their support of the mining project. Given the obligation for NU members to follow the teachings of *kyais*, these “organic intellectual arrangements”¹¹⁸ have marginalised NU's anti-mining contingent. The anti-mining movement has also been particularly hamstrung by its association with communism. After the leaders of the anti-mining movement were labelled as communist subversives, NU elites spearheaded an anti-communist movement which resulted in the construction of Ansor-managed security posts, the arrest of multiple protest leaders, and a reinvigoration of anti-communist rhetoric among NU affiliates.¹¹⁹

At the national level, NU elites have been installed in senior leadership positions within mining conglomerates to manufacture consent for mining projects. In one such case, the mining conglomerate PT. Merdeka Copper Gold invited the daughter of

¹¹⁵ Yapitar et al., “Legal Consequences of Takeover of Authority,” 1540.

¹¹⁶ “Daftar Kontroversi Bahlil Lahadalia, Dugaan Jual-Beli Izin Tambang hingga Studi S3 Kilat,” [List of Bahlil Lahadalia's Controversies, Allegations of Buying and Selling Mining Permits to Fast Doctoral Studies], *Tempo*, October 18, 2024, <https://www.tempo.co/ekonomi/daftar-kontroversi-bahlil-lahadalia-dugaan-jual-beli-izin-tambang-hingga-studi-s3-kilat-431967>

¹¹⁷ Alfian, “Capitalism and Religious Behavior,” 31.

¹¹⁸ Farid Abud Alkatiri and Amir Syarifudin Kiwang, “The Roles of Religious Organizations in the Decline of the Anti-mining Movement in Banyuwangi, East Java,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 179 (2023): 25. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48719556>

¹¹⁹ Alkatiri and Kiwang, “The Roles of Religious Organizations,” 29.

Abdurrahman Wahid to serve as the company's director. When she resigned, her position was filled by another member of the Wahid family. In another case, an influential NU branch head was appointed to an important position in the community relations department of one of Merdeka Copper Gold's subsidiary companies. In addition to fostering support among NU affiliates in the regions where these companies operate, the increased overlap between the mining industry and NU's elite membership has reduced the willingness of central leadership to engage with anti-mining advocates.¹²⁰ This overlap between elite members of NU and mining conglomerates is a key contributor to the development of an ulama-state alliance, as it not only provides the organization with access to resources controlled by the politico-business oligarchy but embeds some of its highest ranking and most well-known members into the oligarchical system directly, encouraging accommodative behavior with regards to government control of mining rents and giving NU a personal stake in protecting the interests of mining companies.

Under Government Regulation No. 25 of 2024, Joko Widodo's amendment to Law Number 3 of 2020 Concerning Mineral and Coal Mining, religious civil society organisations can now be granted "Special Mining Business Permit Areas," granting them the legal rights to extract, mine, and sell natural resources.¹²¹ The involvement of religious organisations in this sector was first proposed in 2021, when Widodo "promised" coal and nickel concessions to NU at the organisation's annual congress.¹²² NU was also the first organisation to accept the official offering of mining concessions in June 2024, with Muhammadiyah following suit one month later, after a meeting of the group's senior religious scholars.¹²³ NU's General Chairman, KH Yahya Cholil Staquf has stated that NU's reasons for accepting the mining concessions are largely financial, although Staquf also highlighted the ability of religious organisations to overcome the unequal distribution of resources, which has predominated in the mining sector and to utilise resources for the common good, which had previously been underutilised due to inactive permits.¹²⁴

Muhammadiyah, meanwhile, has presented its acceptance of the mining concessions as having environmental benefits. The Chairman of Muhammadiyah's

¹²⁰ Alkatiri and Kiwang, "The Roles of Religious Organizations," 26.

¹²¹ Dewi Masitoh, "New Dilemma: Controversy on Granting Permits for Religious Mass Organizations to Manage Mining Businesses," *Institute for Global and Strategic Studies*, May 1, 2024.

<https://igss.uui.ac.id/new-dilemma-controversy-on-granting-permits-for-religious-mass-organizations-to-manage-mining-businesses/>

¹²² Syafiq Hasyim, "Indonesia's Islam-based Mass Organisations and the Mining Industry Vortex," *Fulcrum*, July 2, 2024. <https://fulcrum.sg/indonesias-islam-based-mass-organisations-and-the-mining-industry-vortex/>

¹²³ Falahi Mubarak and Irfan Maulana, "Muhammadiyah latest faith group to join Indonesia religious coal rush," *Mongabay*, August 1, 2024. <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/08/muhammadiyah-latest-faith-group-to-join-indonesia-religious-coal-rush/>

¹²⁴ Bambang Trismawan, "NU Merasa Sudah Lama Melarat..." [NU Feels It Has Been Poor for a Long Time...], *Rakyat Merdeka*, June 12, 2024. https://rm.id/baca-berita/nasional/223978/terima-konsesi-tambang-karena-butuh-nu-merasa-sudah-lama-melarat#google_vignette

Environmental Council has stated that Muhammadiyah will initiate a “green mining” program. This sustainable mining program claims to include reforestation of mined land, empowering communities in mined areas, and investing in the energy transition to reduce coal dependency.¹²⁵

Despite each organisation’s theological and social justifications for accepting the concessions, news outlets including Mongabay, Fulcrum, Tempo, CNN Indonesia, and New Mandala have reported that the elite in both NU and Muhammadiyah understand the concessions as a form of direct political patronage, most specifically for supporting Widodo and Subianto’s political coalitions in the 2019 and 2024 elections. For NU, this patronage can be seen as related to the organisation’s broadly accommodative behaviour vis-à-vis the Indonesian state, further entrenching the patron-client relationship which has existed between NU and the state throughout their histories, but which gained particular strength during Widodo’s presidency.

Acceptance of the concessions by Muhammadiyah has been a greater source of public conjecture, as the organisation was not as closely allied with Widodo’s administration. According to reporting by Alex Arifianto, Muhammadiyah faced pressure from the central government to accept the mining concessions, with Widodo directly stating that the organisation would not receive any state patronage under Subianto if the concessions were refused. The religious moderation program was also reportedly highlighted in these negotiations, with the organisations expected to accept the offer due to Widodo’s support of the Islam Nusantara and Islam Berkemajuan programs.¹²⁶

As Barton argued in his paper on Indonesian neo-modernism, the fusion of liberal ideals with Islamic faith and scholarship transcended the traditionalist-modernist divide, drawing elite ulama from both organisations into a new movement concerned not only with the progressive development of Indonesian Islam but with the progression of Islam as a whole.¹²⁷ Indonesia’s religious moderation program functions similarly in this regard, as both NU and Muhammadiyah have produced scholarship aligned in its outlook with tolerance, pluralism, and, most importantly, nationalism.¹²⁸ The difference between the two movements is that neo-modernism developed independently of the Indonesian state apparatus and was often opposed to the more mainstream Islamic scholarship emerging from the MUI and other ulama within NU and Muhammadiyah. Religious moderation, on the other hand, is explicitly directed by the Indonesian state as a method of defining and restricting Indonesian Islam on the domestic front, while also falling in line with the international concern over religious extremism and the promotion

¹²⁵ “Alasan Muhammadiyah Setuju Terima Izin Tambang dari Pemerintah,” [Reasons Muhammadiyah Agrees to Receive Mining Permits from the Government], *CNN Indonesia*, July 26, 2024.

<https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20240726125315-20-1125830/alasan-muhammadiyah-setuju-terima-izin-tambang-dari-pemerintah>

¹²⁶ Alex Arifianto, “Clerics to coal miners: the decline of Indonesia’s Islamic civil society,” *New Mandala*, Sept. 4, 2024, <https://www.newmandala.org/clerics-to-coal-miners-the-decline-of-indonesias-islamic-civil-society/>

¹²⁷ Barton, “Neo-Modernism,” 6.

¹²⁸ Sekar Ayu Aryani et al., “Synergy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs,” 452.

of religious moderation through the United Nations.¹²⁹ The institutionalisation of patron-client dynamics between NU, Muhammadiyah, and Indonesia's politico-business oligarchy thus occurs at a time when the organisations are also allying ideologically with the state, producing a uniquely Indonesian ulama-state alliance.

As a closing note, it is important to identify the discrepancies between NU and Muhammadiyah within this potential ulama-state alliance. Given NU's long-standing accommodative relationship with political leadership and militant defence of the Indonesian state against its Islamist and communist opponents, it is the elite of this organisation which have currently formed the stronger alliance with the state. NU is also predisposed to the development of an ulama-state alliance through its ideology and governance structure, as fealty to the *kyai* and NU's dependence on the *pesantren* system allows the organisation to more effectively disseminate new teachings and manufacture consent for state policy.

Muhammadiyah, though it similarly depends on state patronage for its programming and ideological projects, has generally maintained a greater degree of ideological independence. The two organisations also define the boundaries of the Indonesian state differently: where NU opposes Islamist parties in addition to communists and fringe Islamic sects like Ahmadiyah, Muhammadiyah has often expressed support for more conservative Islamist parties in the face of state repression.¹³⁰ If an ulama-state alliance is indeed taking shape within Indonesia, it is imperative that scholars of Indonesian Islam take note of heightened convergence between Muhammadiyah and NU elites on issues of religious ideology and national belonging.

V. CONCLUSION

Throughout Indonesian history, the rise and fall of authoritarianism has been based upon the state's material conditions. Political development since democratisation has been constrained by the economic foundations of rentierism and oligarchy, restricting capital accumulation to an elite class that is allied with—and indeed often forms—the state apparatus. Nationhood, however, is not merely material. Indonesia's development has also been fundamentally tied to its Islamic organisations, which use their influence in government and civil society to shape religion's place in public life. The dominant religious organisations have defined the boundaries of Indonesian national belonging, acting in concert with the state to repress opposition movements and to promote a pluralist vision of Islam, which is underlain by Pancasila thought.

With the inclusion of NU and Muhammadiyah into dependent, patron-client dynamics with the Indonesian state, the religious moderation program takes on new significance as a state project to further define and limit Indonesian Islam. The organisations' involvement in coal mining, an economic sector particularly notorious for

¹²⁹ Sekar Ayu Aryani et al., "Synergy of the Ministry of Religious Affairs," 452.

¹³⁰ Arifianto, "Clerics to coal miners."

political rent-seeking and oligarchic dominance, raises further questions about their ability to maintain independence and resist the subjugation of Islamic scholarship to state interests. Most importantly, this entwining of religious organisations with the state has the potential to reduce the adaptability of Indonesian ulama to new political ideologies and forms of utopia, restricting dynamic scholarship that can respond to social issues such as environmental degradation and unequal resource distribution. As the relationships among NU, Muhammadiyah, and the Subianto administration continue to take shape, scholarship on Indonesian Islam should seriously consider the possibility that Indonesia is developing its own ulama-state alliance.

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