

WHO OWNS NAHDLIYYIN? A Discourse Analysis of Islamic Identity in Social Media during the 2024 Indonesia Presidential Elections

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Abstract: The 2024 Indonesian presidential election witnessed the strategic appropriation of Islamic symbols and Nahdliyyin or the follower of Nahdlatul Ulama identity in political discourse, particularly on social media. While Nahdlatul Ulama has historically shaped Indonesian politics, existing studies overlook how Nahdliyyin identity is constructed and contested in digital spaces. This study fills that gap by analyzing social media narratives through Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse and power. Using qualitative discourse analysis, this research explores how Islamic identity is mobilized, negotiated, and challenged in online political debates. Findings suggest that Nahdliyyin identity is increasingly treated as a political object rather than a substantive ideological force, with digital narratives reducing it to mere symbolism for electoral gain. Social media amplifies elite-driven representations, sidelining grassroots interpretations and internal diversity. These findings highlight the commodification of Nahdliyyin identity in political campaigns, reinforcing the dominance of symbolic politics over substantive engagement with Islamic thought.

Keywords: discourse analysis, Indonesian elections, Islamic identity, *Nahdliyyin*, social media.

Introduction

The presidential election is a pivotal moment in Indonesia's five-year political cycle, where various social and political groups compete to gain public support. The contest was prone to disputes and conflict,

but, it turned out to be smooth and peaceful.¹ One of the most influential groups in this contest is *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, with deep political influence.² As a religious community, NU plays a strategic role in every national political contest, including the 2024 presidential election. Its members and followers—both structurally affiliated and culturally bound—are collectively known as *Nabdliyyin*, a group whose political orientations and engagements significantly shape electoral outcomes,³ especially in Post-Suharto period which is marked among other things by electoral democracy.⁴

NU remains a key target for political contestants seeking electoral support. With over 100 million followers, NU's influence extends beyond religious and social spheres, positioning itself as a decisive political force in every electoral contest, including the 2024 presidential election.⁵ The distribution of *Nabdliyyin* across Indonesia highlights the community's electoral significance. According to the Alvara Research Center⁶, the majority of NU followers reside in Java, which holds 79.76% of *Nabdliyyin*, followed by Sumatra (11.56%), Kalimantan (3.65%), Bali and Nusa Tenggara (1.97%), Sulawesi (1.85%), and Maluku and Papua (1.21%). Given that Java is home to the largest concentration of voters in Indonesia, political actors recognize that securing NU's support is instrumental in winning national elections.⁷

¹ Misbahuddin Misbahuddin et al., "The Possibility of Social Conflict in the Momentum of General Elections in the Sociological Perspective of Islamic Law," *Samarah Jurnal Hukum Keluarga Dan Hukum Islam* 9 (2025): 63–82, <https://doi.org/10.22373/sjhk.v9i1.22665>.

² Khamdan Safiuddin and Ita Miftakhul Jannah, "Eksistensi Organisasi Nahdlatul Ulama Dalam Partisipasi Politik Dan Pemerintahan Di Indonesia," *Nabnu: Journal of Nahdlatul Ulama and Contemporary Islamic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2024).

³ Masmuni Mahatma, "Paradigma Politik Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Dalam Bernegara," *Mawa'izh: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Pengembangan Sosial Kemanusiaan* 8, no. 1 (2017): 31–54, <https://doi.org/10.32923/maw.v8i1.695>.

⁴ S Abdi, "Negotiating Islam, Democracy and Pluralism: Islamic Politics and the State in Post-Reform Indonesia," *Mazabih Jurnal Pemikiran Hukum Islam* 24, no. 1 (2025): 101–2, <https://doi.org/10.21093/mj.v24i1.10078>.

⁵ Safiuddin and Jannah, "Eksistensi Organisasi Nahdlatul Ulama.

⁶ Hasanudun Ali and Lilik Purwandi, *Indonesia Middle Class Muslim: Religiosity and Consumerism* (Jakarta: Alvara Research Center, 2017).

⁷ Ibid.

Further highlighting NU's electoral importance, a survey conducted by the Saiful Mujani Research Center (SMRC) in December 2022 estimated that *Nabdliyyin* with voting rights constituted approximately 20% of Indonesia's electorate.⁸ Given that the General Elections Commission (KPU) set the 2024 *Daftar Pemilih Tetap* (DPT) at 204,807,222 voters, this translates to approximately 40,961,444 NU-affiliated voters. Similarly, research by the Indonesian Survey Institute (ISI) Denny JA in August 2023 indicated that those identifying as *Nabdliyyin*, whether structurally or culturally, accounted for 56.9% of Indonesia's total population of 278,696,200.⁹

This growth trend underscores the increasing political weight of NU in Indonesian elections. In 2005, *Nabdliyyin* comprised only 27.5% of the population, rising to 41.7% in 2014 and further surging to 56.9% in 2023. These figures suggest that NU's electoral influence has expanded significantly over the past two decades, making the organization a crucial factor in presidential elections. Consequently, every political contestant must strategically engage with NU's religious, cultural, and political narratives to secure its support.¹⁰ In this note, *psantren* is crucial element.¹¹

The increasing role of *Nabdliyyin* in electoral politics is not only reflected in numbers but also in the symbolic power NU holds within Indonesian society. NU's identity, embedded in cultural and religious symbols such as *kopyah*, *santri*, *pesantren*, and *Aswaja* (*Ablussunnah wal Jamaah*) values, has been instrumental in shaping political narratives.¹² Over the years, these symbols have been actively mobilized to garner

⁸ Syaiful Mujani, "Kekuatan Elektoral Nahdlatul Ulama," YouTube, February 15, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ojksvzymps>.

⁹ Malik Ibnu Zaman, "Ketum PBNU Ungkap Pertumbuhan Signifikan Konstituen NU," NU Online, October 30, 2023, <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/ketum-pbnu-ungkap-pertumbuhan-signifikan-konstituen-nu-U0Dhy>.

¹⁰ Nadiyah Muthoharoh, "Efektivitas Dakwah Nahdlatul Ulama Dalam Aplikasi Nu Online Terhadap Pemahaman Keislaman Nahdliyyin," *Hikmah Jurnal Dakwah Dan Sosial* 1, no. 2 (2021): 65–78.

¹¹ Mohammad Ali Al Humaidy et al., "Pesantren and Politics: Fostering Civil Society-Oriented Political Consciousness in a Muslim Society," *Ulumuna* 29, no. 1 SE-Articles (2025): 340, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujis.v29i1.976>.

¹² Fathor Rosi, "Gerakan Politik Kiai Dan Dakwah Islam: Membaca Aktifitas Dakwah Dan Politik Kiai Pada Momentum Pemilu," *At-Turost : Journal of Islamic Studies* 7, no. 2 (2020): 233–55, <https://doi.org/10.52491/at.v7i2.34>.

electoral sympathy and legitimacy.¹³ Political actors—whether NU-affiliated or external—have sought to incorporate NU’s discourse into their campaigns, constructing narratives that resonate with *Nabdliyyin* while simultaneously leveraging NU’s historical and ideological legacy to appeal to broader segments of the electorate.¹⁴

However, with the rapid advancement of information and communication technology, the dynamics of political engagement within this community have undergone a significant transformation.¹⁵ Social media has emerged as a new arena for political discourse, providing a platform where *Nabdliyyin* engage in discussions, contest narratives, and influence public opinion. The accessibility and immediacy of social media enable the rapid dissemination of political discourses, shaping public perceptions and political behavior.¹⁶

Given these dynamics, the 2024 presidential election presents a critical moment for analyzing how NU’s political discourse is constructed and contested in digital spaces. Social media has become a powerful arena for shaping perceptions, disseminating narratives, and influencing voter behavior among *Nabdliyyin*.¹⁷ This study explores the key discourses that emerged in online discussions about NU and the 2024 presidential candidates, examining how different actors attempt to gain legitimacy and electoral support through religious and political narratives.

Discourse is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a mechanism for constructing knowledge and shaping social practices. It is formed through texts, language, symbols, and other meaning-making elements, each carrying complex layers of interpretation.¹⁸ In this framework, discourse is inextricably tied to knowledge production, which in turn is deeply connected to power relations.¹⁹

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ C A Fox and J Menchik, “Islamic Political Parties and Election Campaigns in Indonesia,” *Party Politics* 29, no. 4 (2023): 622–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688-221091656>.

¹⁵ Howard Rheingold, *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Cambridge: Basic books, 2003).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ali Ridho et al., “Nahdlatul Ulama as the Main Actor Managing and Resetting Civilization in the Digital Era,” *Ath Thariq Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi* 7, no. 2 (2023): 187–87, <https://doi.org/10.32332/ath-thariq.v7i2.7702>.

¹⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1972).

The discourse surrounding NU in Indonesian politics is not a new phenomenon. NU has played a crucial role in shaping national political dynamics, not only through the participation of its prominent figures—such as Abdurrahman Wahid (*Gus Dur*), who became Indonesia’s first NU-affiliated president,²⁰ and KH Ma’ruf Amin, who has served as Vice President since 2019—but also through its deeply rooted symbolic power.²¹

NU’s identity is embedded in cultural and religious symbols, including *kopyah*, *santri*, *pesantren*, and the broader Islamic values it upholds.²² These symbols have been strategically employed as political instruments to garner sympathy and electoral support from *Nabdliyyin*. Over the years, political actors have actively engaged with these symbols to construct narratives that resonate with NU’s vast grassroots base, reinforcing the organization’s influence in electoral politics.²³ Each presidential candidate has strategically sought to appeal to *Nabdliyyin* by employing religious symbols, historical narratives, and identity politics to secure electoral support.²⁴

Thus, this research emerges from a compelling puzzle: why do all presidential candidates strive to construct *Nabdliyyin* narratives despite Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as an institution maintaining a neutral stance,²⁵ although others see it otherwise to an extent that it is considered a brokerage.²⁶ While numerous studies have examined NU’s role in

²⁰ N Franklin, “Gus Dur’s Enduring Legacy: Accruing Religious Merit in the Afterlife,” *Politics and Governance* 12 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.7874>.

²¹ Abdul Haris and Abdulloh Dardum, “Kiai NU dan Politik (Keterlibatan Kiai NU Jember dalam Kontestasi Pilpres 2019),” *Fenomena* 20, no. 1 (2021): 91–114, <https://doi.org/10.35719/fenomena.v20i1.51>.

²² Sanusi, “Motif Penggunaan Simbol Religiusitas Mahasiswa Berkopyah,” *Ijtima’iya: Journal of Social Science Teaching* 2, no. 2 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.21043/ji.v2i2.4299>.

²³ Edhy Susilo, “Berikut Tiga Pesan Ganjar Pranowo Pada Hari Santri Nasional 2022,” (Antara, October 22, 2022), <https://jateng.antaranews.com/berita/468705/berikut-tiga-pesan-ganjar-pranowo-pada-hari-santri-nasional-2022>.

²⁴ Santri Dukung Ganjar, “Santri Dukung Ganjar (@Santridukungganjar),” Instagram Photos and Videos,” <https://www.instagram.com/santridukungganjar/>; Haris and Dardum, “Kiai NU dan Politik,” *Fenomena* 20, no. 1 (2021): 91–114.

²⁵ KompasTV, “Ketua Umum PBNU Tegaskan NU Netral Di Pemilu 2024,” <https://www.kompas.tv/regional/481709/ketua-umum-pbnu-tegaskan-nu-netral-di-pemilu-2024>.

²⁶ R P Wadipalapa and A P Budiatri, “The Rise of Religious Brokerage: Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia’s 2024 Presidential Elections,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 47, no. 1 (2025): 67–93, <https://doi.org/10.1355/cs47-1c>.

Indonesian politics, most have focused on its institutional influence, key figures, or contributions to religious-political dynamics.²⁷ Others suggest that NU is a powerful Islam-based civil society organization.²⁸ However, limited research has specifically analyzed how NU's identity, religious and cultural symbols, and power relations are strategically mobilized and contested within political campaigns, particularly in the digital era. Symbols such as the *kopyah*, *santri* narratives, and *pesantren* values have gained increasing significance as political communication tools, yet their role in shaping electoral discourse remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how NU's symbols are constructed, mobilized, and manipulated within political narratives, particularly in social media campaigns. Understanding this phenomenon is crucial, as political discourse is not only shaped by policy debates but also by the appropriation and instrumentalization of religious identities and cultural symbols representing *Nahdliyyin*.

This study employs three key theoretical perspectives to examine the political discourse surrounding *Nahdliyyin* representation in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, it explores how political actors strategically use symbols such as *santri*, *kopyah*, and *pesantren* to construct narratives of authenticity, religiosity, and grassroots legitimacy.²⁹ These representations, however, are embedded in struggles over meaning,

²⁷ Akhmad Rizqon Khamami, "Nasionalis-Cum-Nahdliyin: A New Identity for Nominal Javanese Muslims," *Contemporary Islam* 16, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-022-00505-6>; Akbar Trio Mashuri, Abdul Rojak Lubis, and Agoes Moh Moefad, "Construction of Religious Moderation at Nahdlatul Ulama Online Media in East Java," *Muharrrik Jurnal Dakwah Dan Sosial* 6, no. 1 (2023): 71–86, <https://doi.org/10.37680/muharrrik.v6i1.2814>; Ulil Abshar Abdalla, "Politik Nahdlatul Ulama," (September 6, 2023), <https://www.kompas.id/baca/opini/2023/09/06/politik-nahdlatul-ulama>; Ridho et al., "Nahdlatul Ulama as the Main Actor," *Ath Thariq* 7, no. 2 (2023): 187, <https://doi.org/10.32332/ath-thariq.v7i2.7702>; Rosi, "Gerakan Politik Kiai Dan Dakwah Islam," *At-Turost* 7, no. 2 (2020): 233–55, <https://doi.org/10.52491/at.v7i2.34>; Eko Setiawan, "Keterlibatan Kiai dalam Politik Praktis dan Implikasinya Terhadap Masyarakat," *Jurnal Ilmiah Ar-Risalah: Media Ke-Islaman, Pendidikan Dan Hukum Islam* 12, no. 1 (2014): 1–17.

²⁸ Zuly Qodir and Robert William Hefner, "Debunking The Myth Of Islamic Parties: Political Ideology and Electoral Contestation in Indonesia during the Lead-up to the 2024 Election," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 18, no 1 (2024) <https://jiis.uinsu.ac.id/index.php/JIIs/article/view/30589>.

²⁹ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).

where different political groups seek to define and control *Nahdliyyin* identity.³⁰

Moreover, discourse according to Foucault, is not merely a reflection of reality but an instrument of power that governs social relations and determines what is legitimized, contested, or marginalized in electoral politics.³¹ Foucault's later work on subjectivity further extends this analysis by examining how individuals internalize and negotiate these discursive formations. Identity, he argues, is not fixed but is continuously shaped through historical and political structures.³² *Nahdliyyin* voters, for instance, do not merely absorb political narratives but actively interpret, resist, and appropriate them within their personal and communal experiences. Social media further amplifies this dynamic, enabling identity to be continuously reshaped through digital discourse.³³

By addressing these issues, the study clarifies how Instagram has become a decisive arena where *Nahdliyyin* identity is discursively produced, contested, and mobilized. Employing a qualitative, Foucauldian discourse-analysis framework, attentive to text, context, interaction, and ideological power.³⁴ It examines 230 posts from four influential accounts: NU Online, Gerakan Nahdliyyin Bersatu, Gibran BerKopyah, and Santri Dukung Ganjar, published during the official campaign (28 Nov 2023–14 Feb 2024). Instagram is prioritised because it delivers the highest engagement (1.16 % per post) and is dominated by voters aged 18–34, who comprise over half of the 2024 electorate.³⁵

³⁰ David Marriott, "The X of Representation: Rereading Stuart Hall," *New Formations* 96, no. 96 (2019): 177–228, <https://doi.org/10.3898/newf:96/97.08.2019>.

³¹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; Donald Matheson, "Book Review: Discourse Analytical Strategies: Understanding Foucault, Koselleck, Laclau and Luhmann," *Discourse & Society* 16, no. 2 (2005): 303–4, <https://doi.org/10.1177/095792650501600207>.

³² Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95; Michael Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

³³ Adriana Zaharijević and Milan Urošević, "Resistance as Desubjectivation in Foucault," *Philosophy & Social Criticism* (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1177/019145372-41284544>.

³⁴ Rachma Ida, *Metode Penelitian: Studi Media Dan Kajian Budaya* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2016).

³⁵ We Are Social, "Digital 2024," We Are Social Indonesia, January 31, 2024, <https://wearesocial.com/id/blog/2024/01/digital-2024/>.

This methodological focus on power-knowledge relations in digital spaces expands current scholarship on Indonesian political communication and Islamic identity, demonstrating how social media simultaneously amplifies representation, deepens internal fragmentation, and reshapes the political landscape through NU's symbolic capital.

Power, Discourse, and the Construction of *Nahdliyyin* Political Identity on Social Media

Michel Foucault's concept of discourse provides a crucial framework for understanding how power and knowledge interact to shape social norms and political identities. Foucault argues that discourse is not merely a vehicle for communication but a system of meaning-making that produces knowledge and structures reality.³⁶ In the context of *Nahdliyyin* political discourse on social media, discourse operates as a mechanism through which different actors—ranging from political figures and religious organizations to grassroots digital communities—define, contest, and reinforce what it means to be *Nahdliyyin* in contemporary Indonesia. The production of knowledge about *Nahdliyyin* identity is, therefore, not neutral; rather, it is embedded in power relations that seek to regulate and direct social and political behavior. Discourse is central to the exercise of power because it legitimizes certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others, reinforcing dominant narratives that shape both individual and collective subjectivities.³⁷

Social media accounts such as *NU Online*, *Gerakan Nahdliyyin Bersatu (GNB)*, *Gibran Berkopyah (GBK)*, and *Santri Dukung Ganjar (SDG)* engage in the production of political knowledge that seeks to influence public perceptions of *Nahdliyyin* affiliation. These digital actors construct narratives that link *Nahdliyyin* identity to particular candidates, religious values, and political ideologies, effectively shaping how the broader public interprets and engages with *Nahdliyyin* discourse. Media and digital communication serve as tools for political

³⁶ Michael Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, "A Journey into the Depths of Power and Discourse," Retrieved November 20, 2024, from Medium.Com website: <https://medium.com/@ehou-wayek/michel-foucault-a-journey-into-the-depths-of-power-and-discourse-1bafb946a-5a3#:~:text=Foucault's theories also emphasized the role of discourse, inseparability of power and the production of knowledge.>

actors to inscribe identity into the public consciousness, reinforcing or contesting dominant interpretations of religious and political belonging.³⁸ Through repetitive engagement with these narratives, social media users participate in the ongoing process of identity formation, as they negotiate their own understanding of what it means to be *Nahdliyyin* within a rapidly shifting political landscape.

Contrary to traditional conceptions of power as merely repressive, Foucault argues that power is also productive—it does not simply prohibit or silence but actively generates knowledge, norms, and subjectivities. This productive aspect of power is particularly evident in the digital contestation of *Nahdliyyin* political identity, where no single discourse holds absolute dominance. Rather, multiple actors engage in an ongoing struggle to assert their interpretation of *Nahdliyyin* identity, creating a discursive field where competing narratives coexist, interact, and evolve. Power operates through diffuse and networked mechanisms, making it impossible for any one group to completely monopolize the meaning of *Nahdliyyin* identity.³⁹ Instead, power is exercised through the negotiation and rearticulation of discourse, as different factions within the *Nahdliyyin* community attempt to influence political narratives and voter perceptions. The political struggle over *Nahdliyyin* identity on social media thus exemplifies how discourse structures meaning and produces knowledge, influencing both individual self-perception and collective political behavior.

Signs and Representation in *Nahdliyyin* Social Media Discourse

Political discourse in social media is often constructed through signs and symbols that carry deeper ideological meanings than their surface appearance suggests. The names chosen for the *Nahdliyyin*-affiliated political accounts—such as *Gerakan Nahdliyyin Bersatu* (GNB), *Gibran Berkopyah* (GBK), and *Santri Dukung Ganjar* (SDG)—are not merely identifiers but serve as sites of meaning-making and contestation. This section unpacks how these symbols operate within *Nahdliyyin* political discourse and the underlying power structures they reinforce.

³⁸ Nicholas Carah, *Media and Society: Power, Platforms, and Participation* (London: Sage Publications, 2021).

³⁹ Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, “Power in International Politics,” *International Organization* 59, no. 01 (2005): 39–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818305050010>.

Unveiling the Meaning of “Bersatu” in Gerakan Nahdliyyin Bersatu

The term *bersatu* (united) in *Gerakan Nahdliyyin Bersatu* (GNB) functions as a signifier that invites critical scrutiny: does its invocation suggest that the *nahdliyyin* have historically been divided, necessitating a renewed call for unity? A historical analysis reveals that *nahdliyyin*, particularly in the political domain, have never formed a singular, cohesive bloc. The dissolution of the NU political party in 1973—following the state-mandated merger of Islamic parties into the United Development Party (PPP)—marked the fragmentation of *nahdliyyin*'s political allegiance.⁴⁰ While many NU-affiliated politicians aligned with PPP, others gravitated toward Golkar, the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI, later PDI-P), and subsequently, the National Awakening Party (PKB).⁴¹ This dispersion underscores that political identity among *nahdliyyin* has remained fluid rather than unified.⁴² In this context, GNB's use of *bersatu* is not merely a rhetorical device but a deliberate attempt to construct a discourse of unity within an inherently pluralistic and politically contested landscape.

Figure 1. *Nahdliyyin Bersatu* Logo



Source: *Nahdliyyin Bersatu* Instagram account

⁴⁰ Peter G. Riddell, “The Diverse Voices of Political Islam in Post-Suharto Indonesia,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 13, no. 1 (2002): 65–84, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410210299>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

From a semiotic perspective, *bersatu* operates as a sign composed of both a signifier—the word itself—and a signified, which is the ideological notion of unity within a historically fragmented political constituency.⁴³ However, meaning is relational rather than intrinsic, emerging within systems of difference rather than through inherent properties of the sign itself.⁴⁴ The discourse of *bersatu*, therefore, gains significance only in opposition to the implied condition of disunity. This constructed nature of meaning aligns with Foucault's theory of discourse, which posits that language does not merely reflect reality but actively constitutes it through power-laden systems of knowledge.⁴⁵ In the case of GNB, the articulation of *bersatu* seeks to position the movement as the legitimate unifying force for *nabdliyyin*, thereby naturalizing its political agenda as a necessary response to perceived fragmentation. Foucault's concept of "regimes of truth" is particularly relevant here, as it highlights how specific narratives become dominant through the institutionalization of particular knowledge systems.⁴⁶ By framing their movement as an embodiment of *bersatu*, GNB produces a discursive reality in which unity is both a desirable and urgent imperative, thus reinforcing its authority within the political landscape of the 2024 presidential election.

However, discourse is never unchallenged; it inherently generates resistance and counter-narratives.⁴⁷ While GNB portrays *bersatu* as an imperative for collective mobilization, competing interpretations emerge, revealing the contested nature of political representation within *nabdliyyin* circles. The longstanding rivalry between Muhaimin Iskandar and Gus Dur's family exemplifies this fragmentation, with figures like Yenny Wahid directly opposing Muhaimin's leadership of PKB. Public exchanges between the two—particularly through social media—illustrate the presence of multiple, often conflicting claims over NU's political legacy. Discourse is not only a site of meaning production but also of power struggles, where dominant narratives are

⁴³ Paul Kockelman, "A Semiotic Ontology of the Commodity," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (2006): 76–102, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jlin.2006.16.1.076>.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

⁴⁷ Michael Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95; Michael Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (New York: The New Press, 1997).

continuously negotiated and resisted.⁴⁸ In this regard, social media becomes a crucial battleground where different factions within *nabdhliyyin* factions.

Consequently, the representation of *bersatu* within GNB's discourse is neither ideologically neutral nor universally accepted. While it functions as a strategic mechanism for political consolidation, it simultaneously provokes counter-discourses that challenge its legitimacy. Foucault argues that discourse always contains the seeds of its own resistance—what he terms the “repressive hypothesis,” whereby power's attempts to control meaning inevitably produce spaces for opposition.⁴⁹ Within *nabdhliyyin* politics, the invocation of *bersatu* is thus not merely a call for unity but also a site of ideological struggle, where different factions interpret and contest its meaning based on their political affiliations, historical grievances, and strategic interests. Whether *bersatu* is embraced or rejected ultimately depends on how *nabdhliyyin* audiences navigate their positions within these power structures, shaping their engagement with both the movement and the broader political discourse surrounding the 2024 presidential election.

Reframing the Meaning of Kopyah Attributed to Gibran

The *kopyah* (cap) holds a profound symbolic significance in Indonesian Islamic and cultural traditions, particularly within the *nabdhliyyin* and *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) communities. It is not merely an item of clothing but a marker of religious devotion, moral uprightness, and adherence to traditional Islamic values.⁵⁰ Within *pesantren* circles, the *kopyah*, often paired with a *sarung* (waistcloth), serves as an emblem of spiritual discipline and social respectability.⁵¹ It is worn in everyday religious activities as well as in formal settings such as *pengajian* (Islamic study gatherings), weddings, and state functions. Furthermore, the *kopyah* symbolizes resistance to Western influence in dress, reinforcing an Islamic identity rooted in *santri* (Islamic student)

⁴⁸ Loizos Heracleous, *Discourse, Interpretation, Organization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

⁵⁰ Abdul Ghofur, “Songkok Celleng,” *Dakwatuna: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi Islam* 6, no. 01 (2020): 35–35, <https://doi.org/10.36835/dakwatuna.v6i01.503>.

⁵¹ Agustinus Rustanta, “Makna Simbolik Busana Sarung Kyai Ma’ruf Amin,” *Komunikatif* 8, no. 2 (2019): 165–77, <https://doi.org/10.33508/jk.v8i2.2197>.

culture and local traditions.⁵² All of these shows moderate stance of Nahdlatul Ulama.⁵³ Given its deeply ingrained cultural and religious meanings, the political appropriation of the *keopyah* in the 2024 presidential election—through the movement "*Gibran BerKopyah*"—invites a critical analysis of its function as a representational and discursive tool.

Hall's theory of representation provides a valuable lens through which to analyze how symbols such as the *keopyah* are constructed and imbued with meaning within political discourse.⁵⁴ Representation is not simply about reflecting an already existing reality but about producing meaning through language, symbols, and cultural practices.⁵⁵ In the case of "*Gibran BerKopyah*", the *keopyah* functions as a signifier—a tangible object that carries connotative meanings beyond its physical form. It becomes a strategic semiotic device designed to associate Gibran Rakabuming Raka with *nahdliyyin* identity, religious piety, and traditional values. However, as Hall argues, signs do not have fixed meanings; they derive their significance from the socio-political context in which they are deployed.⁵⁶ Gibran, who has no prior affiliation with *nahdliyyin* circles, is discursively positioned as part of this community through the symbolic attachment of the *keopyah*. This deliberate construction of identity underscores that representation is a process of meaning-making shaped by power and ideology.⁵⁷

The concept of discourse further elucidates how the *keopyah* operates as a political tool within a larger system of knowledge production and power. Discourse is not merely a way of talking about things but a mechanism through which power relations are established and maintained.⁵⁸ In this context, the discourse surrounding Gibran's *keopyah* does not emerge in a vacuum; it is actively produced by religious elites, political actors, and media narratives to construct an

⁵² Ghofur, "Songkok Celleng.

⁵³ Ardhani, "The Politics of Moderate Islam in Indonesia: Between International Pressure and Domestic Contestations," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 61, no. 1 (2023): 19–57, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2023.611.19-57>.

⁵⁴ Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage, 1997).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*.

image of Gibran as an acceptable figure within *nabdliyyin* circles. The creation of "Gibran BerKopyah" as a movement led by pesantren-affiliated figures exemplifies what Foucault describes as a "regime of truth"—a system of knowledge production that legitimizes certain narratives while marginalizing others. By repeatedly associating Gibran with pesantren communities through symbols like the *kopyah*, the movement seeks to establish a truth-claim: that Gibran embodies the values and aspirations of *santri* culture. This strategic deployment of discourse highlights that power operates through the control of meaning, shaping what is accepted as "truth" in public consciousness.

However, power is never absolute; it generates resistance and counter-discourses.⁵⁹ The attempt to associate Gibran with *nabdliyyin* identity has not gone unchallenged. Critics question the authenticity of this representation, arguing that his background and political trajectory do not align with the historical struggles and values of *santri* communities. The online discourse surrounding "Gibran BerKopyah" illustrates this dynamic, as netizens and political commentators engage in debates over whether the *kopyah* genuinely signifies Gibran's affiliation with *nabdliyyin* or merely functions as a superficial branding strategy. The very existence of such contestation reaffirms that discourse, while shaping truth, also contains the potential for subversion and reinterpretation.⁶⁰

Figure 2. *Gibran BerKopyah*



Source: *Gibran BerKopyah* Instagram account

⁵⁹ Foucault, "The Subject and Power."

⁶⁰ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

The strategic use of the *kopyah* in political branding is evident in the efforts of *Gibran BerKopyah*'s leadership, particularly figures such as KH Ahmad Faiz Abdul Haq Zaini (*Gus Faiz AHZ*), the head of Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid in Probolinggo, who serves as the movement's chairman. Gus Faiz AHZ articulates the movement's goal as securing 10 million votes from *pesantren* circles, positioning Gibran as a candidate who resonates with *santri* values. He emphasizes Gibran's perceived commitment to *pesantren* welfare, particularly through his advocacy for the (*Pesantren Endowment Fund*), arguing that this policy proposal reflects a deep concern for the future of Islamic boarding schools and their students.

"Gibran has shown concern for *santri* and *pesantren*. He also has an entrepreneurial spirit, which aligns with *nabdliyyin* values of economic empowerment. He embodies the *nabdliyyin* spirit of wanting to strengthen *pesantren* and the broader community's economy."⁶¹

This statement illustrates how the movement constructs a narrative in which Gibran is not merely a political candidate but an ideological ally of the *pesantren* community. By emphasizing his economic achievements *Gibran BerKopyah* seeks to present him as a role model for young voters, particularly those from *santri* backgrounds. The movement's branding capitalizes on his image as a successful youth leader, leveraging his status as both an entrepreneur and a public official to craft a discourse of youthful capability and reformist vision.

Nevertheless, the political instrumentalization of the *kopyah* raises broader questions about authenticity and the commodification of religious symbols in electoral politics. Representation is always ideological—it serves particular interests and is shaped by the power structures that govern society.⁶² The use of the *kopyah* as a political symbol in the 2024 election exemplifies this process, demonstrating how cultural markers can be mobilized to construct identity, garner legitimacy, and influence voter perception. However, as the contest surrounding "*Gibran BerKopyah*" illustrates, such representations are not immune to scrutiny. The debate over whether Gibran truly embodies *santri* values or merely appropriates them for political gain reflects the

⁶¹ Interview on August 13, 2024.

⁶² Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*.

ongoing struggle over meaning and legitimacy in Indonesia's political and religious landscape.

Deciphering the Coerced Meaning of "Santri" in Support of Ganjar

In the context of the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, the forced association of the term *santri* with Ganjar Pranowo reveals a deliberate effort to construct a religiously affiliated image for a candidate with no substantial historical ties to *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU). The social media campaign *Santri Dukung Ganjar* (SDG) serves as a case study of how political actors strategically employ cultural and religious symbols to manufacture electoral legitimacy.

Historically, the term *santri* has been deeply intertwined with NU, as *pesantren* form the foundation of the *Nahdliyyin* community.⁶³ Key figures such as KH Hasyim Asy'ari and KH Wahab Chasbullah, who were instrumental in establishing NU, emerged from the *pesantren* tradition, reinforcing the organic link between *santri* and *Nahdliyyin* identity. As a result, the term *santri* is not merely a neutral descriptor but a loaded cultural and religious signifier. Within this framework, the attempt to impose the *santri* label on Ganjar Pranowo represents a strategic political move rather than an organic representation of his identity. The use of symbols such as *kopiah* and *sarung* in SDG's campaign imagery signifies an intentional effort to link Ganjar to the *Nahdliyyin* community, despite his well-established identity as a nationalist politician from PDI-P.

Figure 3. *Santri Dukung Ganjar* (SDG) Logo



Source: *Santri Dukung Ganjar* Instagram account

⁶³ Muhammad Mustaqim, "Politik Kebangsaan Kaum Santri: Studi Atas Kiprah Politik Nahdlatul Ulama," *Addin* 9, no. 2 (2015): 53194, <https://doi.org/10.21043/-addin.v9i2.618>.

As observed in the group's logo and social media campaigns, Ganjar is portrayed wearing *kopiah*, a key visual marker of the *santri* identity. This shift in representation is not accidental; it is a calculated political strategy aimed at aligning him with a religious electorate. Ganjar, previously recognized by the moniker *Rambut Putih* (White Hair), a label popularized by President Joko Widodo, has undergone a strategic symbolic transformation to appeal to the traditional Islamic voter base.

This phenomenon can also be analyzed through Hall's constructionist approach to representation, which asserts that meaning is not inherent in symbols but is actively shaped by social discourse.⁶⁴ The affiliation of Ganjar with *Nabdliyyin* symbolism by SDG exemplifies a deliberate construction of meaning rather than an organic cultural connection. In this case, the political discourse surrounding Ganjar's affiliation with the *Nabdliyyin* community functions as a means of asserting his legitimacy among Islamic voters. The discourse of SDG seeks to inscribe a particular "truth" onto Ganjar's identity, despite the absence of an authentic historical connection to the *santri* tradition. By aligning Ganjar with the religious electorate through symbolic association, SDG attempts to construct a political "truth" that situated him within the *Nabdliyyin* cultural framework.

From a Foucauldian perspective, this maneuver exemplifies how discourse not only constructs meaning but also consolidates power. The forced association of Ganjar with *Nabdliyyin* identity serves as a political strategy to establish electoral legitimacy, creating a new regime of truth in which Ganjar is perceived as the candidate who best represents the interests of traditional Islamic voters. This aligns with Foucault's assertion that discourse is not merely descriptive but prescriptive, shaping how individuals perceive reality.⁶⁵ Through the repeated use of *santri* symbolism in campaign materials, SDG not only seeks to describe Ganjar as a representative of *Nabdliyyin* values but actively dictates how voters should interpret his identity.

This analysis reveals the broader implications of symbolic manipulation in Indonesian electoral politics. The forced ascription of *santri* identity onto Ganjar reflects the instrumentalization of cultural symbols to manufacture political legitimacy. Meaning is not inherent

⁶⁴ Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*.

⁶⁵ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*.

but is actively constructed through discourse.⁶⁶ Similarly, Chandler highlights the role of semiotics in shaping political narratives through visual and linguistic cues.⁶⁷ Meanwhile, the concept of *regime of truth* explains how these constructed narratives become accepted as reality through strategic repetition and normalization.⁶⁸ Ultimately, the *Santri Dukung Ganjar* phenomenon exemplifies how electoral campaigns deploy religious and cultural symbols to engineer political legitimacy.

The Structuring of *Nahdliyyin* Political Discourse on Social Media: Authority, Digital Narratives, and Hashtag Activism

Social media has transformed into a powerful institutional force for *Nahdliyyin* communities, serving not only as a digital public sphere but also as a medium with significant economic and political potential. The ability of *Nahdliyyin*-affiliated groups to strategically deploy social media platforms underscores the centrality of digital technology in shaping political discourse and public opinion.⁶⁹ The 2024 Indonesian presidential election exemplifies this phenomenon, where social media has been instrumental in legitimizing candidates through the lens of religious identity and the symbolism of the *santri* tradition. The extensive use of digital platforms demonstrates how social media functions as both an arena of contestation and an infrastructure for public opinion formation, reinforcing the argument that political allegiance is actively constructed and disseminated through digital narratives.⁷⁰

The structured nature of *Nahdliyyin* discourse on social media is evident in the way various groups mobilize their platforms to advance political narratives. Accounts such as NU Online, *Gerakan Nahdliyyin Bersatu (GNB)*, *Gibran Berkopyah (GBK)*, and *Santri Dukung Ganjar (SDG)* have positioned themselves as digital gatekeepers, curating and distributing content that aligns with their respective political

⁶⁶ Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*.

⁶⁷ Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, 3rd ed. (New York, Ny: Routledge, 2017).

⁶⁸ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*.

⁶⁹ Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1 (2011): 28–41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25800379>.

⁷⁰ Rambe Kamarul Zaman and Misnan Misnan, "Infrastruktur Politik Menuju Pilpres 2024 Dalam Konstruksi Media Sosial," *Petanda: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi Dan Humaniora* 4, no. 1 (2021): 41–53, <https://doi.org/10.32509/petanda.v4i1.1558>.

preferences. As Abdussalam Shohib, the coordinator of GNB, noted, social media provides an open space for political engagement, allowing their movement to grow independently from traditional media structures:

"Social media is an open space where anyone can express their opinions. This has made things easier for us. We grew through social media rather than traditional media."⁷¹

This statement highlights the decentralized nature of political discourse in the digital age, where social media enables grassroots mobilization and bypasses conventional gatekeeping mechanisms. Similarly, Faiz AHZ from GBK emphasized the growing accessibility of digital platforms, even in rural areas, further reinforcing social media's role as an equalizing force in political communication:

"Today, social media is no longer dominated by urban communities. People in rural areas now also have access to the internet. Therefore, utilizing social media for campaigns has become essential."⁷²

Beyond its function as a tool for political engagement, social media has also facilitated a shift in how *Nabdhliyyin* discourse is structured. Unlike traditional political forums, where discussions often take place in physical gatherings led by authoritative figures, digital discourse operates within fragmented yet interconnected networks. As Papacharissi argues, the digital sphere enables broader political participation, but it also leads to the privatization of public discourse, where interactions become more insular and segmented.⁷³ This trend is particularly evident in *Nabdhliyyin*-affiliated social media, where digital enclaves foster specific ideological leanings rather than encouraging open deliberation.

A crucial factor in the structuring of *Nabdhliyyin* political discourse on social media is the role of religious authority figures. In *Nabdhliyyin* communities, *kiai*, *ulama*, and other cultural and structural leaders function as "knowledge authorities" in a Foucauldian sense, wielding influence over religious interpretations and socio-political perspectives.

⁷¹ Interview, August 14, 2024

⁷² Interview, August 13, 2024

⁷³ Zizi A Papacharissi, *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity, 2010).

Their legitimacy derives from their status as moral and spiritual leaders, and their statements often shape the political attitudes of their followers.⁷⁴ The reproduction of these figures' discourses through social media further amplifies their authority, as their messages are selectively curated and repackaged by digital activists. The accounts analyzed in this study—NU Online, GNB, GBK, and SDG—frequently incorporate statements from prominent *Nabdliyyin* figures into their content, reinforcing the perception that their political narratives align with religious legitimacy. This dynamic illustrates that power is not merely coercive but also productive, as it generates knowledge that appears natural and unquestionable within a given discourse.

On the other hand, one of the most visible manifestations of structured discourse within *Nabdliyyin* digital activism is the strategic use of hashtags. Hashtags function as discursive markers that frame political narratives and mobilize online communities. In the context of the 2024 presidential election, the accounts analyzed in this research have employed targeted hashtags to construct distinct political identities. For instance, GNB has promoted hashtags linked to the Anies-Muhaimin campaign, emphasizing narratives of Islamic populism and the *santri* identity as a vehicle for political change. In contrast, GBK's support for Prabowo-Gibran has been reinforced through hashtags that associate the candidates with Nahdliyyin values, positioning them as leaders who can uphold traditional Islamic principles while embracing modernization. SDG, advocating for Ganjar-Mahfud, has used hashtags to highlight their candidates' commitment to *santri* culture, framing their campaign as a continuation of *Nabdliyyin* political traditions.

Table 1. Hashtags Used by These Accounts

Account	#Hashtag
<i>Gerakan Nahdliyyin Bersatu</i>	#santri #kiai #pesantren #aniesmuhaimin2024 #laskarsantri #aminajadulu
<i>Gibran BerKopyah</i>	#gibranberkopyah #pemiludamai2024 #gbk #BersamaIndonesiaMaju

⁷⁴ Abd Hannan and Kudrat Abdillah, "Hegemoni Religio-Kekuasaan dan Transformasi Sosial: Mobilisasi Jaringan Kekuasaan dan Keagamaan Kyai dalam Dinamika Sosio-Kultural Masyarakat," *Sosial Budaya* 16, no. 1 (2019): 9, <https://doi.org/10.24014/sb.-v16i1.7037>.

Account	#Hashtag
Santri Dukung Ganjar	#PrabowoGibranSekaliPutaran #ganjarmahfud2024 #santridukungganjar #ganjarpranowo #mahfudmd #indonesiatangguh
NU Online	#pers #nuonline #nuonline_id #pemilu #pilpres #pemilu2024 #pemeludamai #suara

These hashtag-based discourses serve multiple functions: they create a sense of community among digital supporters, streamline political messaging, and establish a narrative battlefield where competing interpretations of *Nahdliyyin* identity are contested. More importantly, they reveal the performative nature of political identity in the digital era—one that is constantly negotiated and reshaped through interaction, engagement, and algorithmic amplification.

Ultimately, the structuring of *Nahdliyyin* political discourse on social media illustrates how power, discourse, and digital infrastructures interact to shape public perceptions. While social media has democratized access to political engagement, it has also fragmented discourse, creating competing spheres of influence where *Nahdliyyin* identity is continuously reinterpreted and instrumentalized for electoral purposes. In this landscape, digital narratives are not neutral; they are strategic, performative, and deeply embedded in the power dynamics that define Indonesia's political and religious spheres.

Questioning PBNU's Claim of "Neutrality"

Despite its official claims of neutrality, the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), particularly PBNU (*Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama*) and its media platform NU Online, exhibits a pattern of institutional alignment with political power. The appointment of Saifullah Yusuf (*Gus Ipul*) who serves as the Secretary-General of PBNU as Minister of Social Affairs following the 2024 presidential election—continuing a similar role he held during Prabowo's previous administration—exemplifies the persistent exchange between religious institutions and state authority. This phenomenon raises fundamental questions about the nature of neutrality in *Nahdliyyin* political discourse: is neutrality an apolitical stance, or does it function as a strategic maneuver to maintain influence while avoiding explicit endorsement? From a Foucauldian perspective, neutrality is rarely a passive condition; rather,

it operates as a mechanism of power, wherein silence, omission, and selective representation are as politically charged as explicit statements.

During the 2024 presidential election, both PBNU and NU Online consistently maintained a public narrative of neutrality. In 2022, PBNU Chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf (*Gus Yahya*) explicitly cautioned against the politicization of NU, stating, "NU must not be used as a weapon for political competition, because if we allow this to continue, it will not be healthy."⁷⁵ Similarly, NU Online's Chief Editor, Ivan Aulia Ahsan, reiterated the media platform's non-partisan stance, asserting that its role was to provide diverse content that, while rooted in Islamic values, would not be confined to religious discussions alone, including in political matters.⁷⁶ Yet, in practice, NU Online's editorial choices during the election cycle suggested otherwise. On February 14, 2024, NU Online primarily highlighted Prabowo-Gibran's victory speech following the quick count results, while offering little to no coverage of the responses from the other presidential candidates.⁷⁷ The justification provided by NU Online's editorial team—that only Prabowo-Gibran's campaign had held a notable public event on that night—raises concerns regarding the implicit biases in news selection and framing.⁷⁸ This selective coverage aligns with Foucault's assertion that no discourse in the public sphere is truly neutral, as the very act of curating information shapes public perception and constructs meaning.

The notion of PBNU's neutrality was further contested in early 2024, when NU figure Nadirsyah Hosen revealed that during a high-level NU gathering in Surabaya on December 27, 2023, both *Rais Syuriah* Miftahul Akhyar and Gus Yahya conveyed implicit messaging favoring Prabowo-Gibran. While there was no formal directive instructing NU members to endorse the ticket, coded language and strategic arguments were reportedly used to underscore the necessity of supporting candidates aligned with Jokowi's administration—particularly in relation to the continuation of national projects such as

⁷⁵ Dani Prabowo, "Gus Yahya Minta Partai Tak Gunakan NU Jadi Senjata Kompetisi Politik," (May 24, 2022), <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2022/05/24/0909512-1/gus-yahya-minta-partai-tak-gunakan-nu-jadi-senjata-kompetisi-politik>.

⁷⁶ Interview, 1 April 2024

⁷⁷ Aru Lego Triono, "Hitung Cepat Kawalpemilu, Prabowo-Gibran Unggul Di 34 Dari 38 Provinsi," (February 14, 2024), <https://www.nu.or.id/nasional/hitung-cepat-kawal-pemilu-prabowo-gibran-unggul-di-36-dari-38-provinsi-5n6Kr>.

⁷⁸ Interview, 1 April 2024

the development of the new capital city, IKN. This tacit endorsement, though unofficial, effectively signaled a preferred political direction, demonstrating how neutrality can function as a strategic discourse rather than a genuine position of impartiality.⁷⁹

Further evidence of PBNU's alleged bias emerged during a plenary meeting of the NU Yogyakarta regional board on December 24, 2023, where Gus Yahya repeatedly made gestures associated with the number "two," a symbol widely interpreted as an endorsement of Prabowo-Gibran, who were listed as candidate pair number two. While such gestures may be dismissed as coincidental, they must be analyzed within the broader context of power relations in political discourse. In the same period, the controversial dismissal of Marzuki Mustamar as the Chairman of PWNU East Java fueled speculation regarding the intersection of internal NU politics and presidential campaign dynamics. While PBNU maintained that Marzuki's removal was due to longstanding internal issues, his vocal support for candidate pair number one led many to perceive the dismissal as politically motivated. The widespread use of hashtags such as *#SaveKyaiMarzuki* and *#SaveNabdlatulUlama* on social media suggests that the public saw this decision as emblematic of political intervention within NU's leadership.⁸⁰

These instances illustrate that neutrality, rather than being an absence of political engagement, is often a discursive strategy employed to manage institutional legitimacy while maintaining proximity to power. As Foucault posits, neutrality itself is a form of power, as it frames what is considered acceptable discourse within a given social and political context. In the case of PBNU and NU Online, the claim of neutrality serves to construct an image of the organization as an unbiased and independent moral authority while simultaneously engaging in practices that suggest preferential treatment toward specific political actors. This strategic ambivalence allows NU's leadership to navigate the complex terrain of Indonesian politics

⁷⁹ Nadirsyah Hosen, "Prof. Nadirsyah Hosen: Gerakan PBNU Mendukung Prabowo-Gibran - PutCast," YouTube, January 17, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E2yfebPk0-8>.

⁸⁰ Fajar Yusuf Rasdianto, "Gerilya Sesepeuh NU Menangkan Prabowo-Gibran," (January 10, 2024), <https://news.detik.com/x/detail/spotlight/20240110/Gerilya-Sesepeuh-NU-Menangkan-Prabowo-Gibran/>.

without openly compromising its credibility among *Nahdliyyin* communities.

Furthermore, the broader political landscape of the 2024 election contextualizes PBNU's positioning. Given that the *Nahdliyyin* vote was a crucial battleground, all major candidates sought to leverage NU's vast network and influence. While PBNU's official stance remained ostensibly neutral, the subtext of its political maneuvers—whether through symbolic gestures, selective media framing, or strategic appointments—reveals a deeper entanglement with power. The appointment of PBNU Secretary-General Saifullah Yusuf to a ministerial position in the Prabowo-Gibran administration is particularly telling. Though PBNU leaders denied any formal political alignment, this appointment reinforces the perception that institutional neutrality was, at best, an illusion masking a calculated engagement with state power.

In the era of digital media, neutrality is not merely contested through formal institutional statements but also through the competing narratives circulating on social media. The backlash against PBNU's alleged partisanship—particularly from NU figures who supported other candidates—demonstrates that neutrality is a fragile and highly contested construct. Within the logic of media representation, neutrality is not an objective condition but a discursive construct subject to interpretation and reinterpretation. The online discourse surrounding PBNU's political positioning suggests that, in practice, neutrality is often weaponized to either justify strategic alliances or to delegitimize political opponents.

***Nahdliyyin* as a Political Object: the Absence of Substantive Discourse**

Admittedly, the lure of politics is not exclusive to Muslims Indonesia. It happens elsewhere where Muslim population is substantial in amassing votes.⁸¹ During the 2024 presidential election, social media accounts affiliated with *Nahdliyyin*—such as NU Online, GNB, GBK, and SDG—focused heavily on symbolic representations rather than substantive political discourse. Traditional NU symbols like the *kopiah*, *sarung*, *santri*, connections to *habaib*, and endorsements from

⁸¹ Bilal Ahmad Malik, "Islam and Nationalist Mobilization in Kazakhstan: Post-Soviet Cultural (Re)Framing and Identity (Re)Making," *Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies (QJIS)* 11, no. 2 (2023): 385, <https://doi.org/10.21043/qjis.v11i2.13626>.

charismatic *kyai* were prominently used to construct narratives of legitimacy. However, these were not accompanied by serious discussions on governance, policy, or the socio-economic interests of the Nahdliyyin community.

This pattern reveals three major consequences. First, Nahdliyyin's role was reduced to electoral mobilization, sidelining its potential as an active political force. Second, identity competition among factions intensified internal fragmentation. Third, religious symbols were stripped of their ethical depth and repurposed as campaign tools.

To move forward, *Nahdliyyin* engagement must shift from performative identity politics to substantive participation. Political debates should prioritize concrete issues—like *pesantren* financing, educational reform, and NU's national role—over mere visual alignment with tradition.

If *Nahdliyyin* continues to be reduced to a passive electoral commodity, it risks being perpetually sidelined in political decision-making. The instrumentalization of NU for electoral purposes, without corresponding commitments to its substantive needs, ensures that its influence remains at the level of mobilization rather than policymaking. If *Nahdliyyin* wishes to move beyond being a political object, it must reclaim its agency, demand substantive representation, and ensure that its engagement in politics is not dictated by external actors but by its own vision for the future.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how the 2024 Indonesian presidential election saw the strategic appropriation of Nahdliyyin identity, reducing it to a political object rather than a substantive ideological force. Social media played a crucial role in this process, amplifying elite-driven representations while sidelining grassroots interpretations and the internal diversity of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Instead of fostering meaningful engagement with Islamic thought, political actors primarily mobilized Nahdliyyin identity through symbols, hashtags, and performative affiliations, reinforcing the dominance of symbolic politics over substantive discourse.

The consequences of this trend were significant. First, it led to a superficial political engagement where electoral narratives focused more on who appeared more NU rather than on policies affecting Nahdliyyin communities, such as *pesantren*-based economic initiatives

or NU's institutional role in governance. Second, it fragmented political discourse, as competing factions within Nahdliyyin vied for the most legitimate representation of NU, often deepening internal divisions rather than fostering collective political agency. Third, this reliance on symbolic capital enabled political actors to exploit Nahdliyyin identity without committing to concrete policies that would benefit the community in the long term.

These findings underscore the commodification of Nahdliyyin identity in contemporary political campaigns and the broader shift toward visual and cultural signifiers as tools of electoral mobilization. To reclaim its substantive role in political discourse, Nahdliyyin must move beyond symbolic mobilization and assert itself as an active political subject. Given NU's long tradition of intellectual engagement and socio-political activism, its representation in electoral politics should not be limited to mere symbolism but should instead push for policies aligned with its values and interests. By examining how Nahdliyyin identity is constructed, contested, and appropriated in digital spaces, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of the power dynamics shaping religious identity in Indonesia's contemporary political landscape. []

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