

DEFENDING WOMEN UPHOLDING NORM Political Aspiration of *Bu Nyai* in Indonesian Local Politics

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Abstract: The public and political role of Muslim women in Indonesia has been on the increase in recent years. This is due family connections, gender equality, and religious piety. This article particularly highlights the political participation of *Bu Nyai*, Muslim personalities with pesantren backgrounds. This paper contends that their motive is their aspiration to advocate women's rights, which is often ignored by male-politicians. The idea that “only women understand women” represents another reason why these *Bu Nyai* compete in elections for public office. The *Bu Nyai* relies much on defending values and norms rather than on competence or experience. The wisdom behind this is the fact that Indonesian politics is not always about idea, as it is about sense and positive image. These are the so-called social and spiritual capitals that this paper tries to explore by referring to three *Bu Nyai* in East Java and their political aspiration in upholding norms by defending women. The rise of these *Bu Nyai* and their prominence in local elections is a direct testimony that Indonesian politics is not patriarchal. Their activism is an automatic repudiation of neo-liberal thesis that in major Muslim societies, women are politically marginalized.

Keywords: *Bu Nyai*, Social and Spiritual Capital, Local Elections.

Introduction

The role of Muslim women in the public sphere has been on the rise in Indonesia over the past two decades, or in the aftermath of reformation era in 1998.¹ Apart from education level and the

¹ Nicolaas Warouw, “Negotiating Modernity: Women Workers, Islam and Urban Trajectory in Indonesia,” *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 27, no 3 (2016), 283–302.

increasing access to information and knowledge for everyone, the government policies regarding the women representation in the public offices are the main reason behind such a phenomenon. The Indonesian constitution (Law No. 10/2008, 2008) states that 30% of legislative candidates should be women. This development coincides with the emergence of Islam as a formidable political force in the country. Islam has moved toward the center and become expressions at all front. In the political, legal, economic, as well as social and cultural practices, Islam is overwhelmingly predominant.² Borrowing Fealy et al. “Islam has played a broader role than ever before.”³

Over the past fifteen years, a number of female figures have assumed public roles as members of House of Representatives both national (DPR/DPD) or local level (DPRD), governors, regents or mayors. In the 2014 general elections, 97 women were elected as members of DPR out of 560 seats available. In 2019, this number increased to 120 out of 575 members. By comparison, during the 1992 and 1997 elections, out of 500 DPR members, only 62 and 58 were women.⁴

With regard to regional leadership, the role of women in the public office has also seen a significant increase. Thus, there were 26 women elected as heads of local government in the period between 2005-2015. Of these 26 individuals, 18 were in Java.⁵ In the 2018 regional

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2016.1177974>; Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, “The Emergence of Female Politicians in Local Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia,” *Journal of Indonesian Social Sciences and Humanities* 5, no 1 (2017), 61–68. <https://doi.org/10.14203/jissh.v5i1.30>; Bani Syarif Maula, “Indonesia Muslim Woman in Contemporary Political Contestations: Challenges to Gender Mainstreaming Policy in The 2019 Elections,” *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 19, no 2 (2019), 195–217. <https://doi.org/10.21154/altahrir.v19i2.1725>; M. Mahsun, M. Z. Elizabeth & S Mufrikhah, “Female Candidates, Islamic Women’s Organisations, and Clientelism in the 2019 Indonesian Elections,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, no 1 (2021), 73–92. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103420988729>

² N Hasan, The making of public Islam: Piety, agency, and commodification on the landscape of the Indonesian public sphere,” *Contemporary Islam* 3, no 3 (2009), 229–250. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-009-0096-9>

³ Greg Fealy, S White (eds), *Expressing Islam: Religious life and politics in Indonesia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2008), 15

⁴ Edward Aspinall, S White & A Savirani, “Women’s Political Representation in Indonesia: Who Wins and How?,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 40, no 1 (2021), 3–27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103421989720>

⁵ Dewi, “The Emergence of Female,” 61-68.

elections, there were 31 women elected out of 342 candidates as heads of local government.⁶ This is a huge jump considering that in the period between 1974-1998, there were only two women that served as head of public office.⁷

Political leadership is the public realm where all walks of people can participate. The participation of Bu Nyai in politics in particular, who leave their comfort zone as religious teachers,⁸ has increased significantly in recent years. They have the advantage of being equipped with high level of education and social prestige. This is apart from the fact that they are wives of Pak Kyai, head of pesantren, the traditional Islamic school that functions -when needed- as a political powerhouse. Conventionally, pesantren has been understood -in the words of Abdul Rahman Wahid- as “a dynamic social sub-culture”.⁹ Individuals affiliated with pesantren would normally be treated in high honor.

Bu Nyai -having represented pesantren- is not an exception. They belong to a different class and level, as it were. Paradoxically though, the Javanese culture -and equally of pesantren- is patriarchal. How these women managed to come to terms with such culture is in itself an intriguing question. Within pesantren environment, Bu Nyai are often seen as secondary to their husbands. What they would normally do is to look after their children and do domestic works. Some of them would indeed, run a business or do academic jobs. But that does make them superior to Pak Kyai. Hence, Bu Nyai face interactional awkwardness at two different levels, that is, at societal and internally within their own community. How they navigate themselves in such

⁶ Titi Anggraeni, “Potret Perempuan Kepala Daerah Terpilih di Pilkada 2018,” <http://perluadem.org/2018/08/01/potret-perempuan-kepala-daerah-terpilih-di-pilkada-2018/>

⁷ Dewi, “The Emergence of Female,” 61-68.

⁸ Moona Maghfirah and Ahmad Rafiq, “The Qur’anic Movement Gerakan Ayo Mengaji (Gerami) in Jambi: An Intersectional Analysis of Women, Gender, and Class,” *Al-Jami’Ab: Journal of Islamic Studies* 63, no 1 (2025), 143-172.

⁹ M Falikul Isbah, “Pesantren in the Changing Indonesian Context: History and Current Developments,” *QIIS Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 8, no 1 (2020), 65. <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v8i1.5629>; Eka Srimulyani, “Muslim Women and Education in Indonesia: The Pondok Pesantren Experience,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* 27, no 1 (2007), 85–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188790601145564>; E Malihah, S Nurbayani & P Wulandari. “Women in the Eye of Pesantren,” *KnE Social Sciences* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v4i10.7387>

circumstances to win the heart and mind of their voters in political contestation is in itself important question to address.

To study Bu Nyai's political phenomenon is important yet for another reason. As Fauzi has indicated, study of this nature is still rare.¹⁰ Within the development national politics too, study such as this is still rare.

It is worthy noted that in the past two decades or so, the government has been very aggressive in promoting women's political right and have passed some laws to guarantee their participation. Within this important development, it is then legitimate to argue that women like Bu Nyai are direct beneficiaries of the law.¹¹ But their rise and prominence are not at all because of government intervention.

Having this in mind, there are two inter-related issues that this paper is interested to address. On the one hand, it is aimed at tracing the rise of Bu Nyai in the political realm by keeping in mind that being women they are not as preferable as man to hold a public office. On the other hand, it is destined to expose the idea that, while these Bu Nyai are somewhat marginalized, they nonetheless have social and spiritual capitals to appropriate. These capitals, are the values in action that ultimately define their political actions, guide them to draw up political agendas, and bring them to success. These values are represented in the ideals that norms must be upheld by means of defending women.

Bu Nyai's Social Capital and Liberal Democracy

As a theory, social capital assumes that social relationship is resources that can lead to the development and accumulation of human capital. This theory contends that everyone has this capital, and that it is exchanged with others to get something in return. This theory deals with multidimensional phenomenon including a collection of social norms, values, trust, obligations, relationships, networks, friends, membership, civic engagement, information flows, and institutions

¹⁰ Muhammad Latif Fauzi, "Traditional Islam in Javanese Society: The Roles of Kyai and Pesantren in Preserving Islamic Tradition and Negotiating Modernity," *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 6, no 1 (2012), 125. <https://doi.org/10.15642/JIIS.2012.6.1.125-144>

¹¹ E Syahrudin and A N Rohman, "Women's Leadership in the Indonesian Constitutional System and Islamic Law," *Al-Mazaahib* 13, no. 1 (2025): 106–7, <https://doi.org/10.14421/al-mazaahib.v13i1.4189>.

that encourage collective action for mutual benefit that contribute to social development.¹²

Bearing this theory in mind, it might be argued the political involvement of Bu Nyai is not as simple as one might assume. It is not simply about them accepting the offer from political parties to go for election. Nor is it about them taking the opportunity available before them. While they possess all capitals necessary to run the election, and become the political magnet to win the election, other factors such as the enactment of Law No. 2/2008, may also play an important role in their rise and prominence in politics.

Women have been quite prominent in the public space in the last two decades in Indonesia. Their rise in politics, bureaucracy and local government are clear testament for that. Many would look at this phenomenon as a logical consequence of not only the opportunity available for them, but also of their natural ability as public leader.¹³ For Bu Nyai in particular, while socially they have always been active, their rise in politics is partly due to their familial advantage, political dynasty, and certainly to them possessing social -as well as spiritual- capitals.¹⁴ This certainly is contradictory to the finding of Sally White et. al on the matter,¹⁵ at least in the cases of Bu Nyai.

This at least, is what seems apparent at the surface, and represents partially the whole picture. But the issue is not as simple as that. For many the “family thesis” is not satisfactory. Dewi for instance, argues that moral modalities play a significant role in the rise of women in the public space. In her words, “morality -combined with spirituality- is a strong social capital that increases women political bargaining

¹² H Bhandari & K Yasunobu, “What is Social Capital? A Comprehensive Review of the Concept,” *Asian Journal of Social Science* 37, no 3 (2009), 480–510. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853109X436847>; R Dubos, *Social Capital: Theory and Research* (2017). <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=1023502>

¹³ E Rhoads, “Women’s Political Participation in Indonesia: Decentralisation, Money Politics and Collective Memory in Bali,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 31, no 2 (2012), 35–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341203100202>; Aspinall et al., “Women’s Political Representation”.

¹⁴ E Prihatini and I Halimatusa’diyah, “Gender, Political Dynasties, and Committee Assignments: Evidence From Indonesia,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 77, no. 1 (2024): 202, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gxac019>.

¹⁵ S White et al., “Voting against Women: Political Patriarchy, Islam, and Representation in Indonesia,” *Politics and Gender* 20, no. 2 (2024): 391–421, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X23000648>.

power”.¹⁶ In Indonesia, religious symbols are regarded as representing deeper morality and spirituality. Wearing headscarf for instance, is strong message that one is religious. And this religiosity is what many voters prefer to vote.

For Dewi, headscarf is not only a trend as Beta has stated.¹⁷ It is not equally a sign of modernity, although it has -commercially speaking- been transformed into a modern fashion business. Still more, it is not mere representation of piety as some would tend to argue.¹⁸ It is rather “an acting morality”. Muslim women in the past two decades, have been able to make the utmost use of this symbol to communicate to their constituents, apparently in a comfortable manner. It has become a medium of communication, a way of sending the message.

Dewi's thesis is therefore, a refutation of the previous view on women political role and the function of headscarf at the same time. Dewi's “acting morality” thesis is based on the notion that religious belief plays the most basic and fundamental role in shaping people's behavior as “exemplified in the case of NU women (Muslimat)”. It is here that women role becomes apparent. All NU women are veiled, and many -if not all- are social -or at least religious- activist. They organize religious gathering regularly often to recite the Qur'an collectively and listen to religious sermon by preacher. Hence, moral inculcation is taking place at regular basis. Although being member of this organization does not guarantee that one would be morally good and socially active, the environment here is so vibrant that all will feel “encouraged to become active in their respective community by means of their morality”.¹⁹

¹⁶ Kurniawati Hastuti Dewi, “Piety and Sexuality in a Public Sphere: Experiences of Javanese Muslim Women's Political Leadership,” *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 23, no. 2 (2017), 340–362. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2017.1352250>

¹⁷ Annisa R Beta. Commerce, “Piety and Politics: Indonesian young Muslim women's groups as religious influencers,” *New Media & Society* 21, no. 10 (2019), 2140–2159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819838774>

¹⁸ Suzanne Brenner, “Reconstructing self and society: Javanese Muslim women and ‘the veil,’” *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (1996), 673–697. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1996.23.4.02a00010>; Saskia E Wieringa, “Gender Harmony and the Happy Family: Islam, Gender and Sexuality in Post-Reformasi Indonesia,” *South East Asia Research* 23, no. 1 (2015), 27–44. <https://doi.org/10.5367/scar.2015.0244>; Robert W Hefner, “The Hidden Form of Capital. In Islam and Spiritual Capital: An Indonesian Case Study,” (2012), 193–215). <https://doi.org/10.7135/upo9780857289520>.

¹⁹ Dewi, “The Emergence of Female”.

Dewi's thesis is not without challenge. Aspinall for instance contends that the success of women in the public space and in political field, is primarily because of their gender identity on the one hand, and because of their ability to navigate gender issue on the other. This "gender" thesis is developed on the bases of survey undertaken in 2019 in the wake of legislative elections. The survey found that majority of 129 female legislative candidates see gender-related problems such as funding, access to the political elites, and leadership experience as potential cause of their failure. The ability to deal with these issues guarantee women to attract not only fellow women voters but also men and youngsters.²⁰ In Central Java, as Mahsun has shown, many women candidates did have such gender-related problems. But they are capable of dealing with them in a very simple way; they speak to the public as women and address women problems as women too. In Eastern Indonesia, Asliah et al assert that non-elite women successfully secured their political position by employing non-conventional political capital.²¹ This way of campaign proved effective to win people heart.²² Almost the same scenario might be seen in the case of NU senior women members (Muslimat) and junior women members (Fatayat). The only difference is that these NU affiliates have national network and make the best use it for their advantage.²³ Admittedly, as Qodir asserts, NU, along with Muhammadiyah, is powerful Islamic civil society organization in Indonesia.²⁴ This in turn contributes to the acceptance of *bu Nyai* as part of NU in politics.

Bu Nyai are parts of NU, hence members of Muslimat, or else Fatayat in the case of them being juniors. They have no problem therefore, with the networks given that they are normally respected across the country particularly among NU associates. By all accounts,

²⁰ Aspinall et al., "Women's Political Representation".

²¹ A Zainal et al., "Navigating Politics: How Non-Elite Women In Eastern Indonesia Counteract Dynastic Power," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, no. 2 (2025): 793–801, <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i2.2088>.

²² Mahsun, Elizabeth & Mufrikhah, "Female Candidates, Islamic Women's Organisations, and Clientelism," 73–92.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 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), 181.

Bu Nyai have all sorts of social capital required to participate in political contestation both local and national.²⁵

It might be useful in this context of analysis, to make clear that social capital refers to beliefs, networks, and norms that are managed for mutual benefit. It is also, in the words of Putnam, “features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation among people.”²⁶ Coleman sees social capital as related to obligations and expectations, information channels and social norms.²⁷ To illustrate his point, Coleman came up with the following example: If A does something to B, and entrusts B to reciprocate in the future, this is what is called expectation, which at the same time creates obligation. The relationship between A and B should be based on trust if expectation and obligation are to realize. The same relationship is simultaneously dependent on information network between the two, and is strengthened by social norms that bind them. By associating social capital with the growth of young nation, and the nourishment of family values, Coleman said:

A prescriptive norm within a collectivity that constitutes an especially important form of social capital is the norm that one should forgo self-interest and act in the interests of the collectivity. A norm of this sort, reinforced by social support, status, honor, and other rewards is the social capital that builds young nations (and then dissipates as they grow older, strengthens families by leading family members to act selfless.²⁸

Social capital however, has also something to do with religion but not in the same manner that it is associated with nation and family. While social capital is the determinant factor as far as nation and family are concerned, it is the dependent aspect when it comes to religion. In

²⁵ K H Dewi, “Hybrid Feminist Leadership?: Feminist Leadership on the Ground—Experiences of Women Political Leaders in Indonesia,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 26, no. 5 (2024): 1105, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2024.2424812>.

²⁶ Robert D Putnam, “Tuning in, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America,” *Political Science and Politics* 28, no. 4 (1995), 664. <https://doi.org/10.2307/420517>

²⁷ Jame S Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” *The American Journal of Sociology* (1988), 95–120.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

other words, as Kettel has rightly pointed out, “social capital is inferior to -and comes from- faith”.²⁹

Religion by extension, is not only the source of social capital but also of spiritual and political one. It is by virtue of this that a political party in Indonesia especially in the aftermath of Reformation Era gained popularity. Religion especially Islam has become a noticeable political force here. Candland identified this success not merely because of Islam as such, but because of religious elites’ ability “to convert religious ideals into concrete political agendas”.³⁰ The NU elites- Bu Nyai included- are well-known for this.

This way of explaining the phenomenon of Bu Nyai’s success story in politics resembles Dewi’s “acting morality” theory. But while Dewi emphasizes more on the appropriation of religious symbol in politics, this latest one looks at rather on converting religious ideals into political capital. At the end however, both theories believe in morality as the most precious modality in politics. Dewi’s theory implies that Bu Nyai’s success lies in their moral outlook; an outlook that might be seen from their headscarf and family background. The later theory implies that the success of the post-reformation Islamic political parties is due to their political capitals being emanated religious ideals; ideals that put more stressing on morality.

As might be expected, this notion of morality as modality stands as a serious challenge to neo-liberalism, which does not believe in religion, spirituality or morality. In the case of Indonesia, the neo-liberals look at the general elections simply as “big market”, where there are transactions between buyers (actors) and sellers (voters). This practice is quite common, and according to Aspinall, has become “quasi-legal” in the country.³¹ The success of Bu Nyai -or any candidates in that matter- is therefore believed to be the result of this

²⁹ S Kettell, “Social Capital and Religion in the United Kingdom. In P. C. Manuel & M. Glatzer (eds), *Faith-Based Organizations and Social Welfare* (London: Springer International Publishing, 2019), 185–203. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77297-4_8

³⁰ C Candland, “Faith as Social Capital: Religion and Community Development in Southern Asia,” *Policy Sciences* 33, no. 3-4 (2000), 355–374. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1004857811117>

³¹ Edward Aspinall, “A Nation in Fragments: Patronage and Neoliberalism in Contemporary Indonesia,” *Critical Asian Studies* 45, no. 1 (2013), 27–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2013.758820>; Edward Aspinall & M Sukmajati (eds), *Electoral Dynamics in Indonesia: Money Politics, Patronage and Clientelism at the Grassroots* (Singapore: NUS Press Pte Ltd, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1xxzz2>

transaction. It has nothing to do with gender, family, let alone morality, spirituality and religion.

The pragmatic explanation of the neo-liberals seeks to show that in political practices there is always a patronage relationship in which political actors provide funds, rewards, projects, or simply sell promises in order to get elected.³² In this discourse, politics is about a practice whereby all resources are mobilized to achieve set goals. Like economics, politics is also a market where transactions run freely depending on consumer demand. In the words of Patrick, “within neoliberal doctrine, the market becomes the central organizing principle for political, economic, and social decision making”.³³ Market-style political transactions provide space for financiers to buy and sell votes. The more capital one has, the better change he/she has to get elected. A great number of experts believe that neo-liberalism contradicts the principles of democracy, but it prevails in many societies.³⁴

Indonesia is not an exception. Many recent studies have shown that this practice is rampant and deep-rooted in the country’s ill-mannered politics. Muhtadi for instance, upon finishing his research on vote-buying says, “my study found empirical evidence that such practice in general is widespread in Indonesian elections”.³⁵ He added that the sum that most candidates pay ranges between 50,000 to 200,000 Rupiah. In poor areas, they pay less than 50,000 Rupiah. The island with most cases of vote-buying is Kalimantan (32%), the less case being Java (12%).

So widespread this practice is, that most candidates have likely fallen to its prey. One can assume with certainty that, in this “free market” no candidate -with a very few exception- is immune from the

³² U Fiona & D Tomsa, “Changing Patterns of Factionalism in Indonesia: From Principle to Patronage,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2020), 39–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1868103419896904>

³³ F Patrick, “Neoliberalism, the Knowledge Economy, and the Learner: Challenging the Inevitability of the Commodified Self as an Outcome of Education,” *ISRN Education* (2013), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2013/108705>

³⁴ A. J. Ayers & A. Saad-Filho, “Democracy against Neoliberalism: Paradoxes, Limitations, Transcendence,” *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 4-5 (2015), 597–618. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920513507789>

³⁵ Burhanuddin Muhtadi, “The Prevalence of Vote Buying in Indonesia: Building an Index,” B. Muhtadi, *Vote Buying in Indonesia* (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019), 45–79. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-6779-3_2

vote-buying. During general elections, people would normally speak about it in all corners of everyday life, in the coffee-shop, mall, market, campus, even mosques and religious gatherings. This signals that this practice is too common to ignore.

Bu Nyai, Muslimat and Public Sphere

It was 19.00 in the afternoon. Most of Indonesian women would have been at their respective homes taking lease or looking after their household after day-full works. But the same does not apply for Dewi Khalifah (DK), a woman that serves as the Deputy Regent in Sumenep, in which gender equality is still a distant realization amidst conservative stance of many ulama in the region.³⁶ When we visited her, she was busy receiving guests at her office. Some guests came to ask for job, others to consult on family matters, while still others to complain about public service. We were the last in the queue that night and were called in 20.00. We interviewed her for more than one hour. She looked strong and happy, and keeps smiling for as long as our interview.

Other two women that we visited to interview was Nyai Khaironi (Kh), Deputy Regent of Situbondo, and Aminatun Habibah (AH), Deputy Regent of Gresik. We met the two at their respective official residence after working hours. We waited on the queue as many others would do. When we were called in, we were welcomed with an open arm and great warmth. We felt at home almost instantly. The two show us respect and friendly faces although they looked tired after day-full works full with agendas and commitments ranging from meetings, regional visits, and attending central and provincial invitations. The two *Bu Nyai* -we learnt- had never spent their weekend out of office. Even during Saturdays and Sundays, they would still do their works, while during working days, they would stay in the office until late at night.

This short piece of story illustrates the circumstances of daily activities of the three *Bu Nyai* that we study. The three are women with pesantren family background. Before assuming an office, they were active as members and leaders of Muslimat. DK was the chairperson of Muslimat in Sumenep and the Regional Coordinator of

³⁶ Achmad Rozi et al., "Negotiating Gender Equality: NU Scholars' Perceptions of Women's Role in Sumenep," *Islamica: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 20 (2025): 53, <https://doi.org/10.15642/islamica.2025.20.1.52-75>.

Muslimat for the whole island of Madura. Before being elected as Deputy Regent, she was a regional legislative member (DPRD) and Chairman of the Hanura Party. Kh in the meantime was the head of Muslimat in Situbondo, and has led this organization at various levels from village, sub-district and district levels. Before being elected Deputy Regent, she was a member of DPRD and regional head of Unity and Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan/PPP). AH equally was an important person within Muslimat. She served as an administrator and leader of Muslimat for Gresik branch at all levels.

As NU-based women organization therefore, the Muslimat has prepared a fertile ground for the future leaders. But it has also softened the same grounds for its members -especially its leaders- to develop a sensitive sense to women-related issues. The Muslimat is apparently gender-conscious and is fond of echoing gender-based problems such as women rights, women labor, domestic violence against women, women education and the like.³⁷ Therefore, although Muslimat is part of conservative-traditionalist Muslim organization of Nahdlatul Ulama, conservative ideas that value women in private roles is no longer a barrier for them.³⁸

Stressing the importance of Muslimat, DK emphatically iterates during interview that, “as an organization, the Muslimat is very popular among the masses. For many young women leaders, it is an entry point to reach higher in their leadership career including in politics” (DK, interview August 11, 2021).

Leadership, being politically engaged together with a strong sense of gender-consciousness, are systematically engrained in NU-based organizations. NU so-called Kyais are known to have produced discourses that defend women and encourage them to be active in society and politics. Thus, in 1997, NU issued an official statement number No. 004/MN-NU/11/1997, to the effect that women are to be facilitated as potential candidates for the future national and local

³⁷ M R Muqtada, A S bin Mustapha, and A Mufid, “Fiqh Contestation on Women’s Public Leadership in Indonesia and Malaysia: Reproducing Qur’anic and Hadith Interpretations,” *Al-Ihkam: Jurnal Hukum Dan Pranata Sosial* 19, no. 1 (2024): 223, <https://doi.org/10.19105/al-lhkam.v19i1.13163>.

³⁸ S Hardani and M Albahi, “The Role of Women in Politics in Indonesia: Critical Review of Islamic Law,” *Samarub* 9, no. 2 (2025): 1112–13, <https://doi.org/10.22373/-dqmjva57>.

leadership.³⁹ The statement is the product of collective thinking and intensive discussion among the Kyais and their students known in NU as *Babth al-Masa'il*. The NU thinkers are also strong advocate of the inseparability of politics and religion known in the Islamic politic literature as *al-Siyah al-Sbar'iyyah* of which al-Mawardi and Ibn Taimiyah are strong proponents.⁴⁰

This official statement functions not only as an immediate support for women but also as the direct form of legitimacy to run for the public office. The victory of many NU women candidates in the election is partly because of this.

This is apart from the issue that these candidates raise during the campaign, which they keep on addressing during their term in the office. The pragmatic concern of NU to women-related issues on the one hand, and their religion-based interpretation on the basic teaching of Islam on women on the other, have greatly impacted the way these women run their office and deal with their subjects. Unlike their fellow men, the leadership of these NU women are motherly, so to speak. They speak to their subjects especially women, as mother or sister. Hence, their office resembles a household. The spirit of being mother is ever-present not only in their own house, but also in their office. In an interview, DK says, "obligations as a public official in no way interfere with the main task as a mother, especially in terms of educating children and teaching at the pesantren. Everything must be done in an flexible manner. Quality should precede quantity" (DK, interview, August 11, 2021). Indeed, the roles of women in pesantren have improved in recent years to tackle not only teaching, but caregiving and management.⁴¹

On Saturdays and Sundays when she is free of duty, she would return home, care for her family and teach at her pesantren. She says, "for pesantren woman like me, the strength of family is what keeps me strong and steadfast. The fundamental task of women is to make sure that their children have proper education. Women should be appreciated domestically and socially for what they have done. The

³⁹ Dewi, "The Emergence of Female", 68

⁴⁰ Ali Haidar, *Nahdlatul Ulama dan Islam Indonesia* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 1994).

⁴¹ Wina Wardiana, Adi Fadli, and Masnun, "Contribution of Women in the Education Management of Islamic Boarding School," *Ulumuna* 28, no. 1 SE-Articles (2024): 399–400, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujs.v28i1.805>.

welfare of our society depends so much on women. No matter how busy they are at their work, they should not forget their household. The real value of women lies not in their career, but in their motherhood".⁴²

It is an issue such as this that DK and other NU women like her address in their routine activities. They do so in a quite effective manner given that they have enough experience as mothers in their respective household.

In this way, the political and leadership style of these women looks sexy and attractive. No doubt that many political parties in the country including the nationalist ones are interested in recruiting them to represent the parties in political contestation. Study by Dewi shows that moves by political parties -especially when time has come for general elections- to look for NU women in many NU-affiliated schools are common.⁴³ Political parties that have ideological affiliation with NU are even more aggressive in doing so.⁴⁴ These NU-oriented parties would normally make use of religious activities organized by the Muslimat such as routine Qur'anic recitation, *manaqib* and *istighatsah* to promote their parties and recruit the best NU cadres.⁴⁵

The Muslimat on its part, was never meant to be political or as a feeding mechanism for political parties. It was established as a religious-social body to facilitate NU-women to organize religious activities. Since its establishment in 1946, a year after Indonesia's independence, the organization has been vital in catering women's religious enthusiasm. In modern Indonesia, the organization has been rigorous in playing its social, educational and religious role particularly through da'wah activities.⁴⁶

The Muslimat turned political since 1955, especially when NU became political party and participated in the 1955 elections. This continues until 1971, when NU again participated in general elections. In these two elections, the Muslimat stood firm for NU and supplied

⁴² Malihah, S Nurbayani & P Wulandari, "Women in the Eye of Pesantren," *KnE Social Sciences* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v4i10.7387>

⁴³ Dewi, "The Emergence of Female", 68

⁴⁴ E.S. Prihatini, "Islam, Parties, and Women's Political Nomination in Indonesia," *Politics & Gender* (2019), 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X19000321>

⁴⁵ I Ishomuddin, "Understanding of Political Culture in Citizen pf Muslimat NU in East Java," *El Harakah* 21, no. 2 (2019), 313. <https://doi.org/10.18860/el.v21i2.7398>

⁴⁶ Ishomuddin, "Understanding of Political".

large number of voters for its interest. “This is natural”, Nyai Nafi, head of Muslimat in Gresik once said in an interview. “What should not be forgotten is”, she added, “that Muslimat politics is national politics for the sake of not only Islam but also Indonesia. Muslimat has never been greedy for power” (Nafi, interview, September 18, 2021).

During the New Order era, the Muslimat was quite distant from politics roughly from 1971 until 1998. It returned to politics since then, in a rather more sophisticated manner. At the surface, it remains as it is as NU-based social movement for women. But deep inside, it does not stop orchestrating the role of women in the country’s political contestation. Not that it is tempted for power, but because in its discourse, being religious -at the most basic level- means getting engaged in politics. This is what many Muslimat elites call, “the natural way of playing politics”.

Defending Women, Upholding Norm

Part of being natural in politics is to be engaged in it purely to serve the nation. This in itself is a moral calling. Some -if not all- *Bu Nyais* are well-off. Their engagement in politics cannot be said as motivated by economic reasons. They are rich already by virtue of them having the pesantren. Some of them have businesses from small, medium to large ones.⁴⁷ Rozaki discovered that businesses run by pesantren are normally family-oriented and aimed at “fulfilling their individual needs”.⁴⁸ Because of their status as family of pesantren, business owner, and religious teacher, they are respected in their society by neighbors, students and alumni. In Mahmudi’s words, they are the “mentors of their respective community”.⁴⁹ This respect is

⁴⁷ Evi Muafiah et al., “Gendered Pesantren in Contemporary Indonesia: Female Agency, Institution, and Everyday Lives,” *QIJIS Qudus International Journal of Islamic Studies* 12 (2024), 42, <https://doi.org/10.21043/qijis.v12i1.19859>.

⁴⁸ A Rozaki, *Menabur Karisma Menuai Kuasa: Kiprah Kiai dan Blater sebagai Rezim Kembar di Madura* (Malang: Ircisod, 2019), 109.

⁴⁹ Dodik Harnadi, Hotman Siahaan, & Masdar Hilmy, “Pesantren and the preservation of traditional religious authority in the digital age,” *Masyarakat, Kebudayaan dan Politik* 34, no. 3 (2021), 272–280. <https://doi.org/10.20473/mkp.V34I32021.272-280>; Y Machmudi, Preserving Kyai Authority in Modern Society A case study of Pesantren Cidahu, Pandeglang, Banten,” *Wacana* 15, no. 2 (2015), 336. <https://doi.org/10.17510/wacana.v15i2.407>; Y Pribadi, “Religious Networks in Madura: Pesantren, Nahdlatul Ulama, and Kiai as the Core of Santri Culture,” *Al-Jami’ab: Journal of Islamic Studies* 51, no. 1 (2013), 1. <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2013.511.1-32>

natural and is not intentionally orchestrated for certain political purpose.

For some Bu Nyai therefore, politics is not a means of earning a living. On the contrary, it is a moral calling. It is a means to uphold norms and serve the country by emancipating and defending women. In the eyes of Bu Nyai, women in Indonesia are still lacking proper opportunity. They are marginalized. Describing the discrimination against women, DK said in an interview:

The leader's job is to understand all the problems faced by the nation. There is a tendency for male leaders to not fully understand the will of their citizens, especially women. For example, I see that government offices do not provide special rooms for women, both as employees and guests, such as places for breastfeeding, changing equipment for women's needs, to the treatment of women who menstruate. That's just a small example. Men may understand but they do not care. Only women understand women (DK, interview, August 11, 2023).

Such discrimination may be seen as insignificant in Indonesia. But for these Bu Nyai, it reflects the incapability of the current leaders, especially among men, to address women issues. It also means that women leadership is required to address this very important issue. Kh said:

Women's basic needs are about education of children and family. Often these needs are ignored. Women are economically vulnerable because they are always subordinated to men. The task of policy makers is to make sure that women be empowered, qualified and independent so that they are not subdued by men. Some of the existing policies have been implemented but not fully managed. For this reason, women must lead to defend women because it is women that understand women. Defending women literally means upholding norms (Khairani, Interview, September 22, 2021).

Bu Nyai AH specifies the areas in which women may be defended. For her, to defend women means to support child and family education. She said:

Not many people think that the main issue at national level is education for children and families. Where this nation is heading depends on the educational qualities of children and

families. This aspect has not received enough attention both from government (policy makers) and from people. Only mothers realize it. It is for this reason that women leaders are important, because they are the ones that understand children and families. Families need support from policy makers to produce regulation that prepares a strong generation (AH, interview, September 28, 2021).

The problem that lies at the heart of all these is that, women themselves are not properly prepared to take up the leading role in society or in government. They do not have enough knowledge, competence, experience or skill to lead. The Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection (PPPA) reports that in 2020, the average period of women go to school is 8.42 compared to men which is 8.8. That affects the employment rate, which stands at 3/2 the comparison between man and women (out of 3 men workers, there is 1 woman worker). In terms of wage, men earn better than women. It stands at average of IDR 3,167,092 for men, and IDR 2,451,057 for women each month. Men also have a better opportunity to direct access to education, knowledge and technology, which stands at 50.55 in comparison for women at 44.85. On the contrary, on health issue, women are better than men. Only 48.8 of them have health problem, compared to 51.99 among men (Indonesian Women's Profile 2020, 2020, pp. vii-x).

Women are also not fortunate in another respect. Socially speaking, they often received an unfair treatment by their society. Hence, according to press release by the Ministry of PPPA in 2016, most women are discriminated against. Some discriminations are systematic and structured, such as that which is related to the racist behavior of some government employers, or unintended such as that which they receive from government apparatus out of ignorance of regulation.

The regulation and sets of rule in the form of law, are in place as far as women right and their protection are concerned. To some extent this law and regulation are clear, straightforward, and fair. They serve women favor. They are six laws on women, passed in the parliament since the Reformation Era in 19998, in addition to a few drafts that are

still debated in the House of Parliament.⁵⁰ These six laws include, a) law on human right of which women right is part, b) law on domestic violence, c) law on citizenship, d) law on human trafficking, e) law on political right, and f) presidential decree on gender mainstreaming. Certainly, the sexual violence crime law in 2022 is the last to date.⁵¹

Apart from these laws and regulation, there are also Non-government Organization (NGO) that seek to provide platform for women to echo their concern. Prominent among these is Network for Pro-Women National Legislation Program (Jaringan Kerja Prolegnas Pro Perempuan/JKP3). NGO such as this work to push the government to formulate law concerning women and passing it in the parliament. Affirmation action against women is the issue that the NGOs tried to eliminate.

What the NGOs pursue, goes in a perfect line with the idea of “defending women” that some Bu Nyai are after. In an interview, DK emphasizes, “only a few understand about women and the importance of proper policies to support women both domestically and in the public spheres. This is what encourages women like me to take up public positions” (DK, interview, August 11, 2021).

The multifold problems that women faced cannot be addressed properly unless women hold a public office. That is the logic that some Bu Nyai have and the motivation behind them pursuing the popular vote. DK said in an interview, “there are fundamental problems both upstream and downstream concerning the marginalization of women. Upstream in the form of policies and downstream in the form of practices. The result of this is a culture that legitimizes the discrimination against women. Gradually we will eradicate this by means of correct policy” (Khairani, interview, September 22, 2021).

Even withing pesantren, such a culture is quite strong and common. At the surface, pesantren seems to be the ideal representation of equality between men and women. While that might be true at some instance, the role of women is nonetheless still overshadowed by that of men. Paradoxically, some Bu Nyai that often

⁵⁰ EK Poerwandari, R. B. Munti & J Viemilawati, “Pro-women’s policy advocacy movements in Indonesia: Struggles and reflections, *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 24, no. 4 (2018), 489–509. <https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2018.1538646>

⁵¹ Wahidah Zein Br Siregar and Ella Syafputri Prihatini, “Passing the Sexual Violence Crime Law in Indonesia: Reflection of a Gender-Sensitive Parliament?,” *Politics and Governance* 12 (2024) 9–10.

symbolize equality are themselves victims of inequality in their respective household. What they fight for through politics, is therefore a battle not only for the sake of their voters, but also for the sake of remedying the patriarchal culture in their pesantren.

Anthropological studies have shown that Bu Nyai in the pesantren are always seen as secondary to Pak Kyai (the husband of Bu Nyai). Hence Geertz,⁵² Horikoshi,⁵³ and Alfirdaus⁵⁴ discovered that Bu Nyai are not more than wives and daughters. Like any other wives and daughters in the Javanese tradition, they are inferior to Pak Kyai and Gus (the son of Kyai). In all Javanese pesantren, Pak Kyai occupies the very center of his community. He personifies not only religious authority but also -borrowing Max Weber- charismatic and intellectual one. Both in his pesantren and in society at large, Pak Kyai is highly respected and -in some cases- even sanctified. At this juncture, the position of Bu Nyai appears only at the periphery whose importance is fully reliant on the authority of Pak Kyai. It is only when Pak Kyai passed away that the influence of Bu Nyai, his son, daughter, son-in-law or daughter-in-law might be felt.

The emergence of Bu Nyai in the public and political sphere in Indonesia is therefore against all odds, given the above circumstances. This might reflect the changing nature of society on the one hand, and the changing orientation of the pesantren culture on the other. Bu Nyai's participation in political contestation -while does not initially put them at ease- has changed not only the way pesantren is perceived politically and culturally, but also the way Bu Nyai is situated in the whole structure of society. Although the authority of Bu Nyai within pesantren is still narrow and limited, they enjoy popularity and fame in the political realm particularly among women and the marginalized.

Defending women might not be easy for these Bu Nyai given the complexity they faced both at the grassroot where negative perception concerning women is still rampant, and at the strategic or leadership level where not all top leaders are supporting their political agendas. This complexity is further compounded by the fact that some *Kyai*

⁵² C Geertz, "The Javanese Kijaji: The Changing Role of a Cultural Broker," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 2, no. 2 (1960), 228–249.

⁵³ H Horikoshi, *Kiai dan Perubahan Sosial* (Jakarta: P3M, 1987).

⁵⁴ L.K. Alfirdaus, "Islam and Local Politics: In the Quest of Kyai, Politics, and Development in Kebumen, 2008-2010," *Al-Jami'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies* 51, no. 3 (2013), 279–309 <https://doi.org/10.14421/ajis.2013.512.279-309>

continue to resist the involvement of *Bu Nyai* in political activities, reflecting persistent patriarchal interpretations of religious authority. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the majority of *Kyai* actively support and legitimize the political roles of *Bu Nyai*, providing religious, moral, and organizational backing that enables their continued engagement in public and political spheres

What might stand in Bu Nyai's way is the fact that most of them occupy the post as Vice Regent, a position below the authority -and is inferior to- the Regent. Their political agenda regarding women depends fully on the approval of their superior. As Law No. 23/2014 state, "the duty of Deputy Regent is to assist the Regent in the areas of development, supervision and control. Decision and policy-making lies at the hand of the Regent".

In East Java, there is only one Bu Nyai that occupies the position as Regent, which is Nyai Munjidah of Jombang. She previously served as Vice Regent, and was automatically promoted as Regent by virtue of the Regent being jailed on charges of corruption. What seems intriguing is the fact that as a Regent, Nyai Munjidah does not have a strong commitment in promoting, defending and protecting the right of women. There is a dilemma therefore; the three Bu Nyai have political will to emancipate women but have no necessary political power, while the only Regent is equipped with political power but has no political will.

The effective way that the three Bu Nyai can do in defending women is therefore, not to rely solely on their political power. And that what they seem to have realized. What they can do -and seemingly have done- is to appropriate their cultural *elan vital* to echo their concern and influence both their superior and the public. Being Bu Nyai is in itself a powerful cultural modality for these women. Even if they do not hold a public office, they are still influential by virtue of their background. They have that modality to mobilize people and orchestrate their orientation. They are capable of transforming ideas into action, and action into policies or vice versa.

At the more idealistic level, what these Bu Nyai have done is integrating the spiritual values with their political role. At this juncture, it is important to note in this context of analysis that Islam has become an integral part of this nation's political journey since its very inception. Political participation of Muslims has been up and down depending on circumstances. However, in the last two decades or so since

reformation, Muslims have been significantly active in politics resulting in many pesantren women to also take part in it. At the surface, they are now visible everywhere politically speaking. They are active in politics through religion-based political parties or civil society movements”.⁵⁵ Their presence might also be felt in the decision-making circles. They hold a high and important position within the government.⁵⁶ As the country became democratized and open, many pesantren women took the opportunity to get involved in politics making the best use of their social and spiritual capital.

Indeed, the involvement of pesantren women in politics is not entirely new in this country. During the New Order era (1966-1998), many of them have been entrusted to hold a public office or as members of ruling political party, Golkar. But due to the overwhelming power of Soeharto at the time, the influence of pesantren women -or men in that matter- was duly overshadowed.

Now, their political involvement is as natural as it was before. But the level of freedom they enjoy, and their exposure is starkly different. In the current situation, one is free to exert and exercise his/her power and influence to win people’s votes. Positively speaking, democracy in the country has provided all possibilities for women to embark on a political journey. It is the powerful that would ultimately win and survive in the contestation. Bu Nyai are among those powerful.

As has been indicated elsewhere, the power of Bu Nyai lies in their social and spiritual capitals. In terms of social capital, the success of some Bu Nyai in gaining popularity and assuming public office particularly as Vice Regent is due to their ability to manage it for political purpose. In line with Putnam, such social capital as beliefs, norms and networks may be beneficial as means to gain power when they are managed accordingly.⁵⁷ Social capital may be appropriated in terms of reciprocal relationship. Once this is realized, solidarity may be built among members of certain group and collective goals may be achieved.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Fealy, *Expressing Islam*.

⁵⁶ N Hasan, “The making of public Islam: Piety, agency, and commodification on the landscape of the Indonesian public sphere,” *Contemporary Islam* 3, no. 3 (2009), 229–250. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-009-0096-9>

⁵⁷ Putnam, “Tuning In, Tuning Out”.

⁵⁸ M.R. Iravani, “The role of social capital on development,” *Journal of Alternative Perspectives in the Social Sciences* 10 (2010), 966–978.

To some extent, the social capital of Bu Nyai works in this way. After all, such dynamics has been the very trait of social life in pesantren. Hence, it is not too surprising that Bu Nyai were fluent in exerting their influence in politics, for they have already such experience in their daily life in pesantren.

Support from students, alumni, pesantren-based organizations, fellow Bu Nyai and close families gave more impetus for their social capital to gain even more political force.⁵⁹ It is when this force was converted into mass votes that these Bu Nyai are successful in political contestation.⁶⁰

Support from political party to which these Bu Nyai are affiliated, cannot be ignored. This support might even represent the highest percentage for their success. The most popular party of which most Bu Nyai are members, is Nation's Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa/PKB). This party was founded by Abdurahman Wahid (Gus Dur) the former president, along with other leading Nahdhatul Ulama (NU) clerics, the largest Muslim organization in the country.⁶¹

NU itself is an organization with a very strong social and spiritual capital. Hefner noted that it was due to this capital that Gus Dur was elected as president in 1999-2001.⁶² The strength of NU is too obvious to discuss. It has the membership of over 100 million across the country and abroad. Its network covers almost all government and civil organization lines in the country. It has sub-organizations such as the Muslimat, Fatayat, Ansor and IPNU/IPPNU all of which are powerful in their own right. These organizations are "active vote getters" for both legislative and executive elections at national and regional level.⁶³ Major surveys conducted on the political candidates affiliated with these organizations, found that voters consider these candidates to be religious, morally sound and politically competent.

⁵⁹ S Kholifah, "Capital Exchange between Islamic Boarding Schools and Political Parties in the 2019 Election," *Wawasan: Jurnal Ilmiah Agama Dan Sosial Budaya* 5, no. 1 (2020), 43–56. <https://doi.org/10.15575/jw.v5i1.7562>

⁶⁰ K Kusmana, "Pesantren and Local Female Leadership in Modern Indonesia," *Tarbiya: Journal of Education in Muslim Society* 6, no. 1 (2019), 23–35. <https://doi.org/10.15408/tjems.v6i1.8919>

⁶¹ Z. A. Amir, *Peta Islam Politik Pasca Soebarto* (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2003)

⁶² Hefner, "The Hidden Form".

⁶³ Candland, "Faith as Social".

All this is to say that while *Bu Nyai* -by their very definition as wives of *Pak Kyai*- have already social capital integral within their persons, they also earn added capital by being members -and supported by- the NU and its affiliate organizations. The same is true with regards to their spiritual capital; capital that has to do with trustworthiness, behavior, honesty and responsibility. Although these *Bu Nyai* do not exemplify these values in their entirety, they nonetheless are seen as symbolizing the alternative to that set of norms that cause a collective outrage such as corruption and bankrupt bureaucracy.

In the public imagination at least, *Bu Nyai* are still deemed as kind mothers and motherly counselors. That is why they can win easily in the contestation. Indonesian politics is not always about competence and ability as it is more about public image and personal brand.

Put together, there are many factors that help the rise of *Bu Nyai* in the national -as well as local- political arena especially in East Java. Apart from social and spiritual capitals, there are advantages that they enjoy such as being wives of *Pak Kyai* and hence being respected and honored, members of NU, and PKB. To this might be added the very nature of NU people, especially those in remote areas of Java that tend to sanctify *pesantren* family members and treat them as somewhat infallible. Of all these factors, the idea that *Bu Nyai* are heroes for women seem to be the most determining factor. The slogan that these *Bu Nyai* have often used to persuade women voters is, “defending women means upholding norms”, or the reverse.

Conclusion

One of the most central questions that baffle the mind of scholars on Indonesian politics is the role of women. In the neo-liberal world where everyone is asking why women participation in politics is incomplete, the reverse seems to be true in Indonesia both in quantitative and qualitative sense. Over the past two decades or so, the number of women getting involved in politics has increased. The government has also introduced new laws to protect their political rights. Women have equally gained more and more prominence in the political arena including those with the *pesantren* background, popularly known as *Bu Nyai*.

The political style of *Bu Nyai* is different from other fellow women and men. While many of them are meritocratic -and meritocracy is the

very trait of neo-liberal democracy- Bu Nyai are not. They rely on the supra-rational prerequisites, or rather charismatic antecedences they inherently have by virtue of them being members of pesantren family. Hence, their participation in politics is against neo-liberal odds. But they are also professionals in many ways, given that they enter the “political free market” by means of legal mechanism and compete with others objectively and fairly.

In many ways therefore, the participation of Bu Nyai in politics have shifted not only the way politics has been practiced in Indonesia, but has also changed the very paradigm of politics itself. The idea that women are mere wives and mother whose job is limited to look after their household has been diminished. The idea that their capability is inferior to man has been debunked, while the concept that women are oppressed in Muslim societies is automatically cast away.

The notion that “defending women means upholding norms” in the case of the three Bu Nyai serves not only as a slogan during their campaign. It has also been transformed into a quasi-religious tenet according which protecting their right is a “divine value” that should be upheld. It is this idea -the idea that defending women is a norm- that gives a new nuance and dimension not only in their political participation but also in the whole political discourse in Indonesia. []

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