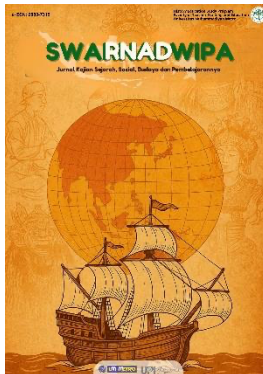


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TOWARDS A NEW, DIGNIFIED INDONESIA: A REFLECTION ON THE HISTORICAL JOURNEY OF ISLAM IN CONTEMPORARY INDONESIA

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Abstract

This article analyzes the historical journey of Islam in Indonesia in the contemporary era through four main phases: the role of Islamic figures in the establishment of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945 the political activities of Muslims in the period 1950–1966 the dynamics of the relationship between the state and Islam during the New Order era, which was marked by depoliticization and structural integration; and the significant changes brought about by the 1998 Reformation era to Indonesia's socio-political configuration. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach based on literature review, utilizing national scientific sources, historical archives, and contemporary academic works. The results of the study show that Muslims have played a consistent role in shaping national identity, political transformation, and strengthening the foundations of democracy in Indonesia. The dynamics of state-religion interactions in each period confirm that the contribution of Muslims is not only political, but also intellectual and cultural, making them an integral part of the process towards a more democratic and dignified Indonesia.

Keywords: Indonesian Islam, contemporary history, Islamic politics, New Order, 1998 Reform

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INTRODUCTION

The historical journey of Islam in contemporary Indonesia constitutes a fundamental part of the nation-building narrative. Muslims have not merely functioned as a demographic majority, but also as an intellectual, political, and social force that has significantly influenced the direction of state formation and national life. The contributions of Islamic figures in facilitating the birth of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) in 1945 demonstrate that Islamic thought and nationalism did not operate separately, but rather interacted closely in the process of shaping the foundations of the state and the political structure of an independent Indonesia. Islamic leaders actively participated in the BPUPKI and PPKI sessions that produced consensus on Pancasila and the national constitution, a process that reflects how the aspirations of the Muslim community were integrated into the foundations of the Indonesian state from the very beginning (Ilyas, 2020).

The political dynamics of the Muslim community did not end with the proclamation of independence; during the period 1950–1966, Muslim political engagement became increasingly complex. Islamic political parties such as Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) played central roles within the parliamentary democratic system, gained significant support in the 1955 general election, and were actively involved in the Constituent Assembly debates concerning the role of Islam in the state constitution. These debates reflected the efforts of Muslims to negotiate religious values within Indonesia's pluralistic political reality and the ideological challenges posed by competing political forces (Imam Ibnu Hajar & M. Yunus Abu Bakar, 2024).

Political turbulence culminating in the Reformasi movement of 1998 opened new opportunities for Muslims in Indonesia's political and social life. The collapse of the authoritarian New Order regime created broader spaces for political, legislative, and civil freedoms, enabling Muslims to participate more fully in public policymaking and democratic processes. The reform era not only gave rise to new Islamic-based political parties but also strengthened civil society movements and fostered the transformation of Islamic discourse toward more pluralistic and democratic orientations (Abdul Rahman & Mubarak Dahlan, 2020). These profound changes indicate that contemporary Islamic history in Indonesia is not solely concerned with power relations, but also with meaningful contributions to the formation of a modern, inclusive, and dignified Indonesia.

Accordingly, this article seeks to provide a comprehensive reflection on the historical trajectory of Islam in contemporary Indonesia through four dimensions: (1) the role of Islamic figures in facilitating the establishment of the NKRI in 1945 and the subsequent physical struggle for independence; (2) the political engagement of Muslims during the 1950–1966 period; (3) the dynamics of Islam–state relations during the New Order era; and (4) the implications of the 1998 Reformasi for the role of Muslims in modern Indonesian history. This historical-analytical approach is expected to illustrate how Muslims have continuously contributed to shaping the direction of the nation and Indonesia's state life toward a more democratic and dignified era.

RESEARCH METHODS

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This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using a library research method to examine the historical dynamics of Islam in contemporary Indonesia, ranging from the role of Islamic figures in 1945, the development of Islamic politics during the 1950–1966 period, the relationship between the state and the Muslim community during the New Order era, to the structural transformations following the 1998 Reformasi. Data were collected through a systematic review of scholarly literature, including accredited national journal articles, historical books, archival documents, and institutional reports relevant to the focus of the study. The analysis was conducted through data reduction, content interpretation, and source triangulation to ensure historical validity and narrative objectivity. This approach was chosen because it allows for a comprehensive interpretation of historical facts within the socio-political context of each period in the development of Islam in Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Islamic Figures in Facilitating the Establishment of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) in 1945 and the Accompanying Physical Struggle

In the formation of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia in 1945, Islamic figures actively participated and contributed to state-building amid its political complexities, as this period marked the first phase of national construction. Ulama, leaders of Islamic organizations, and Muslim intellectuals stood on equal footing in contributing to the state through three main aspects. First, they proposed and deliberated on the draft of the state constitution through the BPUPKI and PPKI forums. Second, they played a role in determining political positions during the democratic process by building consensus in the interest of national unity and cohesion. Third, they mobilized Muslims to contribute to state formation through consolidation efforts in both national and international meetings. These three areas were coordinated in an integrated manner, demonstrating that Muslim communities constituted a foundational pillar in creating a modern Indonesia (Zuly Qodir et al., 2020).

During the BPUPKI sessions, figures such as Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, K.H. Wahid Hasyim, K.H. Kahar Muzakir, Abikusno Tjokrosujoso, and Haji Agus Salim played a decisive role in shaping debates concerning the ideological foundation of the state. They emphasized the principle of belief in God as the moral basis of the nation, as reflected in the initial formulation of the Jakarta Charter. This contribution illustrates that modern Islamic thought and traditional pesantren traditions were able to synergize in constructing the philosophical foundations of a new state oriented toward justice, morality, and humanity. Moreover, the predominance of Islamic representatives within the PPKI indicates the strong influence of Muslims during the decisive phase of determining the form of the state.

This involvement reached a critical momentum when the PPKI ratified the 1945 Constitution. The removal of the phrase “with the obligation for adherents of Islam to carry out Islamic law” from the Jakarta Charter became a major test of political leadership among Islamic groups. Kasman Singodimedjo played a central role by persuading Ki Bagus Hadikusumo to accept the omission of the “seven words” in order to safeguard national unity and prevent potential disintegration, particularly from Eastern Indonesia (Muhammad Shulhan Hadi & Lalu Murdi, 2018).

The establishment of the NKRI in 1945 was a collective achievement of all elements of the nation, with ulama and santri playing a central and substantial role. For pesantren communities, independence was not merely a political achievement but a sacred struggle

to reclaim dignity and honor long stripped away by colonialism. Independence was perceived as a fundamental act aligned with the defense of essential human values. One prominent figure from this group was Kiai Abdul Wahab Hasbullah, the caretaker of Bahrul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Tambakberas, Jombang. Thus, the role of ulama and santri in 1945 carried deep spiritual significance, affirming their undeniable contribution to the birth of the NKRI.

1. Central Figures and Their Roles

- a. Kiai Abdul Wahab Hasbullah

As the caretaker of Bahrul Ulum Islamic Boarding School in Tambakberas, Jombang, he played an important role in assisting Sukarno in diplomatic efforts and pioneered the establishment of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) (Munir, 2023).

- b. K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari

Widely recognized as a great ulama, K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari made a crucial contribution to Indonesia's struggle for independence through two main bases: the traditional pesantren network and the religious organization he founded, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). In the critical post-Proclamation period, he issued the famous Resolusi Jihad in 1945, calling upon the Indonesian people and government to wage jihad against attempts at re-colonization. This fatwa served as the highest religious legitimation of the sovereignty of the newly established Republic of Indonesia and implicitly criticized the government's perceived passivity in responding to Allied troop landings (Bobi Hidayat & Muhammad Rijal Fadhli, 2018).

- c. The Rengasdengklok Incident

The Rengasdengklok incident is widely regarded as a decisive moment that paved the way for Indonesia's Proclamation of Independence. In this event, Sukarno and Hatta were secured away from Jakarta to prevent Japanese influence, as Japan sought to delay the proclamation. By exploiting the power vacuum, this action successfully generated revolutionary momentum, making the Rengasdengklok incident a catalyst for the eventual proclamation of independence (Febrianti, 2024).

2. Physical Struggle and Islamic Militias

- a. Active Muslim participation in the physical struggle was manifested through the formation of Islamic militias, most notably Lasykar Hizbullah, which operated in the Priangan region from 1945 to 1948. Functioning as a youth wing under the Masyumi organization, its members were recruited from various Islamic organizations and schools, including Muhammadiyah and NU (Galun Eka Gemini, 1948). Similar resistance was demonstrated by Hizbullah militias in Bekasi during the 1945–1947 period (Andhika Aditya, 2023).

- b. Tan Malaka emerged as a key figure in the Indonesian Revolution, advocating uncompromising full independence through physical revolution and rejecting cooperation with the Dutch. He founded the Murba Party to channel this ideology, criticizing diplomatic agreements such as Linggarjati and Renville, which he viewed as favoring Dutch interests (Marshanda, 2023).

- c. In Palembang, former Gyugun officers—Japanese-trained military personnel—played a crucial role during the Physical Revolution (1945–1949). After the Japanese surrender, they swiftly took strategic initiatives to defend sovereignty against Allied and Dutch forces, contributing significantly to the early formation of Indonesia's national military (Pedo Nopansyah & Alian, 2017).

The Political Role of Muslims from 1950 to 1966

The period from 1950 to 1966 is historically known as the Old Order era under President Sukarno. During this time, Indonesia's political and ideological landscape was highly polarized between secular nationalists and Islamic nationalists (Effendi, 1998). Political and economic instability characterized the 1950s, as the state was still in a

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transitional phase toward consolidation. This instability led to regional conflicts, particularly in areas such as South and Southeast Sulawesi (Sri Margana, La Ode Rabani, & Bambang Purwanto, 2020).

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) played a significant role during this period by transforming into a political party, thereby strengthening Islamic political representation. Despite electoral successes – most notably in the 1955 general election – NU’s relationship with the state fluctuated amid ongoing ideological competition (Shobacha, 2012; Muslim Nurdin et al., 2025).

As the Old Order period drew to a close, Muslims played a decisive role in opposing communist ideology, driven by fundamental ideological contradictions between Islam and communism. This struggle significantly influenced Indonesia’s political transition and reinforced Islam as a major socio-political force (Effendi, 1998).

The New Order Leadership and the Political Role of Muslims

The New Order regime under President Suharto (1966–1998) was characterized by authoritarian-bureaucratic control. While political stability was achieved, democratic freedoms – including Islamic political expression – were severely restricted (Rajab, 2002). Despite Muslim expectations for political inclusion, the regime pursued systematic de-Islamization policies, culminating in the 1985 enforcement of Pancasila as the sole ideological principle (Darmawijaya, 2015).

NU was compelled to merge into the United Development Party (PPP), weakening its political influence. Consequently, NU returned to the *Khittah* 1926, withdrawing from practical politics to focus on religious and educational activities (Shobacha, 2012).

Nevertheless, Islamic intellectual discourse flourished during this era, influenced by global thinkers such as Ali Shariati and Hasan Hanafi, demonstrating that Islamic thought remained vibrant despite political marginalization (Latif et al., 2018). Simultaneously, the state adopted accommodative policies through legislation on marriage, religious courts, Islamic law compilation, hajj, and zakat administration (Siti Ameliyah et al., 2023).

The 1998 Reformasi and Its Impact on Modern Indonesian History

The Reformasi of 1998 marked a major historical turning point, triggered by political and economic crises at the end of the New Order. The fall of Suharto ushered in a new era of democratic governance under successive leaders, including B.J. Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati Sukarnoputri.

The reform era witnessed the re-emergence of Islamic political parties with diverse ideological orientations, ranging from explicitly Islamic platforms to inclusive nationalist-Islamic parties (Effendi, 1998). Political accommodation toward Muslims intensified, integrating Islamic law into national legal frameworks and legitimizing public policies (Syafuruddin Syam & Syahrul, 2023). Reformasi also significantly benefited Islamic education, expanding intellectual integration and fostering multicultural knowledge within Islamic institutions through supportive public policies (Hasbullah, n.d.).

CONCLUSION

The contemporary history of Islam in Indonesia demonstrates that Muslims have played a central role in the nation’s political, social, and cultural dynamics. During the New Order era, Muslims faced structural constraints due to strict state control over political and religious expression, which limited formal political participation. Nevertheless, this period

also fostered the growth of modernist Islamic thought, intellectual movements, and cultural Islam that emphasized ethical and moral values rather than state formalism.

The Reformasi of 1998 marked a fundamental turning point by opening democratic space, expanding civil liberties, and enabling broader Muslim participation in both formal and non-formal politics. Post-Reformasi Islam in Indonesia has appeared in plural and non-monolithic forms, expressed through political parties, civil society organizations, and social movements. While this openness strengthened democracy, it also introduced new challenges, including identity politics and the politicization of religion. Overall, the historical trajectory of Islam in contemporary Indonesia reflects the adaptive capacity of Muslims in responding to political change. Moving forward, Muslim engagement is expected not only to pursue political power but also to strengthen social ethics, justice, inclusivity, and democratic values as the foundation for a dignified and equitable Indonesia.

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