

Institutional Transformation and Electoral Pragmatism in Indonesian Islamic Organisations

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A Synthetic Review of the Nahdlatul Wathan Case in West Nusa Tenggara

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Abstract

This article examines how Nahdlatul Wathan (NW), a pesantren-based Islamic organisation in West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, has transformed from a religious educational institution into an electoral actor since 2004. It asks how this reflects tensions between religious authority and electoral pragmatism in post-1998 Indonesia, and what conditions enable or constrain pesantren-based organisations to maintain religious legitimacy while competing electorally. Using institutional logics theory and postdigital theory, the article presents a qualitative synthetic review of published scholarship, policy documents and digital discourse patterns (38 sources, 2000–2026). The synthesis identifies three mechanisms: elite leadership combining religious and political capital; activation of social networks as electoral infrastructure; and follower interpretive frameworks reconciling organisational multiplexity. NW's electoral success appears contingent on perceived consistency between leaders' religious principles and political conduct, while organisational multiplexity risks becoming a democratic liability when followers perceive elite capture.

Keywords: Nahdlatul Wathan, institutional transformation, institutional logics, electoral pragmatism, pesantren organisations, West Nusa Tenggara, Indonesia, synthetic review



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Introduction

Indonesia's political landscape is undergoing profound structural transformation, driven by the convergence of traditional religious values and digital technological disruption (Hamid, 2023). This phenomenon reshapes not only how power is contested but also how citizens engage with public policy and religious authority. The scholarly examination of Islamic political behaviour in this context has become increasingly urgent, as the nation simultaneously witnesses the consolidation of electoral democracy and the emergence of new forms of digitally mediated political communication. The term 'post-truth era', used here following McIntyre (2018) and Oxford Dictionaries' designation of 'post-truth' as word of the year in 2016, refers to a political environment in which emotional appeals and group loyalties exert greater influence over public opinion than evidence-based reasoning, a condition amplified by social media algorithms that prioritise engagement over accuracy. In the Indonesian context, the post-truth dynamic is particularly consequential because it intersects with religious sentiment, creating conditions in which viral misinformation framed in Islamic idioms can mobilise voters far more rapidly than factual counter-narratives.

The analytical puzzle at the heart of this article concerns the institutional trajectory of Nahdlatul Wathan (NW), a pesantren-based Islamic organisation founded in 1953 in West Nusa Tenggara (NTB). Since Indonesia's democratisation in 1998 and the introduction of direct regional elections (*Pilkada langsung*) in 2004, NW has evolved from a community-rooted religious educational institution into one of NTB's most consequential political actors, most visibly through the gubernatorial campaigns of TGKH Muhammad Zainul Majdi (Tuan Guru Bajang/TGB), who won the 2008 NTB gubernatorial election with over 60 per cent of the vote (Hamid, 2023; Anwar, 2024). This trajectory raises a fundamental question about the relationship between religious authority and electoral pragmatism: under what conditions can pesantren-based organisations engage in electoral politics while retaining their moral legitimacy among followers? Answering this question requires understanding both the institutional logics that govern organisational adaptation and the digital media environment in which religious and political claims now compete for public credibility.

Previous scholarship has explored Islamic political behaviour in Indonesia through several analytical lenses. Early institutional studies by Hefner (2000) and Feillard (1995) examined how Islamic organisations negotiated the constraints of authoritarian rule and the opening created by democratisation. More recent work by Aspinall (2015) and Mietzner (2012) has documented elite-level institutional competition and the strategic deployment of religious identity for electoral gain. However, these bodies of scholarship remain largely disconnected from the empirical realities of digital-age political communication, where opinion leadership has been partially decentralised and where viral information flows can override institutional gatekeeping mechanisms. A notable exception is the work of Merlyna Lim, whose research on social media activism in Indonesia (Lim, 2013, 2018) establish-

es that digital platforms operate within pre-existing social and political hierarchies rather than displacing them—a finding that provides a crucial point of departure for the present synthetic review. The extant literature also insufficiently addresses how minority religious communities, such as the Ahmadiyah, navigate spaces that simultaneously guarantee formal citizenship rights while imposing de facto social restrictions rooted in majoritarian religious sentiment.

The theoretical gap becomes more acute when examining digital resistance as a distinct political phenomenon. Much scholarship on clicktivism (Morozov, 2009; Gladwell, 2010; Lim, 2013) has dismissed digital activism as inconsequential ‘slacktivism’, yet documented accounts of cases such as the Rinjani cable car movement suggest that digitally coordinated campaigns can generate tangible policy pressure and institutional accountability under certain conditions (Hamid, 2023). This points toward a need for more nuanced theoretical frameworks that neither valorise nor dismiss digital forms of political engagement but instead analyse them within specific historical and institutional contexts.

This article addresses this analytical gap through a qualitative synthetic review of the existing literature on NW, NTB politics, and Indonesian Islamic organisational transformation. The NW case serves as the primary locus of synthesis, with the Rinjani cable car digital resistance movement and Ahmadiyah minority participation invoked as comparative illustrations to examine the boundary conditions of the patterns identified in the NW literature. The research is guided by two explicit research questions: How has Nahdlatul Wathan’s institutional transformation reflected the tension between religious authority and electoral pragmatism in post-1998 Indonesia? And what conditions enable or constrain pesantren-based organisations in maintaining religious legitimacy while engaging in electoral competition?

The article contributes to the field in three ways: (1) it provides a focused synthetic analysis of one specific organisation (NW) within one specific regional context (NTB), enabling depth over breadth; (2) it develops a two-dimensional theoretical framework—institutional logics theory and postdigital theory—that is directly applied to the synthesised evidence rather than assembled as a comprehensive conceptual architecture; and (3) it identifies patterns and mechanisms documented in the existing literature, offering a set of testable propositions for future empirical research rather than advancing normative prescriptions. Methodologically, the analysis synthesises published scholarship, observable digital discourse patterns, and historical institutional analysis, without claiming to have conducted primary netnographic fieldwork.

The stakes of understanding these dynamics extend beyond academic interest. Indonesia’s experience as a large, religiously plural democracy navigating rapid digital transformation carries implications for other Muslim-majority and multi-religious polities worldwide. The questions of how traditional forms of religious authority can either facilitate or impede democratic deliberation, how digital affordances reshape grassroots political agency, and how legal frameworks can protect minority rights while preserving majority voice constitute challenges of global significance.

Methods

This article is designed as a qualitative synthetic review rather than an exercise in primary empirical fieldwork (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Thomas & Harden, 2008). Its philosophical orientation is informed by critical realism (Bhaskar, 1975; Archer, 1995), a metatheoretical position that acknowledges the independent existence of social structures, institutions, norms and power relations, while recognising that human understanding of these structures is mediated through socially situated interpretation. This orientation is particularly productive for synthesising scholarship on Islamic political behaviour because it permits simultaneous attention to the material institutional arrangements that constrain actor behaviour, the cultural-religious meanings through which Indonesian citizens interpret their political worlds, and the emergent properties of digitally mediated collective action that cannot be reduced to individual intentions.

The data corpus for this synthesis comprises four interconnected categories of sources. The primary category consists of peer-reviewed scholarship ($n = 38$) directly addressing Nahdlatul Wathan, West Nusa Tenggara politics, or Indonesian Islamic organisational transformation. These sources were identified through systematic searches of Scopus, Web of Science and SINTA (Indonesia's national science and technology index) databases using combinations of the following keywords: 'Nahdlatul Wathan', 'West Nusa Tenggara', 'pesantren politics', 'Islamic organisation Indonesia', 'electoral politics Indonesia', and 'digital activism Indonesia'. Inclusion criteria required that sources be published between 2000 and 2026, appear in journals indexed in the aforementioned databases, and contain substantive empirical or theoretical content relevant to the study's focus. The temporal scope of the analysis spans Indonesia's transition to democracy in 1998 through 2026, with particular emphasis on the post-2004 direct election era; the systematic search for peer-reviewed sources, however, covered the period from 2000 onward.

The second category comprises institutional policy documents, including UU No. 32 Tahun 2004 on regional governance and UU No. 23 Tahun 2014 on regional administration, which established the legal framework for direct regional elections and decentralisation. The third category draws on documented scholarship covering NW's institutional trajectory from its founding in 1953 through the 2008 and 2013 gubernatorial elections (Hamid, 2023; Anwar, 2024), as well as scholarly analyses of the organisation's archives. The fourth category consists of secondary accounts of digital discourse patterns, as documented in the existing scholarly literature on digital activism in NTB, including the 2016–2020 Rinjani cable car resistance and the 2020 Ahmadiyah participation in Mataram local elections. These digital patterns are not treated as primary data collected through netnographic fieldwork but rather as documented phenomena analysed through the existing scholarly literature. The Rinjani and Ahmadiyah cases are referenced as comparative illustrations to illuminate how digital media dynamics and minority politics interact with organisational institutional logics in the broader NTB context; they are not treated as co-equal primary cases.

The analytical scaffolding for this review draws upon two theoretical dimensions that operate in conversation rather than subordination. Institutional logics theory (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008) highlights how organisations operate according to multiple, sometimes contradictory, institutional logics, defined as the ‘socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality.’ This framework enables analysis of how NW navigates competing religious, electoral and organisational logics. Complementing this, postdigital theory (Jansson & Sollander, 2020; Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Lim, 2018) examines how digital technologies become embedded within existing social practices rather than operating as pure disruptors; in the Indonesian context, this suggests that social media platforms do not replace pesantren-based networks but become an additional layer through which existing institutional logics operate and compete.

These theoretical dimensions are combined with institutional analysis understood not as a narrow focus on formal organisational structures but as an examination of how ‘sets of rules, norms, and beliefs’ shape political behaviour (March & Olsen, 2008), complemented by cultural-interpretive approaches that foreground how Indonesian citizens understand Islamic concepts such as *musyawarah* (consultation), *amanah* (trust) and *khilafah* (leadership) as organising principles for political judgment. This combination permits analysis of both structural constraints—electoral competition driving Islamic organisations toward pragmatic alliance-seeking—and interpretive dimensions, wherein participants invoke Islamic concepts to legitimate or critique political choices.

The synthesis proceeded through several analytical stages. Thematic synthesis, following Thomas and Harden (2008), involved open coding of findings from each source to identify descriptive themes, grouping these codes into analytical themes that transcend individual studies, and generating higher-order interpretations that are presented as propositions for future testing. This procedure was applied systematically across all 38 sources. To extend the analysis beyond the NW literature, cross-study pattern identification examined how different Islamic organisations—Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah and Ahmadiyah—have negotiated similar political structures with divergent strategic outcomes, as documented in the existing scholarship. The Rinjani and Ahmadiyah cases were then subjected to comparative illustration analysis, serving to examine the boundary conditions of patterns identified in the NW literature; specifically, whether the enabling and constraining conditions observed in NW are confirmed, modified or contradicted by evidence from these contrasting cases.

To strengthen the credibility of this synthesis, verification relied upon multiple procedures. Source triangulation involved cross-checking patterns identified in the NW literature against evidence from the Rinjani and Ahmadiyah literatures to assess consistency and identify boundary conditions. Historical institutional tracing documented how decisions from earlier eras—for instance, responses to NASAKOM politics in the 1960s (the Nasakom alliance of nationalism, religion, and communism)—created path depen-

dencies affecting contemporary behaviour. Finally, contemporary policy documents were cross-referenced with scholarly interpretation to identify where descriptive accuracy may be contested.

As a synthetic review, this article makes no claim to having verified causal relationships through primary data. Its contribution lies in systematising fragmented evidence and constructing a coherent analytical framework that can orient future empirical investigations. The propositions advanced here are deliberately framed as testable hypotheses rather than definitive conclusions. This methodological choice is appropriate given the article's aim to integrate diverse sources, but it necessarily limits the ability to make strong claims about follower perceptions or organisational decision-making processes, which require ethnographic or survey-based approaches. The heavy reliance on published academic sources means that under-studied populations or phenomena not captured in Indonesian scholarly literature may be underrepresented. Additionally, the interpretation reflects particular theoretical commitments—critical realism and, to a lesser extent, deliberative democracy theory—that other scholars might question. The author's positioning as an Indonesian scholar affiliated with a major Islamic university inevitably shapes which questions seem salient and which explanatory frameworks appear persuasive. This positioning constitutes a research advantage—access to contextual understanding—and a potential limitation—possible normative commitments affecting interpretation—that readers should weigh in their assessment. Future research should empirically test the propositions developed in this synthetic review, particularly regarding the credibility-contingency mechanism in NW and comparable organisations, through ethnographic fieldwork, survey research or archival analysis of primary organisational documents.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical scaffolding for this article rests upon two interconnected theoretical dimensions that together illuminate how Nahdlatul Wathan's institutional transformation unfolds in contemporary Indonesia. The Hefnerian tradition of examining how Islamic organisations negotiate democratic transitions provides the historical-institutional foundation for this framework (Hefner, 2000). Democracy in Muslim-majority societies, as Hefner demonstrates through the Indonesian case, is not produced by a single institution but through the interaction of organisational capacities, religious legitimacy structures and civic norms, all of which are empirically traceable in the NW literature. Following the principle that a focused synthetic review requires a focused theoretical apparatus (Yin, 2018), this article selects two dimensions—institutional logics theory and postdigital theory—that are directly applicable to the synthesised evidence.

The first dimension concerns institutional logics and organisational multiplexity. Islamic organisations in Indonesia do not operate according to a single institutional logic but rather navigate multiple, sometimes competing, logics simultaneously. Thornton and Ocasio (2008) define institutional logics as the 'socially constructed, historical patterns of

material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organise time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality.’ In the Indonesian context, religious organisations like Nahdlatul Wathan simultaneously embody a pesantren logic emphasising Islamic knowledge transmission, moral formation and spiritual authority; an electoral logic emphasising resource mobilisation, candidate support and policy influence; and an organisational logic emphasising institutional survival, elite reproduction and strategic alliance-building. These logics are not neatly compartmentalised. When a pesantren-affiliated organisation decides to formally endorse a political candidate, it is not simply applying an ‘external’ electoral logic to a ‘pure’ religious institution. Rather, organisational actors draw on resources and legitimacy from the religious logic—moral authority to guide followers—while advancing interests derived from the electoral logic—influence over policy and resource distribution. This multiplexity creates what might be termed institutional tension, which is productive when it generates reflexivity and adaptation and destructive when it produces profound cognitive dissonance among followers who perceive compromised moral authority.

The synthesised literature on Nahdlatul Wathan illustrates this tension acutely. The organisation’s historical mission centred on Islamic scholarship, moral education and social service provision. Yet since electoral democratisation, documented accounts indicate that NW leadership has increasingly functioned in political capacities, with leaders like TGKH Zainal Majdi combining traditional Islamic scholarly status with direct electoral competition (Hamid, 2023; Anwar, 2024). This dual positioning has generated organisational cohesion but also created vulnerability. When religious authority is deployed for electoral purposes, followers may either develop a sophisticated understanding of institutional complexity or experience it as hypocrisy—a tension that the synthesised evidence suggests is managed through leader conduct, institutional framing and follower perception.

The second dimension concerns postdigital politics and embedded disruption. Rather than understanding digital technologies as novel forces disrupting ‘traditional’ political institutions, postdigital theory (Jansson & Sollander, 2020; Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Lim, 2018) proposes that digital affordances become embedded within existing power structures, media practices and cultural patterns. The term ‘postdigital’ does not mean ‘after digital’; rather, it signals that digital technologies have become so thoroughly integrated into everyday social practice that they no longer constitute a separate domain standing apart from existing institutions. Applied to Indonesia, this framework suggests that social media platforms do not replace pesantren-based networks but become an additional layer through which existing institutional logics—religious, electoral and organisational—operate and compete. This dimension explains how NW’s digital presence functions not as a disruption of its religious identity but as an extension of its institutional multiplexity into digital space. Lim’s (2013) analysis of Indonesian digital activism, which demonstrates that social media campaigns achieve policy impact only when aligned with pre-existing institutional leverage, provides an essential empirical foundation for this claim: digital tools amplify what institutional actors already possess rather than creating new political capacity.

from scratch. Tuan Guru figures maintain WhatsApp channels and YouTube accounts that replicate, in digital form, the face-to-face religious authority once exercised exclusively through Friday sermons and pesantren classrooms. The consequentiality of digital activism for political outcomes depends critically on existing institutional leverage; digital campaigns amplify voices that already have some institutional foothold rather than creating political agency from nothing.

By way of comparative illustration, the 2016–2020 Rinjani cable car digital resistance movement in NTB provides an illustration of this mechanism as documented in the existing scholarship. The proposed cable car project to Mount Rinjani, a UNESCO-associated sacred and ecologically significant site in Lombok, generated substantial digital opposition through Change.org petitions, Facebook advocacy and YouTube documentation. The movement attracted thousands of digital signatures and sustained hashtag visibility across platforms. However, what converted digital pressure into actual policy reconsideration was not digital scale alone but rather the intersection of digital mobilisation with institutional leverage: UNESCO World Heritage Site concerns, the technical credibility of environmental non-governmental organisations, and the local government's sensitivity to international reputation. Without these institutional anchors, digital pressure would likely have dissipated. This pattern illustrates postdigital theory's central claim: digital affordances amplify existing institutional resources rather than creating new ones *ex nihilo*.

Together, these two theoretical dimensions provide a coherent analytical lens for examining the synthesised evidence. Institutional logics theory illuminates the multiplexity of organisational identities and the tensions that arise when religious authority is deployed for electoral purposes, while postdigital theory explains how these dynamics are refracted through, and amplified by, digital media environments. The interaction between these dimensions is particularly significant in the Indonesian context, where religious authority, electoral competition and digital communication converge in ways that reshape both organisational behaviour and democratic participation. The subsequent sections apply this framework to the synthesised literature on NW, identifying convergent patterns and developing propositions for future empirical investigation.

The Ecosystem of Islamic Political Behaviour in Digital Contexts

The following represents a conceptual mapping of how the theoretical dimensions discussed above interconnect in explaining contemporary Indonesian political dynamics as documented in the synthesised literature. Within Indonesia's contemporary political landscape, patterns of Islamic political behaviour consistently intersect with the dynamics of the digital post-truth environment. This core phenomenon emerges from complex interactions between institutional structures, strategic actors, forms of resistance and systemic challenges. Institutionally, traditional authorities such as pesantren and their religious teachers face mounting pressures toward electoral pragmatism, while formal electoral institutions demand large-scale mass mobilisation. Concurrently, digital platforms, with their algorithmic curation and attention-driven architectures, present both new opportunities

for political engagement and new vulnerabilities to misinformation and polarisation.

Strategic actors also play crucial roles in this ecosystem. Opinion leaders frequently inhabit multiple roles simultaneously—religious authority, political operative and digital influencer—creating persistent tensions around credibility and authenticity. Religious organisations must adapt strategically amid competing institutional logics, navigating between religious mission and electoral imperatives. Ordinary citizens, including minority groups such as the Ahmadiyah, demonstrate varying capacities for political participation that are significantly shaped by their digital literacy; these groups often experience inclusion and exclusion simultaneously, as formal citizenship rights coexist with *de facto* social restrictions. Resistance emerges in the form of digital mobilisations such as online petitions and viral advocacy campaigns, though the political impact of such mobilisations depends heavily on institutional context—a condition vividly illustrated by the Rinjani cable car case, where digital pressure translated into policy reconsideration only when aligned with existing institutional leverage. Complementing these grassroots efforts, civil society counter-movements can strengthen democratic deliberation when institutional footholds are present.

However, systemic challenges remain pervasive. Information integrity is eroded by the proliferation of misinformation and the polarising effects of algorithmic curation. The protection of minority rights is weakened by digitally amplified prejudices that reinforce majoritarian sentiment. Corruption and elite capture undermine the integrity of representative institutions. Critically, the capacity of civil society to maintain non-partisan co-ordination alongside electoral engagement emerges as a principal determinant of democratic resilience in the face of these converging pressures. All of these layers—from Islamic boarding schools to social media timelines—operate within a single, mutually influential ecosystem in which Islamic political behaviour constitutes an ongoing negotiation among religious beliefs, material interests and digital realities.

This conceptual mapping provides the analytical foundation for the synthesis of empirical findings that follows, grounding the identification of convergent patterns and the development of testable propositions in the interconnected dynamics described above.

Synthesis of Findings from the Reviewed Literature

This section synthesises findings from the reviewed literature, organised to address the two research questions guiding this article. The first two synthesised patterns address RQ1—how NW’s institutional transformation reflects the tension between religious authority and electoral pragmatism in post-1998 Indonesia—while the third addresses RQ2—what conditions enable or constrain pesantren-based organisations in maintaining religious legitimacy while engaging in electoral competition. Where the Rinjani cable car resistance and Ahmadiyah cases illuminate the same mechanisms identified in the NW literature, they are invoked as comparative illustrations to examine boundary conditions rather than as co-equal primary cases.

Embedded Transformation from Spiritual Authority to Electoral Instrumentality

The synthesised literature on Nahdlatul Wathan's institutional trajectory—from a pesantren-centred organisation founded in 1953 to a significant electoral actor in West Nusa Tenggara—converges on a pattern wherein religious organisations navigate structural pressures toward electoral pragmatism while seeking to maintain perceived moral authority (Hamid, 2023; Anwar, 2024). Several interconnected mechanisms are consistently documented across the reviewed scholarship.

The first mechanism concerns elite leadership and strategic innovation. The ascendance of leaders such as TGKH Zainul Majdi (Tuan Guru Bajang/TGB)—individuals combining traditional Islamic scholarly authority with modern intellectual training, including at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, and political acumen—created conditions for organisational adaptation to electoral competition. TGB's success in the 2008 West Nusa Tenggara gubernatorial election, securing over 60 per cent of the vote (Hamid, 2023; Anwar, 2024), illustrated how pesantren-affiliated organisational networks could be operationalised for electoral advantage without apparent loss of religious legitimacy among followers, according to the documented accounts. This apparent compatibility between religious authority and electoral success appears to have been contingent upon leaders positioning themselves as defenders of Islamic interests against perceived secular or external threats—a discursive framing that justified political mobilisation as religious obligation rather than political opportunism.

The second mechanism concerns institutional duality and organisational memory. Historical analyses reviewed in the literature suggest that NW's shift toward electoral politics was not a discontinuous rupture but rather the activation of institutional capacity that had previously remained latent. The organisation's founding emphasis on integrating Islamic knowledge with community development meant that organisational elites always possessed networks and legitimacy extending beyond strictly religious functions. Electoral democratisation simply provided institutional opportunity structures for operationalising this existing social capital. The organisation's documented ability to maintain pesantren operations, educational services and social programmes while simultaneously functioning as an electoral force suggests that organisational multiplexity, rather than producing paralysing internal conflict, may under certain conditions generate adaptive capacity.

The third mechanism concerns follower perception and credibility dynamics. Interview evidence and analyses of digital discourse patterns documented in the scholarly literature (Hamid, 2023) indicate that many Nahdlatul Wathan members do not perceive tension between the organisation's religious and electoral functions. Instead, followers employ interpretive frameworks derived from Islamic concepts such as *jihad* (struggle) and *amanah* (trusteeship) to understand organisational political engagement as an extension of religious duty. This interpretive work—wherein followers actively construct meaning that reconciles institutional multiplexity—appears crucial for maintaining organisational cohesion. However, the same evidence suggests that credibility remains contingent upon perceived

consistency. If organisational leaders were perceived as pursuing electoral advantage at direct cost to organisational members' material interests or contrary to stated Islamic values, credibility would deteriorate rapidly—a pattern that has become increasingly visible in the more recent literature on TGB's political repositioning.

Derived proposition from Pattern 1: Pesantren-based organisations' capacity to maintain religious legitimacy while engaging in electoral politics is positively associated with leaders' perceived consistency between religious principles and political conduct. This proposition warrants empirical testing through systematic survey research or ethnographic investigation of follower attitudes.

Clicktivism as Consequential yet Precarious Political Engagement

The synthesised evidence on the 2016–2020 digital resistance to the Rinjani cable car project in West Nusa Tenggara illustrates how what has been termed 'clicktivism'—low-threshold digital participation such as signing online petitions, sharing social media content and commenting on YouTube videos—can generate tangible policy consequences under certain conditions, challenging scholarly dismissals of digital activism as inherently inconsequential 'slacktivism' (Morozov, 2009; Gladwell, 2010). Yet the documented pattern also departs from views that overstate digital activism's transformative potential. Following Lim's (2013) finding that Indonesian social media activism frequently produces 'many clicks but little stick', the Rinjani case demonstrates that consequentiality is conditional rather than categorically absent.

Several mechanisms are consistently identified in the documented accounts. The first concerns scale and speed of mobilisation. Digital platforms enabled coordinated opposition to reach a scale that traditional grassroots mobilisation would have required substantially greater resources to accomplish. The Change.org petition attracted thousands of signatures; the #SaveRinjani hashtag generated sustained visibility across multiple platforms. This scale created political costs for the implementing local government in Lombok Tengah regency, including negative international media coverage and pressure from environmental organisations (Hamid, 2023). The speed of this mobilisation, occurring in weeks rather than the months-to-years timeline of traditional coalition-building, compressed the temporal space within which policymakers could implement decisions without encountering substantial opposition.

The second mechanism concerns conditional consequentiality. Detailed case analysis (Hamid, 2023) reveals that digital mobilisation produced policy reconsideration not through digital pressure alone but through interaction with existing institutional vulnerabilities and international dimensions. The Rinjani project became vulnerable to pressure precisely because implementing agencies faced international reputation concerns related to UNESCO World Heritage Site designation; environmental non-governmental organisations possessed technical expertise credible with international audiences; and local opposition voices gained platform visibility that reduced risks of coordinated political suppression. Had these institutional conditions differed—had international stakeholders been

indifferent, had environmental expertise not existed, or had local opposition faced greater capacity for repression—digital mobilisation would likely have proven inconsequential. This suggests that digital activism’s political efficacy depends crucially on alignment with existing institutional vulnerabilities.

The third mechanism concerns distributed participation and distributed risk. Clicktivism’s low-threshold participation structure means that participants can contribute to mobilisation campaigns with minimal personal risk exposure compared to traditional protest. This lowers participation barriers but also creates particular vulnerabilities. Evidence from digital discourse analysis indicates that many participants simultaneously engage in multiple digital activism campaigns across different issues, suggesting that participation is often distributed attention rather than deep commitment. Additionally, the digital trace of participation creates a permanent record; individuals supporting particular political positions cannot easily exit without a trace, making them potentially vulnerable to social sanctions from opposing groups if community norms shift.

Derived proposition from Pattern 2: The political efficacy of digital activism in contexts of institutional vulnerability is contingent upon alignment between online mobilisation and pre-existing institutional leverage, including legal standing, international reputation concerns and the technical credibility of non-governmental organisations. This proposition suggests that digital activism amplifies rather than replaces institutional resources.

Enabling and Constraining Conditions for Pesantren-Based Organisations in Electoral Politics

The synthesised analysis of NW’s electoral trajectory raises the question of conditions: what enables NW to navigate institutional multiplexity successfully while other organisations attempting similar transitions face legitimacy collapse? Synthesising the evidence across the NW, Rinjani and Ahmadiyah cases, three enabling conditions and one critical constraining condition are consistently identified in the literature.

The first enabling condition concerns elite credibility as the core mechanism. NW’s electoral success from 2008 to 2013 depended critically on followers’ perception that TGKH Zainul Majdi embodied both genuine religious scholarship and political competence. Follower perception and credibility dynamics documented in Hamid (2023) demonstrate that organisational multiplexity is sustainable precisely when the leader’s political conduct appears consistent with professed religious principles. When followers detect inconsistency—as occurred with TGB’s political repositioning prior to the 2024 election cycle—credibility deteriorates rapidly, and organisational multiplexity becomes a liability rather than a resource. Elite credibility thus functions as the primary internal enabling condition: absent perceived leader integrity, follower interpretive frameworks that reconcile religious and electoral identities dissolve.

The second enabling condition concerns pre-existing social networks as institutional infrastructure. NW’s transition did not require building electoral infrastructure from scratch. The pesantren network, alumni associations and community organisations constituted pre-existing social infrastructure that substantially reduced the organisational cost of

electoral mobilisation. By contrast, the Rinjani digital resistance movement demonstrates that without pre-existing institutional leverage—in that case, UNESCO World Heritage Site concern and environmental non-governmental organisation (NGO) technical credibility—digital mobilisation alone proves insufficient to convert public pressure into durable policy change.

The third enabling condition concerns digital-religious coherence as a legitimacy maintenance mechanism. NW's digital media presence—WhatsApp channels, YouTube sermons and social media managed by affiliated pesantren alumni—functions as an extension of its existing religious identity rather than a departure from it. This coherence between digital communication style and institutional identity constitutes an enabling condition for maintaining religious legitimacy in digital environments. Constraining conditions arise when digital communication strategies privilege electoral signalling over religious identity reinforcement, generating follower perceptions of elite capture.

The critical constraining condition concerns legal recognition as a baseline structural requirement. By way of contrast, the Ahmadiyah community's navigation of the 2020 Mataram local elections illustrates the limiting case: for communities facing legal restriction—the 2008 joint ministerial decree (*Surat Keputusan Bersama*) restricting Ahmadiyah proselytisation—and social hostility, no amount of institutional coherence or elite credibility can overcome the structural constraint of legal vulnerability. Ahmadiyah participants employed strategies of selective visibility, making political identities public only in contexts perceived as safe while suppressing group identity markers in hostile environments (Hamid, 2023). This demonstrates that the three enabling conditions identified above presuppose a baseline of legal recognition; where that baseline is absent, organisational multiplexity cannot develop, and digital platforms amplify exposure to risk rather than enabling political agency.

Derived proposition from Pattern 3: The sustainability of organisational multiplexity in pesantren-based organisations during electoral competition depends upon the conjunction of elite credibility, pre-existing social infrastructure and digital-religious coherence, all of which presuppose a baseline of legal recognition. Where legal recognition is absent, as in the Ahmadiyah case, these enabling conditions cannot be activated.

Discussion: Interpretation, Implications, and Propositions

The synthesis of findings from the reviewed literature presented above generates two significant implications for understanding how pesantren-based Islamic organisations navigate democratic transitions in postdigital contexts. These implications integrate the synthesised patterns into broader theoretical conversations about institutional logics and postdigital politics, while policy recommendations arising from this analysis are addressed separately and beyond the scope of this article, consistent with the principle that normative prescription requires its own empirical grounding (Yin, 2018).

Implication One: Institutional Multiplexity as Dynamic Democratic Adaptation and Risk

The synthesised patterns of Islamic organisational transformation—from primarily religious institutions toward institutional hybrids combining religious, electoral and social functions—represent neither simple corruption of religious mission nor straightforward institutional evolution. Rather, the reviewed literature converges on an interpretation of dynamic adaptation to new institutional opportunity structures—namely, direct elections—and constraints, including the need for mass mobilisation. From one perspective, this adaptation demonstrates democratic system flexibility: traditional authority structures are reconfigured rather than destroyed, enabling their integration within democratic competition. From another perspective, the same process risks instrumentalising religious authority for elite political purposes, potentially transforming authentic religious communities into electoral machines.

The theoretical question that emerges from this synthesis is not whether institutions should adapt, but rather what conditions determine whether adaptation strengthens or undermines democratic legitimacy. The synthesised NW literature suggests several relevant factors. First, whether organisational elites maintain perceived consistency between religious principles and political action; when perceived hypocrisy emerges, documented accounts indicate that credibility collapses rapidly. Second, whether organisational multiplexity generates reflexivity and accountability versus simple opportunism; NW's documented success appears linked to genuine engagement with organisational complexity rather than dismissal of religious concerns. Third, whether adapted institutions create space for multiple viewpoints within organisational decision-making versus top-down elite control; organisations with more democratic internal governance structures appear more resilient to claims of elite capture than hierarchically controlled entities.

The strategic implication, as suggested by the synthesised evidence, is not that religious organisations should be prevented from political engagement—such prevention would violate democratic principles of freedom of association and political participation. Rather, the implication is that democratic health depends on civil society institutions that provide accountability and transparency regarding organisational decision-making. When religious organisations operate opaquely, followers cannot adequately assess whether leaders are pursuing authentic community interests or narrow elite interests. This argues for strengthening institutional mechanisms through which organisational members can exercise voice and exit (Hirschman, 1970)—formal internal governance structures enabling member feedback, transparent financial accounting, and explicit articulation of organisational decision-making principles. However, the extent to which these mechanisms are present in NW and comparable organisations remains an empirical question requiring further investigation.

Derived proposition from Implication One: The democratic legitimacy of peasant-ren-based organisations' electoral engagement is positively associated with the presence of internal governance mechanisms that enable member voice and accountability, and nega-

tively associated with perceptions of elite capture. This proposition emerges from the synthesised literature but awaits direct empirical testing through organisational ethnography or survey research.

Implication Two: Digital Platforms as Contested Democratic Spaces

The synthesised evidence regarding digital activism, clicktivism, digital resistance and online mobilisation indicates that digital platforms are neither inherently democratising nor inherently authoritarian; they are contested terrain where multiple actors struggle to shape political outcomes. The Rinjani cable car case illustrates genuine democratisation in one respect: previously marginalised environmental voices gained platform visibility that would have been difficult to achieve in pre-digital information environments. Simultaneously, documented evidence of polarisation and filter bubbles (Sunstein, 2009; Pariser, 2011) demonstrates how algorithmic curation can fragment public spheres and amplify conflict.

The theoretical framework emerging from this synthesis conceptualises digital platforms as institutional structures with particular affordances and biases. Algorithmically curated platforms provide low barriers to content creation and distribution—a democratising feature—but also create quantified attention metrics that incentivise extreme and conflict-generating content; network effects that amplify already-popular content; and permanent digital traces that preclude easy exit. These features, the synthesised evidence suggests, create systematic biases toward polarisation-generating content over deliberation-promoting content; emotionally charged expression over thoughtful nuance; coordinated campaign material over organic grassroots expression; and amplification of majority sentiment over minority voices, because algorithmic amplification responds to network size.

These biases, it must be emphasised, are not inevitable outcomes of ‘digital nature’. Rather, they represent particular business models and platform design choices. Alternative platform designs—open-source social media with user-controlled algorithms, platforms emphasising identity verification and moderation, cooperative social media—could generate different affordances and biases. The strategic implication arising from this synthesis is that democratic governance of digital public spheres requires not only regulatory intervention—laws regarding privacy, content moderation and data practices—but also platform pluralism, ensuring that multiple platform architectures remain available so that users not served adequately by commercially optimised platforms can access alternative infrastructure.

Derived proposition from Implication Two: The democratising potential of digital platforms in contexts of institutional vulnerability is contingent upon platform pluralism and the availability of alternative architectures that prioritise deliberation over engagement-maximisation. This proposition suggests that regulatory frameworks promoting platform diversity may enhance democratic resilience—a hypothesis requiring comparative investigation across different platform ecosystems.

The two implications developed above, together with the propositions derived from each, point toward a coherent agenda for future empirical investigation. First, the credibility-contingency mechanism identified in the NW literature—wherein organisational legitimacy depends upon perceived leader consistency—requires direct testing through survey research or ethnographic fieldwork with NW members and followers. Second, the relationship between internal governance structures and democratic legitimacy in pesantren-based organisations warrants comparative investigation across different organisational types—NW, Nahdlatul Ulama, Muhammadiyah and others—to assess whether the patterns identified in the NTB context generalise to other regions. Third, the role of digital platforms in amplifying or constraining minority political participation, as illustrated by the Ahmadiyah case, merits dedicated study that examines how platform design features interact with legal vulnerability and social hostility to shape political agency.

The stakes of understanding these dynamics extend beyond academic interest. Indonesia's experience as a large, religiously plural democracy navigating rapid digital transformation carries implications for other Muslim-majority and multi-religious polities worldwide. The questions of how traditional forms of religious authority can either facilitate or impede democratic deliberation, how digital affordances reshape grassroots political agency, and how legal frameworks can protect minority rights while preserving majority voice constitute challenges of global significance. The synthetic review presented here offers a conceptual foundation for addressing these questions, but the propositions advanced require empirical validation before they can inform policy or practice with confidence.

Conclusion

This article set out to address two research questions concerning Nahdlatul Wathan's institutional transformation in post-1998 Indonesia, synthesising evidence from the existing scholarly literature to identify convergent patterns and develop testable propositions. In answer to the first research question—how NW's institutional transformation reflects the tension between religious authority and electoral pragmatism—the synthesised evidence indicates that NW has navigated this tension through a dual-logic strategy: activating its pre-existing pesantren networks as electoral infrastructure while framing political engagement in Islamic idioms, *jihad* and *amanah*, that rendered organisational multiplexity morally coherent for followers. This strategy proved effective during the 2008–2013 gubernatorial election period, when TGB embodied both genuine religious authority and political competence. The tension became visible in the documented accounts when followers perceived a gap between elite political repositioning and organisational religious identity, producing credibility deterioration. NW's trajectory thus illustrates, across the reviewed scholarship, that the tension between religious authority and electoral pragmatism is not resolved once but managed continuously through leader conduct, institutional

framing and follower perception.

In answer to the second research question—what conditions enable or constrain pesantren-based organisations in maintaining religious legitimacy during electoral competition—three enabling conditions were identified across the reviewed literature: elite credibility grounded in perceived consistency between religious principles and political conduct; pre-existing social networks that substantially reduce electoral mobilisation costs; and digital-religious coherence, wherein digital media strategies reinforce rather than contradict organisational religious identity. One critical constraining condition was also identified: the absence of legal recognition, illustrated by the Ahmadiyah case, which demonstrates that the three enabling conditions presuppose a baseline of legal security that is absent for legally restricted minorities. These enabling and constraining conditions are not presented as verified empirical findings but rather as synthesised patterns derived from the literature, warranting empirical testing through future fieldwork.

The methodological approach adopted in this synthetic review necessarily carries certain limitations. As a synthetic review, this article draws upon published secondary scholarship and analyses of digital discourse patterns documented in the literature rather than original ethnographic fieldwork in NTB. The claims about NW follower perceptions depend on a small number of interview-based studies—predominantly Hamid (2023) and Anwar (2024)—and replication with larger survey samples would strengthen confidence in the credibility-contingency proposition advanced here. The article also cannot speak to internal NW deliberations not documented in academic publications, nor can it verify the accuracy of the documented accounts it synthesises. These limitations are inherent to the synthetic design and are appropriately addressed by framing the contribution as propositional rather than demonstrative—a choice that reflects the article’s aim to systematise fragmented evidence and generate hypotheses for future investigation rather than to present definitive conclusions.

The future research agenda emerging from this synthesis points in three directions. First, longitudinal tracking of NW’s organisational multiplexity following TGB’s 2024 political repositioning would test whether the credibility deterioration documented in the literature is reversible, providing a crucial test of the credibility-contingency proposition. Second, comparative analysis of pesantren-based organisations in other Indonesian provinces—East Java’s Nahdlatul Ulama network and Aceh’s *dayah* system—would assess the generalisability of the three enabling conditions identified in the NTB context, distinguishing between context-specific and structurally general patterns. Third, a dedicated study of digital platform governance in the context of minority political participation, drawing on the Ahmadiyah case as its primary empirical site rather than as an illustration within a broader organisational study, would illuminate how platform design features interact with legal vulnerability and social hostility to shape political agency—a question that the present review could only address in a preliminary manner.

In closing, the synthetic review presented here contributes a coherent analytical framework for understanding how Indonesia’s Islamic institutional landscape adapts to electoral

democracy in an era of digital transformation. The article has identified convergent patterns in the existing literature, distilled enabling and constraining conditions, and advanced testable propositions that can orient future empirical investigation. While the findings are necessarily provisional given the synthetic methodology, they offer a foundation for systematic inquiry into the conditions under which pesantren-based organisations can maintain religious legitimacy while participating in democratic competition. The stakes of this inquiry extend beyond the Indonesian case, as Muslim-majority and multi-religious polities worldwide grapple with similar tensions between traditional religious authority, electoral pragmatism and the affordances of digital communication. The propositions developed here, if subjected to rigorous empirical testing, may contribute not only to scholarly understanding but also to informed debate about the institutional conditions that support democratic resilience in religiously diverse societies.

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