

Between Da'wah and Politics: A Study on the Role and Local Political Participation of Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the involvement of Muslimat NU actors in the political sphere as a strategic issue that has attracted significant attention from academics, activists, and policymakers. The low representation of women in legislative institutions is not merely a numerical problem but also concerns the substantive dimension of democracy itself. This research employs a qualitative approach, with primary data collected directly from the field. Data collection methods include observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings reveal the roles played by Muslimat NU women in both *religious* outreach (dakwah) and political activities, the challenges they face when these two domains intersect—particularly during electoral contestations—and the strategies they develop to navigate conflicts of loyalty between religious organizational commitments and political party affiliations. The study highlights that while dakwah remains a visible and official mandate of the organization, political engagement often operates more subtly, yet leaves a tangible impact on the dynamics of local democracy.

Keywords: muslimat NU; women's political participation; dakwah, gender and politics.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis keterlibatan Aktor Muslimat NU di dalam ruang politik sebagai isu yang strategis dan menjadikan perhatian khusus para akademisi, aktivis, dan pembuat kebijakan. Rendahnya keterwakilan perempuan di lembaga legislatif bukan sekadar persoalan numerik, melainkan juga menyangkut dimensi substantif dari demokrasi itu sendiri. Penelitian ini menggunakan data kualitatif dengan fokus utama data di lapangan. Metode pengumpulan data menggunakan observasi, wawancara, dan dokumentasi. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan peran yang dijalankan oleh perempuan Muslimat NU dalam ranah dakwah dan politik, tantangan yang hadapi ketika dua ranah tersebut saling berbenturan, khususnya dalam situasi kontestasi elektoral, dan strategi yang dikembangkan untuk menavigasi konflik loyalitas antara organisasi keagamaan dan afiliasi partai politik. Dakwah yang terang benderang sebagai mandat resmi organisasi dan politik yang bergerak diam-diam namun meninggalkan jejak nyata dalam peta demokrasi lokal.

Kata Kunci: muslimat NU; partisipasi politik perempuan; dakwah, gender dan politik.

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Introduction

The involvement of women in the political sphere in Indonesia is one of the strategic issues that continues to attract the attention of academics, activists, and policymakers. Since the reform era, discourse regarding women's political representation has developed quite significantly, both in terms of regulation and democratic practices in the field. The General Election Law mandates a 30% quota for women's representation in every legislative candidate list, yet the realization of such representation remains far from expectations. Research shows that although the number of women serving in parliament continues to increase, structural and cultural barriers still form thick walls that are difficult to dismantle (Munggaran, 2023).

The low representation of women in legislative institutions is not merely a numerical issue, but also concerns the substantive dimension of democracy itself. Women as political subjects possess different interests, perspectives, and life experiences, so their presence in decision-making spaces is believed to produce policies that are more responsive to broader societal needs. Women's political participation is not only about fulfilling minimum quotas, but about how women are able to become active actors in the democratic process, from the level of voters to government administrators (Adriani & Maulia, 2024). Studies on women's political participation have become highly relevant, not only academically but also practically in efforts to strengthen substantive democracy in Indonesia (Wulandari and Sari 2025).

In this context, the existence of religion-based women's organizations plays a role that cannot be ignored. Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama (Muslimat NU) is one of the largest women's organizations in Indonesia, established on March 29, 1946, in Purwokerto, Central Java. As an autonomous body (banom) of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), Muslimat NU has a strong organizational structure and a network that reaches village levels throughout the archipelago. Institutionally, Muslimat NU is committed to strengthening the role of women in the development of the ummah and the nation, with primary focuses on health, social affairs, economy, education, and da'wah (Pimpinan Pusat Muslimat Nahdlatul Ulama (PP Muslimat NU), 2023). The vast membership of Muslimat NU, estimated to reach tens of millions across Indonesia, makes this organization a strategic civil society force in both national and local political arenas.

Studies on the role of Muslimat NU in the context of da'wah and women's empowerment have been widely conducted. Research shows that Muslimat NU plays an important role in promoting moderate Islam while empowering Muslim women in modern society through various social and religious programs. Women's contributions in da'wah activities are highly significant, both as active participants and as initiators of activities that accelerate the spread of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah Islamic values within society (Choirin et al., 2025). However, studies specifically examining Muslimat NU's involvement in practical politics, particularly how its members navigate the dualism of roles between loyalty to religious organizations and political party affiliations, remain relatively limited in Indonesian academic literature.

This phenomenon becomes increasingly complex when confronted with the context of regional head elections, where competing candidates often share the same NU support base. In the 2018 East Java gubernatorial election, for example, the contestation between Khofifah Indar Parawansa and Saifullah Yusuf (Gus Ipul) created a real dilemma for Muslimat NU activists who were simultaneously PKB cadres. Khofifah, who at that time served as

Chairwoman of the Central Executive Board of Muslimat NU, institutionally received support from the Muslimat NU mass base. Meanwhile, Gus Ipul was officially nominated by PKB as the party's candidate. The distinction between "supporting," which is the right of mass organizations, and "nominating," which is the right of political parties, became a crucial distinction that every NU women activist operating in both spheres had to understand (Azizah, 2022).

This is where the importance of this study lies. Field data collected from a key informant a woman currently serving as a member of the East Java Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) for the 2024–2029 period and simultaneously Chairwoman of Muslimat NU in Trenggalek Regency provides a rich and authentic picture of how an NU women activist navigates such complexities throughout her political journey. The informant's experience, beginning her legislative career in the 2004 election through PKB and successfully serving two terms in the Trenggalek DPRD, reflects the broader dynamics of NU women's struggle to attain equal positions within Indonesia's political sphere (Mutrofin 2020).

From the informant's account, it is evident that the tension between the Khittah NU which serves as the foundation for the thoughts, attitudes, and actions of NU members as decided in the 27th Congress in Situbondo in 1984 and the realities of practical politics has never truly been resolved. NU officially asserts its position as a socio-religious organization unaffiliated with any political party. However, in reality, the membership networks between NU, its autonomous bodies, and PKB overlap to such an extent that the boundaries between da'wah and politics become blurred. This does not mean that Muslimat NU has deviated from its mandate. On the contrary, this phenomenon reflects the complexity of the relationship between religion and politics within the context of Indonesia's local democracy, which continues to mature.

Research on the electoral behavior of NU communities in Trenggalek shows that the connection between NU identity and political choices has become increasingly fluid, especially among younger generations. Young NU groups tend to consider performance, moral issues, and digital da'wah narratives more than structural organizational affiliations in determining their political choices. This shift provides important context for understanding how senior NU women activists such as the informant in this study must adapt their political strategies they can no longer fully rely solely on organizational solidarity, but must also build convincing personal images and capacities in the eyes of constituents (Kristina & Ismawan, 2022).

Departing from the background above, this research seeks to fill the gap in the literature regarding the role of NU women at the intersection of da'wah and politics. Using a qualitative approach and primary data in the form of in-depth interviews with key informants, this study seeks to capture the complexities, contradictions, and wisdom contained within the experiences of an NU women activist who is also a politician. This study is expected not only to contribute theoretically to studies of women's politics and Islamic politics in Indonesia, but also to provide practical implications for efforts to strengthen women's roles in local democracy, particularly in regions with strong NU mass bases such as Trenggalek Regency and East Java in general.

Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a case study approach as the main methodological framework. The consideration is that the issue being examined—namely the role of Muslimat NU women at the intersection of da'wah and practical politics—is a social phenomenon rich in meaning, subjective experiences, and relational dynamics that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative instruments alone. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to deeply enter the world of the informants' experiences, understand how they interpret their dual roles as activists in religious organizations as well as political actors, and capture the complexity of tensions that arise in the context of regional elections and legislative elections at the local and provincial levels.

This research was conducted through direct fieldwork, with the aim of describing and detailing the phenomena occurring in the real lives of the informants (Khikmawati et al., 2024). The informants in this study were Hj. Siti Mukiyarti, M. Ag (as the chair of Muslimat NU Trenggalek and a member of the East Java DPRD), Sulusiyah (as the Chair of the Muslimat NU Tugu Branch) and Hj. Insiyatus Sholihah (as the Chair of the Muslimat NU Pogalan Branch). Data collection was focused on identifying and analyzing three main aspects that form the core issues of this study: first, the roles carried out by Muslimat NU women in the spheres of da'wah and politics. Second, the challenges they face when these two spheres intersect, particularly in situations of electoral contestation. And third, the strategies they develop to navigate conflicts of loyalty between religious organizations and political party affiliations. These three dimensions were explored specifically through the experiences of the main informant, namely a member of the East Java Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) for the 2024–2029 period who also serves as the Chairwoman of Muslimat NU in Trenggalek Regency, and were further enriched through data confirmation from other supporting sources.

Results and Discussion

Women's Political Representation and the Dynamics of Political Recruitment and Cadre Development in Muslimat NU

Studies on women's political representation in Indonesia have developed rapidly over the past decade. Munggaran (2023), in his research on the role and influence of women in Indonesian politics, asserts that despite a quantitative increase in the number of women successfully serving in legislative institutions, structural and cultural barriers remain determinants that limit women's effective participation in public decision-making. From a more theoretical perspective, an important distinction is made between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the physical presence of women in representative institutions—the number of women sitting in parliament—while substantive representation refers to the extent to which this presence actually results in advocacy and policies responsive to women's interests.

Research findings from the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, University of Indonesia, support this argument by showing that descriptive representation of women is a necessary but insufficient prerequisite for gender-responsive policies. Substantive representation requires institutional support, political leadership, and a strong and sustainable advocacy coalition (Sopia, 2026). Regarding women's political participation at the local level, Kristina and Iskandar found that low female representation in parliament is not

solely caused by individual factors, but rather by a system that is unfriendly to women, ranging from gender-biased party recruitment mechanisms, high political costs, and patriarchal cultural constructs that place women as secondary players in electoral contests (Kristina & Ismawan, 2022).

Similar research by Antari reinforces these findings by adding the dimension of psychological barriers: women often experience what is known as "impostor syndrome," where they doubt their own capacity to engage in a historically male-dominated political world (Kahpi & Harahap, 2024). Interestingly, in the field data of this study, these psychological barriers did not appear to be dominant among the informants. He did not interpret his defeat in the 2014 election as confirmation of his unworthiness, but rather as God's will that opened the door to devotion through another path, a resilience mechanism that was deeply rooted in religious values that were internalized through a long process within the Muslimat NU organization.

However, as noted in the study "Women's Leadership in Islamic Da'wah" (2025), Muslimat NU has evolved far beyond its purely da'wah function in practice. This organization serves as a complex women's empowerment agency, simultaneously managing religious, social, health, educational, and, although not always explicitly, political activities (Choirin et al., 2025). This complexity of functions is the source of the dual role problems experienced by Muslimat NU administrators in the field.

The relationship between Islamic organizations and politics in Indonesia is a topic that has been extensively studied in academic literature. Islamic organizations such as NU are understood as part of civil society that holds a strategic position in Indonesia's democratic system, not merely as interest groups but as moral and social forces capable of influencing public opinion, voter behavior, and even the direction of state policy.

In this context, the existence of PPKB, a wing organization of the National Awakening Party (PKB), whose membership overlaps significantly with Muslimat NU, creates an informal but highly effective symbiotic relationship. The National Awakening Party (PKB) gained access to the social networks and trust capital built by Muslimat NU through years of da'wah activities, while Muslimat NU gained a channel to place its cadres in political positions that enabled them to advocate for women's interests from within the system. Musrifah (2022), in her study of NU and the 2020 Tuban Regency Pilkada, found a similar pattern, where the NU network informally supported certain candidates despite the official neutrality of the parent organization (Musrifah, 2022).

The dynamics of the 2018 East Java gubernatorial election, the most dramatic context in the informants' narratives, have attracted the attention of a number of academics. Azizah (2022), in her study of religious elite hegemony in the East Java Pilkada, identified that the involvement of Islamic boarding school-based figures and Islamic mass organizations in the electoral contest in East Java was not merely an expression of the elite's personal interests, but rather a manifestation of a patron-client network that had been established long before the contest took place (Azizah, 2022). In this context, Khofifah's role as the Chairperson of the Central Executive Board of Muslimat NU and her gubernatorial candidacy automatically activates this patron-client network, placing Muslimat NU administrators throughout East Java in a precarious position if they have differing party loyalties. This is precisely what the

informant experienced, ultimately choosing an accommodating strategy by simultaneously supporting both candidates to ensure the safety of the institutions that call their home.

Regarding the concept of women's dual roles in Islamic organizations, a study by Bimas Islam (2024) on the construction of the theory of women's multiple roles in Islam identified that Muslim women in Indonesia, particularly those active in religious organizations, consistently perform multiple roles encompassing the domestic sphere, the da'wah sphere, and increasingly the public-political sphere (Suripto & Kuriyah, 2024). These three spheres cannot always be clearly separated; instead, they influence and mutually legitimize each other. A woman's ability to play a role in the da'wah sphere provides moral legitimacy and social networks, which then become invaluable assets when she enters the political arena. Conversely, her political position expands the reach of her da'wah because she now has access to state policies and resources that can be utilized for the benefit of the community. In this context, the informant's framing of her political struggle as part of her worship and efforts to benefit the community makes perfect sociological sense.

Research on the electoral behavior of NU members in Trenggalek (2024) provides relevant local context. The study found that the link between NU identity and political choices is increasingly fluid, especially among the younger generation, who tend to prioritize performance and substantive issues over structural organizational affiliation. This finding is important because it suggests that the network-based political mobilization strategies that have been effectively employed by NU cadres, including women working through Muslimat NU, need to evolve. Amid this shift in voting behavior, the informant's ability to persist and even successfully enter the East Java Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) in 2024 demonstrates that she has successfully combined organizational social capital with more independent and convincing personal capital.

A study of the political communication strategies of women legislators in East Java found that female legislators in East Java developed various adaptive communication strategies to navigate gender-based barriers in a still-patriarchal political system (Suprihatin et al., 2025). They relied not only on organizational networks but also built personal branding that emphasized typical female characteristics such as empathy, closeness to constituents, and commitment to social issues. Research on structural barriers to women's representation in the Central Java Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), published by Al-Imarah, also found that patriarchal culture, limited economic capital, and negative stereotypes against women in politics were cross-regional barriers that were not specific to one region (Sari, 2023). These findings reflect the context of this research, where similar challenges were also faced by informants in their long journey to achieving representation at the provincial level.

Finally, the discussion on women and regional elections provides an important conceptual framework that women's representation in regional head contests is not solely determined by the individual capacity of the woman herself, but also by the extent to which the local political ecosystem of parties, mass organization networks, media, and voters provides a conducive space for women to appear and compete on equal terms. From this perspective, Muslimat NU functions not only as a da'wah organization, but also as an ecosystem that allows women to build self-confidence, expand their networks, and mature their leadership capacity, which ultimately become important capital when they decide to enter formal political contests.

The Role of Muslimat NU in the Realms of Da'wah and Politics

In practice, Muslimat NU carries out two major roles that appear to run on separate tracks, yet in reality mutually support and complement one another: the role of da'wah and the role of politics. The da'wah role is explicit, official, and institutionally recognized as the organization's primary mandate. Meanwhile, the political role is implicit and informal, yet no less influential within the landscape of local democracy. From field data obtained through in-depth interviews with an informant who is a member of the East Java Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) for the 2024–2029 period and simultaneously serves as the Chairwoman of Muslimat NU in Trenggalek Regency, it becomes very clear how these two roles coexist within a single organizational body—sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in tension that requires particular ingenuity to manage.

In the realm of da'wah, Muslimat NU has long been known as one of the most active and consistent Islamic women's organizations in expanding the reach of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah values at the grassroots level. Research on the role of Islamic women's organizations in moderate da'wah found that Muslimat NU plays an important role not only in promoting a friendly and inclusive Islam, but also in empowering Muslim women to emerge as active social agents—as daiyah, leaders of majelis taklim, and movers of socio-religious activities at the community level (Choirin et al., 2025). Da'wah in this sense is not merely the delivery of religious messages from the pulpit to the congregation, but rather a process of empowerment that gradually builds the capacity, self-confidence, and social networks of NU women from the grassroots upward. This then indirectly becomes the most valuable capital when NU women decide to enter the arena of formal politics.

The informant in this study is a concrete example of such a journey. She began her involvement in the public sphere through the Muslimat NU organizational path, then gradually built the trust of constituents through the da'wah networks and social activities she engaged in. That organizational experience later became a solid foundation when she entered legislative contestation through PKB in the 2004 Election and successfully served two terms in the Trenggalek DPRD. This pattern aligns with findings from research on pesantren women and local leadership in East Java, which shows that NU-based women are able to integrate spiritual capital and social capital built through religious activities to seize leadership spaces in the public sector (Chalik, 2023). In this context, da'wah functions as a leadership incubator that is far more effective than merely formal political training.

The true complexity lies in the fact that Muslimat NU is institutionally bound by the 1984 NU Khittah, decided at the 27th Congress in Situbondo, which affirms that NU as a jamiyyah is organizationally unaffiliated with any political or social organization, while simultaneously guaranteeing every NU member, as a citizen, political rights protected by law (Amin, 2023). This formulation deliberately separates the individual political rights of NU members from the institutional stance of NU, which must remain neutral. However, in practice, the boundary between the two easily becomes blurred, especially when membership and management positions between Muslimat NU and party-affiliated organizations such as PPKB (Perempuan Penggerak Kebangkitan Bangsa) overlap.

The informant openly acknowledged that during the 2015 Trenggalek regional election, although the local branch of Muslimat NU did not issue an official instruction to support any candidate pair, support flowed automatically because almost all branch

administrators of Muslimat also held positions within PPKB. This confirms research findings regarding the continuing tendency of politicization within NU bodies at both elite and subordinate organizational levels, even though formally the khittah remains the official reference.

The conceptual distinction emphasized by the informant between “nominating” and “supporting” in electoral contestation became one of the most interesting findings in this study. According to her, only political parties have the right to nominate candidate pairs in regional elections, while Muslimat NU, as a social organization rather than a political party, can only occupy the position of supporter. In the 2018 East Java gubernatorial election, Gus Ipul was nominated by PKB, while Khofifah Indar Parawansa was informally supported by the Muslimat NU mass base. This clear understanding of the distinction reflects a high level of political literacy, while also becoming an institutional strategy to ensure that Muslimat NU is not considered to have violated its mandate as a non-partisan organization. Research on the role of Islamic mass organizations as civil society in Indonesia confirms that the position of Islamic organizations in the space between religion and politics actually provides strategic flexibility unavailable to political parties, because such organizations can maneuver without being bound by strict electoral legal consequences (Astuti & Wibisono, 2022).

The most striking aspect of the informant’s narrative is the way she interpreted her political defeat in the 2014 Election as part of Allah’s will that must be accepted wholeheartedly, while believing that the struggle for the welfare of the ummah does not always have to pass through parliamentary seats. This religious framing is not merely a psychological mechanism for coping with defeat, but rather a profound value orientation regarding the meaning of politics for NU women. For them, politics is a continuation of da’wah through different instruments—both ultimately leading to the same goal, namely the welfare of the ummah. From this perspective, the informant’s narrative of resilience strengthens the argument that organizations such as Muslimat NU function not only as leadership incubators, but also as shapers of value orientations that make NU women more resilient in facing pressure and failure in political contestation (A & Mumtahana, 2025). This is what distinguishes the political activism of NU women from other forms of conventional political participation: it is rooted in convictions that transcend mere electoral calculations.

Challenges to Leadership Dualism

One of the most substantial findings emerging from the field data in this study is the persistent tension experienced by the informant due to the dualism of leadership roles she simultaneously carries. As the Chairwoman of Muslimat NU of Trenggalek Regency and at the same time a member of the East Java Regional House of Representatives (DPRD) from the National Awakening Party (PKB), the informant not only performs two positions in parallel but also bears two fundamentally different institutional logics. Muslimat NU, as an autonomous body of NU, operates within the corridor of the Khittah NU, which requires it to remain neutral in political contestation, while PKB as a political party demands loyalty and active commitment from each of its cadres in every electoral moment. These two demands do not always go hand in hand, and it is precisely at this intersection that leadership dualism becomes a heavy and complex burden.

In academic literature, this phenomenon can be understood through the concept of role conflict, namely a condition in which an individual occupies two or more positions that simultaneously demand contradictory behaviors. Women's leadership in dealing with organizational conflict, as studied from a communication perspective, shows that female leaders tend to develop more consensual and peaceful approaches in managing such role tensions, different from the aggressive and confrontational approaches commonly used by male leaders (Yarnis et al., 2024). This consensual approach also appears to have been chosen by the informant when she decided to "escort both candidate pairs" in the 2018 East Java gubernatorial election—a decision that on the surface seemed ambiguous, but was actually a highly calculated form of role conflict management.

This challenge of leadership dualism became most evident and emotionally significant in the context of the 2018 East Java gubernatorial election, when the two competing candidates, Khofifah Indar Parawansa and Saifullah Yusuf (Gus Ipul), both had strong organic ties with the NU network. Khofifah, who at that time served as the Chairwoman of PP Muslimat NU, naturally gained support from the Muslimat NU mass base throughout East Java. Meanwhile, Gus Ipul was officially nominated by PKB, the party. The informant openly admitted that as a branch-level administrator, she "felt confused in determining her choice." However, she also realized that there was a greater commitment beyond personal preference namely that the safety of NU, Muslimat NU, and PKB had to be safeguarded simultaneously. The phrase "must beautifully play political strategy" expressed by the informant is highly meaningful; it is not merely about tactical cleverness, but reflects the moral burden borne by a female leader who must preserve the integrity of all the institutions that constitute her political and organizational home.

From a broader perspective, the tension between Islamic mass organizations and political involvement is not a new phenomenon. *Tribakti: Jurnal Pemikiran Keislaman* notes that the *Khittah NU* can be interpreted as a prohibition against institutional political involvement, yet in practice, the political steps taken by NU always generate pros and cons because at the personal level, NU cadres are allowed to join certain political parties (FN, 2020). This condition creates a gray area that must be navigated by Muslimat NU cadres such as the informant—they move within a space that is officially neutral but in practice can never be completely sterile from political interests. Studies on religious organizations and the responsibility of political neutrality even identify that organizational involvement in politics can create internal community tensions, worsen the organization's public image, and make the organization's socio-religious vision unclear because its energy becomes absorbed by electoral interests. This challenge quietly also haunts Muslimat NU at the branch level whenever local elections take place.

The challenge of leadership dualism does not stop at the external-electoral dimension alone, but also penetrates into the organization's internal dimension. When a Muslimat NU chairwoman is also an active PKB cadre, there is a risk that some Muslimat members with different party affiliations will feel unrepresented or even pressured. Studies on women's representation in Islamic-based political parties in Indonesia show that women in religion-based political organizations are often trapped in a dilemma between ideological loyalty to the organization's religious values and the pragmatic demands of parties oriented toward electoral victory (Prastiwi & Hakim, 2024). This dilemma is precisely reflected in the

informant's experience, where she must simultaneously ensure that Muslimat NU is not perceived as an organ of PKB while also fulfilling her obligations to the party as a loyal cadre.

Another equally significant challenge is the pressure to always appear competent and credible on two stages at once. Research on the role of women's leadership in public office within regional legislatures found that female leaders must consistently demonstrate leadership effectiveness through command, consultative, participatory, and delegation functions—a standard that is often applied more strictly to women than to men in similar positions (Dewanti, 2022).

In the informant's context, these double standards become multiplied. She is not only required to prove her capacity as a member of the DPRD, but also as the leader of the largest women's religious organization in the regency. Both roles carry different public expectations, and failure to fulfill one of them can negatively impact her legitimacy in the other sphere.

Interestingly, field data show that the informant does not interpret this leadership dualism merely as a burden, but also as a source of strength. Her years of experience in Muslimat NU provided her with social capital and public trust, which became invaluable assets in legislative competition. Conversely, her political position in the DPRD opened access to state policies and budgets that could be utilized to strengthen Muslimat NU programs on the ground. Santhet: Jurnal Sejarah, Pendidikan dan Humaniora, in its study on gender equality in PKB, notes that women in PKB-affiliated organizations can occupy strategic positions with leadership flexibility free from gender bias—an institutional ecosystem that provides broader space for women to move in both arenas simultaneously (Matondang & Harahap, 2026) This condition explains why the informant was able to endure and even continue climbing the political career ladder despite bearing the considerable complexity of dual roles.

Ultimately, the challenge of leadership dualism experienced by the informant reflects a broader structural problem within Indonesia's political system. As long as the boundaries between Islamic mass organizations and political parties remain blurred, and as long as overlapping membership between Muslimat NU and PKB continues without clear regulatory mechanisms, leadership dualism will remain a challenge that must be faced individually by every NU woman cadre who chooses to engage in the political arena. However, every woman who has successfully entered parliament—including the informant in this study—must struggle not only against external obstacles, but also manage the internal complexity of the multiple positions she simultaneously holds. It is precisely within this struggle that the most authentic and relevant leadership potential is found: the ability to remain standing at the crossroads without falling to one side.

Strategies for Responding to Conflict Challenges Between Religious Organizations and Political Parties

One of the most significant findings in this study is how the informant, a woman who simultaneously serves as Chairwoman of Muslimat NU of Trenggalek Regency and as a member of the East Java Regional House of Representatives for the 2024–2029 period, developed mature and adaptive strategies in facing the challenge of conflicting loyalties between the two institutions that constitute her political and organizational home: Muslimat NU as a religious organization, and the National Awakening Party (PKB) as her political vehicle. This conflict is not merely a technical-administrative issue, but touches the deepest

layers of identity, moral commitment, and organizational responsibility that she must manage simultaneously within the dynamic space of local democracy.

The first strategy identified from the field data is what the informant herself refers to as a “graceful” attitude in politics. This phrase does not refer to something aesthetic, but rather to intelligence in managing her position between two contradictory institutional pulls. When the 2018 East Java gubernatorial election positioned Khofifah Indar Parawansa, then Chairwoman of PP Muslimat NU, and Saifullah Yusuf (Gus Ipul), who was endorsed by PKB, as opposing candidates, the informant did not choose to fully follow one side while abandoning the other. Instead, she chose to “escort both,” an accommodative strategy designed to ensure that neither side felt neglected. From the perspective of political communication, such a strategy aligns with the concept of impression management developed by academics, in which a political actor consciously manages her image and stance in order to remain trusted by various groups of interests simultaneously (Asmuni et al., 2025). This strategy is not a form of opportunism, but rather a reflection of the awareness that in the context of a mass-based religious organization such as NU, institutional preservation must be placed above short-term electoral interests.

The second prominent strategy is the informant’s ability to build and utilize dual social capital, namely capital derived from the Muslimat NU network as well as the PKB network through PPKB. Research on the strategies of Islamic-based parties in mobilizing female voters found that religious organization networks such as pesantren and NU autonomous bodies constitute highly effective social infrastructure for building voter trust and loyalty at the grassroots level (Fujilestari, 2026). The Muslimat NU preaching network granted her moral legitimacy and trust among the nahdliyin community, while her PKB affiliation provided access to political machinery and structured legislative recruitment channels. The combination of these two forms of social capital became the foundation of her durable political strategy, resilient against shifting electoral dynamics.

The third strategy is what may be called the religious framing of political reality. The informant consistently framed her political experiences—including victories, defeats, and confusion in determining political choices—within a strong religious narrative. When she failed in the 2014 legislative election, she did not respond with destructive disappointment, but instead interpreted it as the will of Allah opening another path of service. Such framing has a dual function: psychologically, it becomes a resilience mechanism that prevents the informant from easily giving up; socially and politically, it strengthens her image as an activist struggling not for personal interests, but for the welfare of the ummah. Research on women’s representation in mass-based Islamic parties in Indonesia confirms that successful NU female cadres in legislative contests are generally those who are able to integrate their religious and political identities into one coherent and convincing narrative, rather than artificially separating the two (Asmuni et al., 2025).

The fourth strategy, equally important, is the informant’s ability to understand and emphasize the conceptual distinction between “nominating” and “supporting” in the electoral context. She firmly stated that Muslimat NU is not a political party; therefore, its position is merely as a supporter, not a nominator—a distinction with significantly different legal and organizational implications. A clear understanding of this distinction is not simply a matter of legal literacy, but also a strategy to maintain the legitimacy of Muslimat NU as a religious

organization that is not formally trapped in partisan politics, while still allowing its network to move informally in supporting candidates considered representative of nahdliyin community interests. Prastiwi and Hakim, in their study on women's representation in mass-based Islamic parties, found that female cadres who successfully navigate Indonesia's Islamic political arena are generally those who possess a deep understanding of institutional boundaries between religious organizations and political parties, and who are capable of intelligently and ethically utilizing the space between them (Juwita Hayyuning Prastiwi, 2024).

The fifth strategy is the dignified management of post-contestation relations. The informant specifically emphasized her appreciation for the political culture of Trenggalek society, which is capable of reuniting after local elections without mutual condemnation. Behind this appreciation, however, lies a more substantive message: that she herself consistently prioritizes reconciliation and organizational solidarity as values higher than mere electoral victory. Strategically, this attitude is important because it builds a long-term reputation as a leader trusted by various groups—not only by her supporters, but also by those with different political choices. Studies on women's participation in Indonesian politics show that female politicians capable of positioning themselves as figures of reconciliation after political contests tend to enjoy higher levels of public acceptance and are generally better able to build cross-group coalitions necessary for sustaining their political careers (Kahpi & Harahap, 2024).

Overall, the strategies developed by the informant reflect a distinctive model of NU women's leadership: neither confrontational nor rigidly ideological, yet also not opportunistic. She operates within the gray zone between da'wah and politics with full awareness, maintaining a balance between religious commitment and political pragmatism by using Islamic values as a moral compass that guides rather than restricts. This model deserves greater attention from academics and policymakers alike, because it offers valuable lessons on how women can survive and thrive within a political system still full of structural challenges, without betraying their fundamental identity as NU women committed to da'wah and the welfare of the ummah.

Conclusion

Women as NU cadres stand at the crossroads of two worlds: da'wah that shines brightly as the organization's official mandate, and politics that moves quietly yet leaves tangible traces on the map of local democracy. These two roles are not a choice, but a reality that must be lived simultaneously. As long as the boundary between Islamic mass organizations and political parties remains blurred, and as long as Muslimat NU and PKB continue to be intertwined without clear rules, the dualism of leadership will continue to fall as a burden carried alone by every female cadre brave enough to step into the political arena. This is not a personal matter; it is a structural wound gaping within the body of Indonesia's political system. These cadres do not choose a confrontational path, are not trapped in rigid ideology, nor do they dissolve into cheap opportunism. They move within the gray zone between the pulpit and the podium, between prayer beads and ballot papers, with full awareness and measured grace. Islamic values are not walls that confine them, but compasses that guide

them; not shields that conceal, but lights that illuminate every step between the two worlds they equally love.

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