

Pesantren and the Khilafah Discourse: Responses of Kiai in South Sumatra on Religion–State Relations

Izomiddin, Syahril Jamil, Abdul Hadi, Muhammad Torik
Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah Palembang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the responses of pesantren communities in South Sumatra to the discourse of khilafah, particularly how kiai and santri interpret exclusive and inclusive Islamic texts in relation to religion–state dynamics. The research employed a qualitative method with a critical hermeneutic approach, combining in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies in five pesantren across three districts. The findings reveal that the pesantren communities do not perceive the khilafah merely as a political project, but as a discourse negotiated through da'wah, education, and religious authority. Three major patterns of response were identified: (1) support for the nation-state while internalising Islamic values through da'wah and education; (2) reflective acceptance of the khilafah as an ideal, but with contextual consideration for Indonesia's pluralistic reality; and (3) normative rejection of both the nation-state and khilafah based on critical views of political failures. These responses demonstrate the active role of pesantren in shaping Islamic discourse, promoting moderation, and safeguarding national unity. The study concludes that pesantren function not only as educational institutions but also as centres of da'wah and socio-political negotiation that adaptively respond to transnational Islamic ideologies in contemporary Indonesia.

Keywords

Khilafah; Pesantren; Kiai, South Sumatra

Corresponding Author

Syahril Jamil

Universitas Islam Negeri Raden Fatah, Palembang; Syahriljamil_uin@radenfatah.ac.id

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the Reformation era, Indonesia has experienced complex political dynamics, characterised by the intensification of religious discourse intersecting with state ideology. One recurring issue is the discourse on the caliphate. Often associated with transnational movements, this ideology presents an alternative system of governance that is distinct from both the principles of the state outlined in the philosophy of Pancasila and the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) (Musawar & Suhirman, 2021). This discourse is not confined to academic circles or radical activist groups; it has also spread to public spaces, including religious educational institutions (Aulya, 2020). Amid this polarisation, the pesantren community occupies a unique and strategic position as one of Indonesia's main pillars of traditional Islamic education. In South Sumatra, where there are strong historical links to the moderate Islamic traditions of Nusantara, examining the pesantren community's response to and interpretation of the caliphate is highly relevant. They are not merely objects of global ideological currents, but active participants in their interpretation and response, shaping religious narratives that impact social stability and national unity. One of the major issues surrounding this concept is the 'caliphate', which remains a dynamic force within modern state systems (Rasuki, 2019).



In the context of contemporary Indonesia, the idea of the caliphate still leaves room for complex interpretations and lacks absolute clarity. Until now, the relationship between religion and the state has largely been viewed as a normative ideal, despite often being encapsulated by the slogan 'al-Islam din wa al-dakwah' (Putri, *et. al.*, 2024; Setiawan & Risnandar, 2019). Discussions about the caliphate have sparked a variety of responses, ranging from rejection on the grounds of incompatibility with the modern nation-state (Azmy, 2020; Sugiri, 2019), to acceptance as part of certain ideological aspirations, as evidenced by the growing religiously-based political polarisation before and after the 2019 elections. The government's dissolution of Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) reflects concerns about transnational ideologies threatening the national consensus based on Pancasila (Arif, 2016; Rafiuddin, 2015). Amidst the generalisation of discourse on the caliphate, the pesantren community offers a more nuanced spectrum of interpretations. As traditional religious institutions that preserve the heritage of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah, they also serve as pillars of nationality (Mahamid, 2022; Wahib, 2020). However, academic studies to date have primarily focused on the caliphate movement or state responses, while the internal dynamics of pesantren, including how clerics, students and alumni navigate the caliphate discourse within a pluralistic and democratic political reality, remain largely unexplored (Muniroh, 2019; Zain & Mutaqin, 2022). In Islamic tradition, the concepts of caliphate and caliph derive from the root word *khalafa*, meaning 'successor' (Habibi, 2019). In the Qur'an, the caliphate carries both universal spiritual significance and specific political authority, as exemplified in the case of Prophet David (Surah al-Baqarah: 30; Surah Shad: 26). Therefore, the interpretation of the caliphate must consider its historical and socio-political context, including the various forms of Islamic governance that have emerged over time (Faslah & Yanti, 2020).

This research focuses specifically on the response and interpretation of the pesantren community in South Sumatra towards the caliphate discourse. The study will emphasise how the institutional structure of pesantren, traditional curricula and the central role of kiai influence these interpretations (Yahya, 2014). The study will also examine how pesantren communities in South Sumatra construct counter-narratives or reinterpretations of the caliphate that align with national values and Nusantara Islamic traditions. Thus, this research will provide an overview of pesantren attitudes towards contemporary issues and offer a richer understanding of the resilience and adaptability of traditional Islam in the face of ideological challenges in the globalised era (Hannan, 2020). This is a crucial entry point for understanding the dynamics of Islam in Indonesia, where pesantren remain important in shaping the identity and direction of the Muslim community. The discourse of the caliphate has been an intensely researched topic in Indonesia since the post-Reform era, marked by the resurgence of religious discourse intersecting with state ideology. Most of the available literature can be grouped into three main categories. Although these categories are relevant, they leave significant knowledge gaps, which are the focus of this study. This literature review aims to synthesise, critique and identify these gaps to clarify this study's original contribution.

Studies of the caliphate's ideology and movement, such as those conducted by Imam Yahya (2014), have significantly contributed to our understanding of the historical roots, doctrines and mobilisation strategies of groups such as Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and of how this ideology interacts with national political dynamics. However, the dominant approach in the literature tends to treat Muslim communities, including Islamic boarding schools, as passive recipients of ideology, thereby ignoring their intellectual and theological agency in responding to caliphate discourse (Mastuhu, 2014; Mukaffan & Siswanto, 2019). Other studies highlight the rejection of the caliphate by the government and moderate Islamic groups (Barton & Andre, 2014; Hasan, 2022) also often assume

that pesantren support the nationalist narrative passively and monolithically, without considering a more complex spectrum of responses. This could include theological reinterpretation or separating the concept of the caliphate as a normative ideal from its political implementation. The latter is considered irrelevant in the Indonesian context.

Meanwhile, classical literature on pesantren (Dhofier, 1988; Gazali, 2018), has established a strong foundation regarding their role as centres of traditional Islamic education and guardians of the archipelago's Islamic traditions, but has not explicitly examined their interaction with contemporary transnational ideological challenges. Additionally, the dominance of studies focusing on pesantren in Java (Akhiruddin, 2015; Armita, 2017; Machsum, 2013) This leaves a significant geographical gap, particularly in the South Sumatra region, which has its own historical and socio-religious characteristics. While existing literature has provided a solid theoretical framework, studies that specifically and deeply investigate how pesantren communities in South Sumatra interpret and respond to the caliphate discourse in their local context are still lacking.

This study broadens the theoretical understanding of the relationship between Islam and the state. It enriches the local perspective in Indonesian Islamic studies by highlighting South Sumatra's important yet under-explored role. To this end, the research aims to answer three key questions, which will be analysed in depth in the discussion: (a) how the social structure and political dynamics of pesantren communities and their leaders (kiais) in South Sumatra function, including how they establish their political position and religious ideology within the local public sphere; (b) how pesantren communities respond socially and politically to the idea of the caliphate — whether with rejection, acceptance or adaptation — in the context of Indonesia's pluralistic nation-state; and (c) how discourse on the caliphate impacts the political orientation and relationship between pesantren communities and the state — whether leading to tension, resistance or synergy within the national framework. Adopting an in-depth qualitative approach, this research makes a significant scientific contribution to the interpretation of religious politics from the perspective of traditional communities which are often considered passive or non-political, despite having considerable ideological agency and socio-political influence within local communities.

This study aims to address this gap by making clear and compelling original contributions to the study of the caliphate movement or the state's response. It does this by focusing on the internal perspectives and agency of the pesantren community, particularly the kiai, santri and alumni, who are positioned as dynamic interpreters. This will enable narratives and meanings that may have been overlooked by quantitative studies or broader discourse analyses to be captured. In-depth interviews with senior and young kiai, santri, and alumni will be used to uncover the complex spectrum of perspectives. By focusing the research on South Sumatra, the study is expected to provide unique empirical findings and enrich understanding of the diversity of Islam in Indonesia. The hypothesis to be tested is that the Islamic tradition, deeply rooted in Sufism and mysticism in South Sumatra, can be a key factor in shaping either a pragmatic or a theologically rejecting response to the caliphate. The study will enrich literature on Islamic boarding schools and caliphate discourse, providing a richer, more nuanced understanding of how traditional Islam in Indonesia adapts to and confronts contemporary ideological challenges. This original contribution will clarify the strategic role of Islamic boarding schools as intellectual and social actors that will determine the future direction of Islam.

2. METHODS

This study takes a qualitative approach based on the interpretive paradigm — a theoretical

framework well suited to examining meaningful and subjective social phenomena. Rather than seeking a single truth, this paradigm seeks to understand reality as an intersubjective construction shaped by those involved's experiences and social contexts (Rahman, 2023). In the context of this study, this approach enables researchers to describe not only 'what' the pesantren community's views on the caliphate are, but also 'why' these views were formed. This process involves negotiating meaning between religious traditions, kiai authority and contemporary socio-political dynamics (Darmalaksana, 2020). Therefore, this framework is fundamental to uncovering the complex and often hidden spectrum of meanings behind dominant religious discourse. To achieve systematic depth of interpretation, this study will apply a critical hermeneutic approach. This approach goes beyond simple textual analysis by integrating the hermeneutic cycle and critical reflection on underlying assumptions (Fadli, 2021). The process begins with forming a preliminary understanding based on a literature review. This understanding is then deliberately confronted with empirical field data. The collected data will be analysed repeatedly, moving from understanding the parts (the informants' statements) to understanding the whole (the central themes) and vice versa. During the critical reflection stage, the researcher will systematically question any power structures or ideologies that may have influenced the informants' views, such as the influence of religious leaders or the dominance of national narratives. This approach ensures that the resulting interpretation is not limited to a surface-level description, but can critique and contextualise the meaning of the caliphate within a broader socio-political framework. To strengthen the transparency of the methodology in this paper, the following table summarises the main components of the research :

Components	Details
Research Location	3 Districts in South Sumatra
Number of Islamic Boarding Schools	5 Islamic Boarding Schools
Number of Informants	24 informants comprised Islamic Boarding School Leader, Senior Teachers, and Active Students.
Data Collection Methods	Semi-structured Interviews, Participatory Observation, Documentation Study
Implementation Period	January- April 2019
Data Validation	Member checking through Limited Group Discussions
Analysis Approach	Hermeneutika: pra-understanding, circularity, critical reflection

This study employed a purposive sampling strategy to identify informants and locations rich in information. Three to five Islamic boarding schools in South Sumatra were selected as case studies to represent geographical diversity and institutional typology. These included urban boarding schools with intensive interaction with contemporary issues and rural boarding schools that still strongly uphold tradition (Lisabella, 2013). Key informants were carefully selected from each pesantren, including kiai/pesantren leaders, ustadz/senior teachers, senior santri and alumni. Representing these various actors is important to accommodate a range of views. The main criterion for the active involvement of informants in religious discourse will be verified through teaching records, participation in forums, or publications. Data validity and reliability will be ensured through triangulation of sources, methods, and theories – a strategy combining various data sources (diverse informants), data collection methods (interviews, observations, document analysis), and theoretical frameworks

Data analysis will be conducted using systematic thematic analysis. This process begins with verbatim transcription of interview data and field notes, followed by initial coding and grouping of codes into central themes. Narrative interpretation will then be used to explain the underlying meaning. The validity of the findings will be strengthened through 'member checking', whereby the analysis results will be reconfirmed with the informants. As human instruments, researchers are aware of their own subjectivity. Therefore, critical reflection on subjectivity is an integral part of the methodology. By systematically documenting personal biases and assumptions, this research aims to achieve greater objectivity, ensuring that the resulting interpretations are academically valid, credible and ethically accountable.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 *The Socio-Political Dynamics of Pesantren and Kiai in South Sumatra*

The relationship between Islamic boarding schools, clerics and socio-political dynamics in South Sumatra is deeply rooted in history and sociology, transcending the functional relationship between educational institutions and power structures. Historically, Islamic boarding schools emerged as religious entities and institutions deeply rooted in the struggle for the nation's independence and social transformation (Jauhari, 2017). During the colonial period, for example, they served as centres of cultural and intellectual resistance against colonial domination (Sukmurdiyanto & Zulfa, 2020). Religious leaders fostered a collective consciousness that became a valuable asset in the fight against colonialism by teaching classical texts and shaping students' characters. Pesantren became bastions of morality and Islamic identity whose role extended beyond education to forming a strong social network. The term 'mudir', commonly used in some pesantren in South Sumatra, is not merely a title for the leader (Muslimah Imas, 2016). It is also a reflection of local cultural sensitivity, recognising the authority of the kiai not only in educational matters, but also in the social and spiritual aspects of the community (Muhakamurrohman, 1970). Consequently, the kiai in South Sumatra have legitimised their historical and social authority by fulfilling dual roles as accomplished educators and community leaders..

Despite its strong historical foundation, the authority of the kiai in South Sumatra is facing significant challenges in the contemporary political landscape (Bisri, 2019). Modern political dynamics, especially since the Reformation era, have created opportunities for kiai to participate in practical politics by affiliating with political parties or openly supporting legislative or executive candidates (Fajar, 2018). As has also occurred in other regions, this participation seriously affects their religious authority. Empirical data shows that political affiliations often lead to social polarisation within the pesantren community. Tensions arising from differences in political support among clerics have been observed, even within a single pesantren. For example, in Musi Banyuasin, differences in support for gubernatorial candidates in the 2009 regional elections caused disharmony. This phenomenon threatens social harmony and can erode the spiritual authority of kiai in the eyes of santri and the community, who view kiai as role models above practical political interests.

The erosion of the kiai's piety due to political affiliation is a crucial issue that requires in-depth analysis. In the pesantren tradition, the authority of the kiai is based on scholarship ('alim), morality (wara'), and spiritual exemplarity (Bruinessen, 1995). However, when kiai become involved in politics, the dual nature of their role can create tension. For example, pesantren teachers who are also involved in politics may become more preoccupied with political activities than teaching, resulting in a decline in focus on learning (Harun, 2018). Field data from other case studies shows that this can reduce students' interest in learning and affect the pesantren's credibility. Kiai's involvement in practical

politics has created new dynamics in the construction of religious authority legitimacy in Indonesia, requiring interdisciplinary analysis through political sociology and religious anthropology (Sari, 2020). Historically, kiai legitimacy was rooted in scholarly and spiritual authority, built through pesantren traditions, scholarly lineage and deep ascetic practices. In the contemporary context, however, active participation in political contests has shifted this foundation towards a basis of power and political networks, which are often pragmatic and transactional (Syahidah, 2022). This shift changes the relationship between the kiai and the santri communities and reconstructs the kiai's position within the broader socio-political structure. Here, religious authority is renegotiated within electoral interests and strategic alliances. Therefore, sociological and anthropological approaches are essential for comprehending this transformation of legitimacy as it relates to the mediation between religious tradition and modern political reality, and its ramifications for the veracity of the kiai's role in upholding society's moral and spiritual integrity.

By comparison, this dynamic offers an interesting perspective when considered alongside the pesantren tradition in Java. In Java, the relationship between kiai and politics is often formalised through mass organisations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Islam-based political parties, resulting in a more organised pattern of relations (Samrudi & Abd. Hadi Faishol, 2022). By contrast, in South Sumatra, while religious organisations exist, the relationship between kiai and politics tends to be more personal, based on individual networks. This makes the kiai's authority more vulnerable to fragmentation and polarisation (Haris & Dardum, 2021). The scholarly tradition in South Sumatra, which often has roots in Middle Eastern education and Malay traditions, also has a distinctive character. This reinforces the argument that pesantren and kiai in regions outside Java have unique narratives and challenges. The transformation of kiai authority in the modern political landscape of South Sumatra demonstrates that religious legitimacy is not fixed, but continuously negotiated and tested amid power struggles, affiliations and social polarisation.

Throughout the history of Islamic politics in Indonesia, the Kiai has played a dual role as both a religious figure and a political actor, forming a symbiotic relationship between political power and religious authority since the sultanate era. (Apriyanti & Dienaputra, 2015). Royal structures such as palaces in South Sumatra were important in establishing religious centres. The Sultan acted as the highest religious authority in these centres and appointed religious leaders as extensions of his spiritual power (Rahim, 1998). This historical relationship legitimised political power by securing the support of religious scholars and institutionalised Islamic education by establishing Islamic boarding schools, such as Seri Bandung in Tanjung Batu (Syarifuddin, et., al., 2021), Raudhatul Ulum Sakatiga (Kirana, 2020), Al-Ittifaqiah Indralaya and Qodratullah Langkan are clear examples of the institutional development of Islamic education, with its strong local cultural and historical foundations (Meriati, 2017; Susanti, 2018). With more than 300 Islamic boarding schools now established across various regions of South Sumatra, this province has become one of the most important centres for developing such schools in Indonesia (Fajar, 2018). This is concrete evidence of the dynamism of religious institutions deeply rooted in local communities' historical and social makeup.

The transformation of the Kiai's role from that of a spiritual leader to that of a practical political actor has had significant implications for Islamic boarding schools' integrity and social cohesion within the community (Ridho, et., al., 2021). When a kiai explicitly shows affiliation with a particular political party, it can cause political polarisation among santri and their guardians. This impacts educational choices and leads to perceptions of piety based on ideology rather than spirituality (Achmad, 2019). The politicisation of this issue has caused tension between clerics with different political views, which could

undermine the solidarity of the ulama and disrupt the moral exemplarity that forms the foundation of Islamic boarding schools (Kurniawan & Barokah, 2022). In this context, Islamic education is an arena for character building and ideological contestation, which requires critical and systematic examination. Studying kiai and practical politics in South Sumatra is part of deconstructing the Javanese-centric narrative that has dominated Islamic political studies. This approach also opens up new ways of mapping power relations, religious authority and cultural resistance to political hegemony, as seen at the Raudhatul Ulum Sakatiga Islamic boarding school (Mei Wisnu, 2018).

3.2 *The Social and Political Reality of Kiai*

The term 'Kiai' has shifted meaning in the Indonesian context, evolving from a religious figure to an influential socio-political actor. One of the pioneers who introduced this term into anthropological discourse was Clifford Geertz, who studied religious structures in Java in 1960 (Geertz, 1984). In academic studies, discussions about Kiai often take a normative approach, focusing on the Java region and neglecting the unique local dynamics in other areas, such as South Sumatra. South Sumatra, for example, has a strong Islamic tradition and a distinctive religious social structure in which Kiai play a pivotal role in community life, acting as both spiritual leaders and strategic political figures (Adawiyah, 2020). In this context, the Kiai is a socio-political figure who plays two roles: spiritual leader and mediator of local political interests. This analysis explains how the Kiai uses his charismatic authority to establish a foundation of political legitimacy independent of the state's formal structures (Ridho, *et. al.*, 2021). In the context of patronage, Kiai established a loyalty-based power network that bolstered the relationship between the political elite and the grassroots communities of Semende Darat (Gemuruh & Mikail, 2021). This paper explores the articulation of religious values in contemporary political practice, and the role of the Kiai in facilitating negotiation between religious institutions and the state. Thus, the Kiai's role at the intersection of religiosity, charismatic leadership, and political power becomes apparent.

South Sumatra is home to several large Islamic boarding schools which serve as centres for education, preaching and social mobilisation (Dhofier, 1990). Religious leaders in this region are known by local titles, such as 'Mudir', and they have considerable influence in religious and political spheres (Marli, 2016). Field studies have shown that Islamic boarding schools, such as Al-Ittifaqiah Indralaya, Raudhatul Ulum Sakatiga and Nurul Islam, play a significant role in shaping the political preferences of their communities. The clerics at these schools are spiritual leaders and active political actors, particularly in the lead-up to general elections (Muhyiddin, 2019). They use alumni networks, social advocacy and economic incentives to foster political loyalty (Nasution, 2017). In practice, based on patronage and clientage, the relationship between the Kiai and the community became the main instrument of electoral mobilisation, whereby religious authority was used to direct political support.

The leadership of the Kiai in South Sumatra also exhibits variations in authority. Some maintain traditional charismatic patterns, while others adopt a more rational, modernist approach. For instance, the Kiai at Raudhatul Ulum Sakatiga combine a Salafi approach with a modern curriculum, and participate in political campaigns alongside parties such as the PKS. Conversely, Kiai at Nurul Islam tend to distance themselves from practical politics, yet still influence the strengthening of local identity. These differences demonstrate that Kiai charisma is not monolithic, but rather contextual and adaptive to local socio-political dynamics.

The following local empirical data illustrates the variation in the political roles of Kiai in South Sumatra:

Pesantren	Type of Kiai Leadership	Political Involvement	Social Impact
Nurul Islam	Charismatic Traditional	Passive support for local candidates	Strengthening of local identity
Raudhatul Ulum Sakatiga	Rational Modernist	Active campaigning with PKS	Village voter mobilisation
Al-Ittifaqiah Indralaya	Traditional-Modernist Hybrid	Influence in educational policy	Local political legitimacy

Kiai's political involvement in South Sumatra has complex consequences. While they are seen as guardians of society's moral and spiritual values, their involvement in practical politics often places them in an ambiguous position, making them vulnerable to conflicts of interest (Rochmiatun, 2016), especially when political affiliations are not in line with the aspirations of the people. In some cases, the spiritual authority of the Kiai has been undermined because they are perceived as being too pragmatic or partisan (Zainal, 2019). This phenomenon shows that religious charisma is not always linear with political legitimacy, and that the political morality of religious leaders must continue to be tested in an increasingly critical public sphere.

The political mobilisation strategies employed by Kiai in South Sumatra are diverse. Firstly, political education is incorporated into the pesantren curriculum to raise the political awareness of the santri. Secondly, alumni networks are utilised to consolidate electoral support. Thirdly, economic incentives, such as aspiration funds and government assistance, strengthen political loyalty. Fourthly, social preaching is employed as an effective campaigning tool. The political mobilisation strategies employed by Kiai in South Sumatra are diverse. Firstly, political education is incorporated into the pesantren curriculum to raise the political awareness of the santri. Secondly, alumni networks are utilised to consolidate electoral support. Thirdly, economic incentives, such as aspiration funds and government assistance, strengthen political loyalty. Fourthly, social preaching is an effective campaigning tool (Azharhany, 2023; Siregar, 2018). These strategies demonstrate that Kiai are political actors with significant mass mobilisation capacity and spiritual leaders. The political role of the Kiai in South Sumatra reflects the complex relationship between religion and the state at a local level. Kiai now function as both guardians of tradition and agents of socio-political change. In order to maintain their social and religious relevance, the Kiai's political involvement must be grounded in ethical principles and a spiritual orientation. For the Kiai, politics should not merely be a tool for contesting power, but a means to promote the welfare of the people. Therefore, maintaining moral and cultural integrity is essential to retain their legitimacy and influence in contemporary Indonesian society. As mentioned previously, religious movements led by Khairil Musthofa, *et. al.*, (2023) should be based on preserving local traditions while internalising religious teachings. Therefore, Kiai's political role must remain within a cultural framework, preventing them from becoming trapped in the pragmatism of power. The political morality of the Kiai should serve to build civilisation, rather than merely being a tool for electoral contestation. Therefore, consistency in maintaining moral and cultural integrity is key for the Kiai to remain socially and religiously relevant in contemporary Indonesian society.

3.3 Political Implications for Islamic Boarding Schools in South Sumatra

The development of religious educational institutions, particularly Islamic boarding schools and madrasas, is an important indicator of the level of religiosity among the people of South Sumatra. The province has seen significant growth in religious infrastructure, reflecting the community's active

participation in religious activities. Data shows that around 384 Islamic boarding schools are spread across various districts and cities in South Sumatra, supported by 25,474 mosques and prayer rooms (Munir, 2012). The large number of Islamic boarding schools demonstrates a strong religious spirit and represents the community's choice of an educational model based on Islamic values. These schools are seen not only as centres of religious study, but also as institutions that shape character and uphold ethical values considered relevant to the challenges of the times (Fuadi, *et. al.*, 2022; Mustakim, 2017). Islamic boarding schools offer a strong alternative to formal state education thanks to their spiritual, cultural and social orientation (Fajar, 2018). Thus, the rapid development of religious institutions in South Sumatra reflects a combination of religious revival and social transformation, in which the community sees pesantren education as a vehicle for preserving values and an agent of change.

In the context of the dynamics of Islamic political thought in Indonesia, particularly in South Sumatra, the kiai and pesantren leaders demonstrate a spectrum of views on two major concepts: the Nation State and the Sharia State. Thus, the rapid development of religious institutions in South Sumatra reflects a combination of religious revival and social transformation. In this context, the community views pesantren education as preserving values and effecting change. In the context of Islamic political thought in Indonesia, particularly in South Sumatra, clerics and pesantren leaders hold diverse views on two key concepts: the nation state and the sharia state (khilafah). This view reflects not only ideological preferences, but also the influence of history, social conditions and the interests of Muslims on state discourse (Armita, 2017; Ronaldo & Darmaiza, 2021). In general, attitudes can be categorised into four groups: supporters of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, supporters of an Islamic State, opponents of a Nation State and opponents of an Islamic State. Each group has strong and complex arguments that deserve critical examination. Supporters of a nation state consider the ideology of Pancasila (Soebiantoro, *et. al.*, 2021). To them, the nation state is both a manifestation of national power and a reflection of the nation's collective identity (Efendi & Ibnu Sholeh, 2023). They reject the idea of a caliphate because it is considered a form of politicisation with the potential to divide people and disrupt state stability (Moqsith, 2014). The argument is based on the flexibility of Islamic teachings, which do not prescribe a particular form of government, and on the belief that political discourse must be responded to wisely as it develops as part of societal dynamics. This conservative stance seeks to maintain social harmony and national unity by taking an inclusive, constitutional approach.

Conversely, those in favour of an Islamic state regard this system as the ideal symbol for Indonesia, given that the majority of its population is Muslim. They regard an Islamic state as a revolutionary force that could liberate the nation from the influence of 'jahiliyyah' culture and the failures of previous regimes (Humaidi, *et. al.*, 2023). According to them, this discourse must be approached seriously, but with consideration for society's readiness, so that it does not backfire on Muslims themselves. They also emphasised that establishing a Sharia state must be accompanied by developing supporting pillars to prevent it from becoming the political downfall of Muslims (Suryana, 2019). This view reflects a transformative spirit that seeks to replace the existing system with one considered more in line with Islamic values. However, this approach carries significant risks if it is not accompanied by structural and cultural readiness. Conversely, opponents of the nation-state criticise this concept as a Western construct designed to control developing countries. They reject the idea of associating the nation state with the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia, as this obscures the values of Pancasila and fails to recognise the nation's heterogeneity (Jufri, 2018). They believe that alternative approaches, such as those adopted by Iran and Saudi Arabia, are more relevant from

structural and cultural perspectives. They believe that the nation-state has destroyed the nation by dividing it into different elements, and has become merely a tool for overthrowing the existing government. This attitude reflects scepticism towards the modern state system and highlights the dominance of Western ideology in the formation of national political systems.

Meanwhile, groups opposed to the Sharia state do not explicitly reject this system; rather, they highlight aspects of readiness and potential negative impacts. They emphasise that the enforcement of Sharia law requires caution and maturity so that it does not backfire. The Islamic community in Indonesia, particularly in South Sumatra, is deemed to be ill-prepared for Sharia-related changes. The establishment of a Sharia state could also provoke negative feelings among other religious groups and potentially cause national disintegration. This demonstrates a moderate and pragmatic stance with a focus on social stability and community readiness. Islamic boarding schools managed by progressive clerics tend to be more open and have modern management systems and comprehensive, professional educational facilities. These differences in approach influence how Islamic boarding schools respond to community needs. Progressive Islamic boarding schools tend to be more popular as they strike a balance between spirituality and worldly competence (Harun, 2019). Nowadays, people are looking for religious educational institutions that can respond to economic, social and professional challenges. Therefore, Kiai's ability to translate religious values into modern life is crucial for building sustainable educational institutions. However, the community remains concerned about Kiai's involvement in practical politics (Nasution, 2017). However, as long as the main commitment to education does not shift due to political orientation, Islamic boarding schools will remain a strategic choice for the community in shaping a generation that is religious, competent and contributive. Those that are able to adopt a balance of traditional and modern values will continue to be an important pillar of the national education system, particularly in South Sumatra.

It can be concluded from these four groups that the discourse on the form of the state is not a single issue that can be resolved ideologically alone. Rather, it is the result of historical struggles, social conditions and ever-changing public interests. Therefore, an inclusive dialogue based on contextual understanding and oriented towards the common good is required. In Indonesia's pluralistic and dynamic context, the views of South Sumatra's *kiayi* and *pesantren* leaders are an important reflection of the diverse, critical and reflective ways in which Muslims respond to state challenges. The results of the above interviews reveal the thought processes of Kiai/*pesantren* leaders in South Sumatra, as shown in the table below :

Table 1
Reasons given by religious leaders and heads of Islamic boarding schools in South Sumatra:
Supporters of the Nation State

1	The final product is a unifying factor based on the ideology of the Pancasila.
2	The nation state reflects and embodies the strength of the Indonesian people.
3	The development of discourse on statehood is an attempt to advance the political agenda of specific individuals or organisations.
4	The concept of the nation-state is shrouded in historical narratives and debates.
5	Islam is a flexible religion. There are no Islamic rules that dictate the form of government, even in countries with a Muslim majority.
6	The development of discourse is part of the evolving dynamics of South Sumatran society.

Table 2

Reasons why religious leaders and heads of Islamic boarding schools in South Sumatra support the caliphate (sharia state):

1	Indonesia, which has a Muslim majority population, is most fittingly symbolised by a Sharia state.
2	The discourse on the Sharia state must be developed. However, it is also necessary to consider the readiness of Indonesian society in general, and South Sumatran society in particular. Otherwise, it will backfire on Muslims themselves.
3	The development of discourse is part of the evolving dynamics of South Sumatran society.
4	The Sharia State is a revolutionary force that aims to free the government from its ignorance-based culture.
5	These contradictory views are an attempt by the West to sensationalise the discourse of sharia law itself.
6	A Sharia state is one that must be fought for. This is because the ever-changing regimes in Indonesia have failed to uphold the dignity of its people.
7	The Sharia state is built alongside the 'pillars of the Sharia state'. Otherwise, the effort to establish a Sharia state will sound the death knell for 'Islamic politics in Indonesia'.

Table 3

Reasons why religious leaders and heads of Islamic boarding schools in South Sumatra oppose the nation-state

1	I disagree with linking the nation state to the concept of the unitary state of the Republic of Indonesia because Indonesia has a distinctive national history.
2	Discourse that obscures the values of the State of the Five Principles.
3	The concept of the nation-state is based on experience. Each country has its own experiences, particularly with regard to upholding its sovereignty.
4	The concept of a nation state with national sovereignty and a legitimate, sovereign government that upholds national heterogeneity does not exist.
5	This alternative approach is suitable for both structural discourses, such as those concerning Iran, and cultural discourses, such as those concerning
6	The nation state crystallised the destruction of the nation, worsening the situation of Indonesian society.
7	The interpretation of the nation-state is a dynamic process that involves correcting the current government.
8	The concept of the nation-state is an American invention designed to facilitate control over other countries. Discourse on issues such as human rights, justice and democracy has emerged merely as a means to increase Western hegemony over Indonesia in particular.

Table 4
Reasons why leaders of Islamic boarding schools in South Sumatra oppose a Sharia state

1	The concept of a Sharia state requires careful consideration and maturity. For Indonesia, a country with a Muslim majority population, a Sharia state is the most appropriate symbolisation.
2	Enforcing Sharia law also requires maturity. If done incorrectly, it can become a double-edged sword.
3	The Islamic community in Indonesia, particularly in South Sumatra, is not yet ready for any changes related to Sharia law.
4	The establishment of a Sharia state can breed sentiment against other religions, which could lead to the nation's actual disintegration.
5	Generally speaking, they do not have an opposing view; they merely emphasise the willingness of Muslims to implement Sharia law.
6	These contradictory views are an attempt by the West to sensationalise the discourse of sharia law itself.

The political thought of Islamic scholars and leaders of Islamic boarding schools in South Sumatra is characterised by a diversity of ideological perspectives that cannot be summarised by a single paradigm. In the context of contemporary Islamic politics, this diversity reflects the evolving relationship between religion and the state (Iwan, 2014; Sadari, 2019). Unfortunately, most studies of Islamic political discourse in Islamic boarding schools remain narrative and empirical, failing to fully integrate theoretical frameworks such as the relationship between religion and the state, post-Islamism and the neo-traditionalist approach (Muzakki, 2023). Consequently, the analysis tends to be descriptive, failing to provide an in-depth explanation of how Islamic ideology interacts with the national political structure. Generally speaking, there are three types of political thinking among the kiai of South Sumatra (Tomadeh, et., al., 2023). The first group supports the concept of the nation-state, viewing Sharia as an internal value of the Muslim community rather than a formal political system (Basri, 2023). Within the neo-traditionalist framework, this approach emphasises the importance of Islam as a cultural force shaping society through education, preaching and strengthening spiritual values. Their strategy is bottom-up, prioritising the process of social Islamisation over the formalisation of law. Their bottom-up strategy prioritizes social Islamisation over legal formalisation (Sudrajat, 2018). This approach aligns with the accommodationist model of religion-state relations, in which Islam is a source of public ethics without controlling state institutions (Fadhilah, i, 2024). In this context, the kiai play a key role in developing an Islamic narrative that aligns with local culture, facilitating peaceful and constructive da'wah. They do not ignore Islamic principles, but are realistic about the diversity of the Indonesian nation. This approach demonstrates their attempt to establish a meeting point between Islamic values and the modern state system, particularly within the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) framework.

The second group also supports establishing a Sharia state, but takes a more reflective and contextual approach. They recognise that the project for an Islamic state is not yet finalised, and that it must consider Indonesia's pluralistic society and political dynamics (Khoirurrijal, 2017). From a post-Islamist perspective, this group no longer prioritises the formalisation of Islamic law; instead, it encourages the internalisation of Sharia values within the socio-political structure. Their criticism of the electoral system and oligarchic domination stems from disappointment at the failure of Muslim political

representation after the Reformation. They propose revitalising the Muslim community as a prerequisite for a more Islamic and just political transformation, rejecting coercive approaches that could provoke social resistance (Anwar, 2020). Therefore, some believe that the discourse on the caliphate should focus on the internal revitalisation of the Muslim community to avoid repeating past mistakes. This approach demonstrates an understanding that political transformation requires a solid moral and cultural foundation to avoid provoking resistance from within the Muslim community or from external groups.

The third group fundamentally rejects the concept of the nation-state, arguing that the Republic of Indonesia has failed to improve the economic, legal and social status of Muslims. Their criticism is structural, targeting the state's failure to fulfil the people's basic rights. However, the absence of a conceptual consensus on the definition of sharia law — whether as fiqh, criminal law or an ethical-political system — indicates the weak epistemological foundation of this discourse (Azharhany, 2023). This disagreement prevents the development of a systematic and applicable Islamic political strategy (Halim, *et. al.*, 2022). In this context, there is an urgent need for an epistemological discourse on Sharia law to avoid becoming mired in confusing semantics and a fragmented understanding. One of the fundamental weaknesses of discourse on Islamic politics in Islamic boarding schools is the lack of historical and constitutional analysis of the Republic of Indonesia's position. Discussions about the Sharia state often take a normative approach, ignoring historical dynamics such as the Jakarta Charter and post-Reformation ideological debates. The relationship between Islam and the state in Indonesia results from complex political compromises that continue to be renegotiated.

Clerics who support the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia generally recognise the nation's historical and cultural values, but remain open to dialogue to reinterpret the relationship between religion and the state more flexibly and contextually. This approach reflects a critical yet constructive attitude, grounded in nationalism while upholding Islamic values. Therefore, the constellation of Islamic political thought in South Sumatra's Islamic boarding schools cannot be understood in isolation. A multidisciplinary approach combining Islamic political theory, structural analysis and epistemological studies is required to develop this discourse into an internationally recognised academic one. Integrating Islamic values into the modern state system must be carried out inclusively and rationally, based on historical awareness and local wisdom. As educational and da'wah institutions, Islamic boarding schools strategically shape a moderate, applicable Islamic narrative relevant to contemporary challenges.

4. CONCLUSION

This study confirms that Islamic boarding school leaders in South Sumatra have diverse attitudes towards the concept of the caliphate, influenced by local social, cultural and political dynamics. Identifying three thought configurations — supporters of the nation-state with a long-term orientation towards Sharia law; supporters of an ideal Sharia state with a realistic attitude; and groups that normatively reject the nation-state — shows that, in the pesantren environment, the caliphate is more of an academic discourse framework than a concrete political movement. Through preaching, internal discussions and the educational process, Salafi clerics convey Islamic ideas reflectively, without encouraging radical or confrontational attitudes among students. Salafi pesantrens also appear to be moderate spaces that respond to national realities with a values- and spirituality-based approach. Consequently, the caliphate concept circulating in pesantrens is not a form of political activism or radical movement, but rather an academic response to socio-religious concerns stemming from development inequalities, systemic failures, and the inadequate implementation of Islamic values in

state life. Kiai tend to convey these ideas through preaching, internal discussions and scholarly teaching without encouraging santri to adopt radical attitudes or engage in political action. Consequently, Salafi pesantren in South Sumatra play an educational and moderating role when dealing with sensitive religious and national issues.

This study is expected to contribute to a new discourse in contemporary Islamic studies, particularly with regard to Islamic political thought and religious moderation in Islamic boarding schools. The finding that Islamic scholars can negotiate between Islamic and national values challenges the perception of Salafism as an exclusive and intolerant movement. In the context of South Sumatra, for example, Islamic boarding schools play a strategic role as agents of moderation, promoting dialogue and values-based education to foster a harmonious relationship between religion and the state. From the perspective of Islamic boarding schools, political moderation is reflected in an adaptive attitude towards the national system while gradually and contextually maintaining Islamic ideals. This means that politics is not viewed as a power struggle, but rather as an ethical arena for fostering societal well-being. This research also serves as an important reference for policymakers and practitioners of Islamic education in formulating a cultural approach that accommodates the plurality of thought within Islam without neglecting the spirit of nationalism. More broadly, this research strengthens the argument that Indonesian Islam can be strengthened without the establishment of a sharia state, through strengthening values, education and social ethics in people's lives.

However, this study has several limitations. The limited focus on South Sumatra restricts the possibility of generalising to pesantren contexts in other regions, which have different traditions and dynamics. Additionally, the qualitative approach has not yet achieved quantitative measurement of the impact of thought on socio-political behaviour. The influence of the curriculum, alumni networks and digital media on santri opinions regarding the caliphate has not been explored either. Therefore, further multidisciplinary research with a broader geographical scope is recommended, involving various types of pesantren and conducting longitudinal studies to capture historical changes in thought. This would enable studies on politics, Islamic boarding schools and the caliphate to provide a more comprehensive and universal understanding of the challenges of diversity and statehood in Indonesia, including the position of Islamic boarding schools in the broader narrative of Islam and Indonesian nationality. Thus, studies on the caliphate will not only address the discursive dimension, but also touch on broader, more transformative practical aspects for society.

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