

Cultural Legitimacy, Coalition Pragmatism, and Digital Outreach: Explaining the National Awakening Party's Trajectory in Indonesia

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Abstract

Studies on Islamic political parties in Indonesia have largely focused on ideological debates between Islam and democracy or descriptive analyses of electoral behaviour, leaving limited attention to the strategic transformation of cultural Islamic parties in contemporary electoral politics. This article examines the role of Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB) in Indonesian Islamic politics, asking three interrelated questions: how does PKB's cultural Islamic identity function as both a resource and a constraint in electoral competition? What mechanisms explain its transition from grassroots democratic education towards electoral pragmatism? Moreover, under what conditions does digital outreach reinforce rather than erode its traditional Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) base? Employing a critical narrative review of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, theses, and relevant political documents, this study synthesises scholarship from 1998 to 2024. The conceptual framework draws on Schwedler's inclusion-moderation thesis, Bayat's post-Islamism perspective, Pitkin's typology of representation, and Hefner's civil Islam framework. The findings reveal four interrelated patterns: PKB's cultural Islamic identity functions as a strategic resource that differentiates it within Indonesia's Islamic political spectrum; during the early Reformasi period (1999-2008) it served as an agent of grassroots democratic socialisation; from 2010 to 2020 a calculated shift towards electoral pragmatism unfolded; and the 2024 General Election demonstrated an adaptive integration of cultural legitimacy, policy-based representation, and digital outreach. The study contributes a theoretically grounded reconceptualisation of PKB as a culturally rooted yet strategically adaptive political actor, illustrating broader dynamics of moderation, identity negotiation, and democratic consolidation in contemporary Indonesian politics.

Keywords

Islamic politics; cultural Islamic party; political pragmatism; PKB; Indonesian democracy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Indonesian politics cannot be separated from Islam's role as the majority religion and a central force in shaping the nation's political landscape. Since the early twentieth century, Islamic organisations have played a decisive role in mobilising political consciousness and articulating collective interests. The emergence of Sarekat Islam marked the first organised effort to integrate Islamic identity with the nationalist political struggle, positioning Islam as both a source of social solidarity and a means of resistance against colonial domination (Fealy & White, 2008; Ricklefs, 2012). During the



colonial period, Islam functioned not merely as a religious identity but as a political resource capable of shaping collective action and nationalist aspirations.

Following independence in 1945, the relationship between Islam and the state entered a new phase of intense ideological contestation. Debates between nationalist and Islamic groups over the foundation of the state culminated in a political compromise embodied in the adoption of Pancasila as the national ideology. The removal of the Islamic clause from the Jakarta Charter, although deeply controversial, established a pluralistic framework that continues to shape the dynamics of Islamic politics in Indonesia (Boland, 2015; Mietzner, 2018). During the liberal democracy era of the 1950s, Islamic political parties such as Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) emerged as dominant political forces, only to be marginalised by the forced party fusion policy of 1973 under Suharto's New Order regime, which reinforced the dominance of Golkar and severely restricted Islamic political expression (Liddle, 2013; Hadiz, 2016).

The Reformasi movement of 1998 constituted a critical turning point. The collapse of the New Order opened political space for democratic competition and the emergence of new parties, including Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB). Unlike ideologically driven parties such as Partai Keadilan Sejahtera (PKS), PKB was established as a *cultural* Islamic party rooted in the social base of Nahdlatul Ulama, promoting a nationalist-religious identity that affirms Pancasila and pluralistic democracy (Barton, 2014; Hefner, 2020). This orientation reflects NU's long-standing emphasis on cultural Islam, as articulated in its *khittah* 1926, which positions NU primarily as a socio-religious organisation rather than a political vehicle.

Despite extensive scholarly attention, existing studies exhibit three interconnected shortcomings that this article addresses. First, the literature remains largely descriptive or electorally focused and has not provided a theoretically grounded analysis of PKB's strategic transformation that specifies underlying mechanisms. Second, comparative engagement with frameworks developed for analysing Islamic party adaptation in other Muslim-majority contexts — notably Schwedler's (2006) inclusion-moderation thesis, Bayat's (2013) post-Islamism perspective, and Hamayotsu's (2011) work on Islamic party survival — has been largely absent from PKB scholarship. Third, and most importantly, it remains theoretically underspecified whether PKB's pragmatic evolution represents a genuine moderation consistent with democratic deepening, or an opportunistic adaptation that happens to align with democratic norms without reflecting principled commitment to them (Hefner, 2000; Mietzner, 2018).

These gaps generate three explicit research questions that guide this study. First: how does PKB's cultural Islamic identity function as both a strategic resource and a structural constraint in electoral competition? Second: what mechanisms explain PKB's transition from a model of grassroots democratic education (1999–2008) to one of electoral pragmatism (2010–2020)? Third: under what conditions does PKB's digital outreach strategy reinforce its traditional NU base rather than eroding it? These questions are not merely descriptive but are designed to generate analytical propositions that contribute to comparative debates on Islamic party adaptation and democratic consolidation.

Conceptually, this study positions PKB within the *adaptive Islamic politics* framework, understood as the capacity of culturally-rooted Islamic parties to reconcile religious identity with democratic competition through selective institutional learning and strategic communication. This framework builds on but extends Schwedler's inclusion-moderation thesis by incorporating the *digital* dimension of party adaptation — an element largely absent from canonical accounts developed before the social media era. It also draws on Hefner's (2000) *concept of civil Islam* to argue that PKB's moderation is not merely strategic but also has structural sources in NU's pluralist theology and organisational culture.

The novelty of this article lies in conceptualising PKB not merely as an ideologically moderate Islamic party, but as a cultural-religious actor undergoing strategic transformation within competitive democratic politics — one whose experience illuminates broader patterns of Islamic party adaptation across Muslim-majority democracies.

2. METHODS

This study employs a *critical narrative review* design rather than a strictly systematic review. This reframing is deliberate: while the study follows a systematic and transparent search process, the primary analytical contribution lies in the critical interrogation of existing scholarship — identifying competing interpretations, theoretical tensions, and empirical gaps — rather than in producing a quantitative synthesis. This approach is increasingly recognised in political science as appropriate when the aim is conceptual clarification and theoretical development rather than the aggregation of comparable empirical findings (Nurhuda et al., 2025; Sijabat, 2025).

The literature search was conducted across SINTA, GARUDA, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus, using keyword combinations including "PKB," "Indonesian Islamic politics," "NU and PKB," "cultural Islamic party," "political pragmatism and Islam," "identity politics Indonesia," "inclusion-moderation thesis," and "civil Islam Indonesia." The temporal scope covers 1998–2024, capturing PKB's trajectory from its establishment through its performance in the most recent general election. A total of 87 sources were identified in initial searches; after removing duplicates and applying relevance screening (direct focus on PKB, NU, Indonesian Islamic politics, or comparative Islamic party adaptation), 52 sources were retained for full-text review. Sources were evaluated on three criteria: (i) scholarly credibility (peer-reviewed journals, university press books, or postgraduate theses with institutional affiliation); (ii) methodological transparency; and (iii) substantive contribution to debates on party identity, strategy, or democratic consolidation.

Several important limitations of this methodology must be acknowledged. As a narrative review, the study cannot generate new empirical claims about PKB's actual behaviour; it synthesises what existing literature reports. The analysis is therefore subject to publication bias — the tendency for critical or negative findings about PKB to be underrepresented in accessible Indonesian academic databases. Language bias is also present: most sources are in Indonesian or English, and perspectives published in Arabic or Dutch archives are largely beyond the scope of this review. Furthermore, the study's temporal scope means that events and publications from 2025 onward are not captured. These limitations do not invalidate the study's analytical contributions but establish appropriate epistemic scope conditions for interpreting its findings.

The analytical procedure followed three stages. In the *descriptive-critical* stage, each source was read to identify its central argument, its empirical basis, and its theoretical framing. In the *comparative* stage, arguments across sources were juxtaposed — both within the PKB literature (e.g., comparing assessments of PKB's pragmatism from Mujani, 2018, and Mietzner, 2023) and across Islamic parties in Indonesia and beyond (e.g., comparing PKB with PKS and with Malaysian PAS as studied by Hamayotsu, 2011). In the *synthetic* stage, convergent findings were consolidated into propositions, and contradictory findings were explicitly flagged to generate a theoretically specified account of PKB's adaptive trajectory rather than a simple survey of existing claims.

The temporal periodisation employed in the findings section — 1999–2008, 2010–2020, 2024 — is analytically justified rather than arbitrary. The first period corresponds to the consolidation phase of Indonesian reformasi democracy and PKB's initial institutional formation, including the consequences

of the Abdurrahman Wahid crisis (2001). The second period corresponds to the acceleration of multiparty competition and the initial penetration of digital platforms into Indonesian electoral campaigns, documented extensively from approximately 2009–2012 onwards. The 2024 election is treated as a distinct empirical reference point because it is the first election for which digitally mediated campaigning was systemically documented at the party level in peer-reviewed literature. The gap between 2020 and 2024 reflects a genuine limitation of the reviewed literature rather than a claim that those years were analytically insignificant.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 PKB as a Cultural Islamic Party: Strategic Resource and Structural Constraint

The literature consistently identifies PKB's status as a *culturally Islamic party* as both analytically distinctive and politically functional. However, scholarly accounts diverge on whether this characterisation represents principled moderation or instrumental positioning. The cultural Islamic label, as used in the literature on PKB, refers to a mode of Islamic politics that draws its legitimacy from the cultural and social practices of traditionalist Islam — particularly NU's pesantren network, the authority of *kyai*, and rural Nahdliyyin communities — rather than from a programme of Islamic legal formalisation or shari'a implementation (Barton, 2014; Hefner, 2020; Mietzner, 2023). This distinguishes PKB sharply from ideologically Islamist parties such as PKS, which has pursued a more explicitly transformative religious agenda, and from PPP, which occupies an ambiguous position between cultural and ideological Islam (Noor, 2012; Hamayotsu, 2011).

The cultural orientation operates through two mechanisms that are simultaneously enabling and constraining. As an *enabling* mechanism, PKB's cultural roots give it access to NU's extensive social infrastructure — an estimated 90 million members — which functions as a durable source of social capital and electoral mobilisation that money politics alone cannot easily replicate (Fealy & Bush, 2014; Mujani, Liddle, & Ambardi, 2018). As a *constraining* mechanism, however, the same cultural roots impose significant limits on programmatic flexibility. As Fealy and White (2008) and Bakti (2015) both document, PKB's dependence on NU legitimacy makes it structurally cautious about policy positions that might alienate *kyai* networks or rural Nahdliyyin constituencies, thereby reducing its responsiveness to urban and younger voters.

This tension maps onto a broader theoretical debate in comparative Islamic party studies. Schwedler (2006) argues that participation in democratic institutions produces genuine moderation over time, as Islamic parties learn to accept the terms of pluralist competition. Bayat (2013) offers a more sceptical account, suggesting that post-Islamist parties adopt pluralist rhetoric strategically without necessarily internalising democratic norms. The PKB case appears to fit neither framework perfectly. Unlike the cases Schwedler analyzes in Jordan and Yemen, PKB was never a genuinely Islamist party that subsequently moderated; its cultural-pluralist identity was foundational from 1998. However, unlike the post-Islamist parties Bayat describes, PKB's moderation is not merely rhetorical — it has structural sources in NU's pluralist theology (Hefner, 2000). It has been institutionally sustained across multiple leadership transitions. PKB may therefore represent a distinct subtype: a party whose cultural and religious roots produce durable moderation without the inclusion-moderation dynamic, because it was never excluded in the first place.

3.1.2 Political Education and Grassroots Consolidation (1999–2008)

Studies of PKB's early post-Reformasi period document its role as an agent of democratic socialisation rather than merely an electoral machine. Humaidi (2010) demonstrates that PKB implemented political education through two interrelated channels: structural mechanisms (cadre training, organisational consolidation) and cultural mechanisms (pesantren-based discussions, religious gatherings, *kyai* mediation). This dual approach embedded democratic participation within familiar communal frameworks, strengthening the legitimacy of electoral politics among Nahdliyyin communities previously marginalised under authoritarian rule.

The model also generated institutional vulnerabilities. Following elite fragmentation in the wake of Abdurrahman Wahid's impeachment in 2001, the continuity of political education weakened significantly (Huda, 2010; As'ad, 2013). This episode illustrates a structural vulnerability documented across religious brokerage politics more broadly: reliance on charismatic or moral authorities enhances mobilisation capacity but simultaneously reduces organisational autonomy when elite cohesion breaks down (Mujani, Liddle, & Ambardi, 2018). What distinguishes PKB from cases of total organisational collapse — such as several smaller Islamic parties that disappeared after 2004 — is the resilience of NU's social infrastructure, which functioned as an organisational anchor even when party leadership was in disarray.

Situating this phase within Schwedler's framework, one observes that PKB's early political education work does not conform to the inclusion-moderation dynamic: PKB was already committed to pluralism before entering democratic competition. Rather, this period reflects a process of *institutionalisation* — transforming NU's social capital into a durable political organisation capable of competing in multiparty elections without abandoning its cultural Islamic identity. The mechanism is not moderation through inclusion, but *consolidation through cultural embeddedness*.

3.1.3 Strategic Shift towards Electoral Pragmatism (2010–2020)

The second decade of reformasi marks a clear strategic transition documented across multiple sources. The literature identifies this phase as one of increasing electoral pragmatism, characterised by coalition flexibility, professionalisation of party management, and expansion of strategic communication beyond traditional religious networks (Mujani, 2018; Mietzner, 2023). Several mechanisms underpin this shift.

First, the role of *kyai* gradually transformed from direct political mobilisers into symbolic guarantors of moral legitimacy — a shift from substantive to symbolic functions (Fealy & Bush, 2014). Second, PKB expanded its use of mass media and early digital platforms to reach non-traditional and younger voters. Third, PKB's coalition behaviour became more flexible: its alliance with Prabowo Subianto's Gerindra and other non-Islamic parties in the post-2014 period illustrated a willingness to prioritise seat maximisation over ideological alignment (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019).

Critically, the literature is divided on how to interpret this pragmatism. One reading, represented by Hefner (2020) and Noor (2022), treats it as evidence that culturally rooted Islamic parties can evolve into mature democratic actors who participate pragmatically in coalition politics without abandoning principled commitments. A more sceptical reading, implied by Mietzner (2018), questions whether PKB's pragmatic bargains — particularly its willingness to ally with candidates whose democratic credentials are questionable — are consistent with its self-representation as a defender of pluralist norms. This interpretive tension is empirically unresolved and represents a genuine limitation of the existing literature. Without systematic evidence on how PKB's NU base interprets these coalition choices, it is impossible to determine whether pragmatism is strengthening or eroding the party's

cultural legitimacy.

Applying Pitkin's (1967) representation typology analytically rather than illustratively, this phase can be characterised as a deliberate shift from *descriptive* representation (embodying NU cultural identity symbolically) towards *substantive* representation (delivering policy outcomes relevant to NU constituencies, such as pesantren governance and rural welfare). However, this shift is incomplete and conditional: substantive representation appears to succeed only where cultural legitimacy has already established trust. Where PKB's pragmatic coalitions are perceived as detached from grassroots priorities, the party risks the credibility loss identified by Aspinall and Mietzner (2019) as a systemic vulnerability in Indonesian party politics.

3.1.4 PKB in the 2024 General Election: Adaptation and Consolidation

The 2024 General Election constitutes a significant empirical reference point, though the causal interpretation of PKB's performance must be stated with appropriate epistemic caution, given the limitations of the reviewed literature. PKB secured 68 seats in the DPR (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, 2024; DPR RI, 2024), representing a modest increase from its 58 seats in 2019 — a gain achieved in a highly competitive field in which several Islamic parties experienced declining vote shares. This comparative context matters: PKB's performance is analytically significant not because 68 seats represent an extraordinary outcome, but because it demonstrates the party's ability to maintain and slightly expand its electoral base amid intense identity polarisation and the consolidation of Prabowo Subianto's Gerindra-led coalition.

Aprimayanti (2025) shows that PKB combined defensive strategies — maintaining its traditional NU base through pesantren networks and *kyai* endorsements — with offensive strategies aimed at younger and more diverse voter segments. At the programmatic level, PKB foregrounded policy issues closely aligned with NU's social concerns, including rural development, funding for pesantren education, and migrant worker protection. Suryadinata (2021) and Putra et al. (2025) further document that PKB's emphasis on moderation and inclusive nationalism enabled it to avoid the electoral risks associated with exclusionary religious narratives, which contributed to the fragmentation of PPP and smaller Islamist parties.

Regarding digital outreach, the reviewed literature offers partial evidence that PKB's media-centre model — in which local party units develop digital content pipelines and manage online reputational risks — enabled it to reach young Nahdliyyin voters whose political identities are increasingly mediated by platform logics (Safitri, 2024; Rois, 2024). However, this literature does not establish that digital outreach *caused* electoral gains; it remains possible that digital activity amplified existing social networks rather than generating genuinely new supporters. This is an important empirical limitation that future research should address by analyzing party communications and voter survey data.

3.2 Discussion

3.2.1 The Dualism Mechanism: How Cultural Legitimacy Enables and Constrains Pragmatism

The central analytical question raised by the findings is not simply whether PKB combines cultural identity with electoral pragmatism — the evidence clearly shows that it does — but *under what conditions* this combination is sustainable. Drawing on the evidence synthesised above, this study proposes that cultural legitimacy enables pragmatism when two conditions are met: (i) pragmatic coalition choices can be framed to NU constituencies as substantively beneficial in policy terms; and (ii)

the cultural symbols associated with NU identity (green branding, *kyai* endorsements, pesantren-language communication) remain visibly present in party communication. When either condition fails — either because coalition partners are perceived as antithetical to NU values, or because cultural signalling is drowned out by professionalised campaign messaging — pragmatism begins to erode rather than complement cultural legitimacy.

This conditional logic helps explain a puzzle in the PKB literature: why has the party's NU base remained relatively stable despite multiple controversial coalition choices? The answer appears to lie in PKB's consistent cultivation of what Hefner (2000) terms *civil Islam*. This orientation frames moderation not as secular dilution but as an internally grounded ethical stance. When PKB enters pragmatic alliances, it can draw on this cultural reservoir to interpret them as consistent with NU's tradition of *tawassut* (balance) and *tasamuh* (tolerance). This interpretive flexibility constitutes PKB's principal organisational advantage over both rigidly Islamist parties (which are less able to accommodate coalition partners outside their ideological bloc) and purely secular parties (which lack the cultural grammar to communicate with Nahdliyyin communities).

3.2.2 Identity Politics and PKB as a Democratic Buffer

The salience of identity-based contestation in Indonesia's recent electoral cycles — peaking in the 2016–2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential campaign — provides important context for understanding PKB's buffering function. Aspinall and Mietzner (2019) document how polarising entrepreneurs have exploited religious cleavages to generate extra-institutional pressure, creating conditions in which even moderate actors may be tempted to adopt illiberal repertoires to avoid being outflanked.

PKB's response to this challenge has been analytically distinctive. Rather than matching exclusivist mobilisation, the party deployed its cultural Islamic legitimacy as a counter-narrative resource: it offered an alternative framing of "real" Nahdliyyin Islam as inclusive and pluralist, thereby delegitimising more exclusivist religious claims on the NU constituency (Mietzner, 2023; Hefner, 2020). This represents a *competitive religious moderation* dynamic that has been undertheorised in the comparative literature on Islamic parties, which has focused predominantly on the inclusion-moderation thesis and paid less attention to cases where moderation is deployed strategically against more radical competitors.

However, this buffering capacity is conditional and fragile. It depends on the ability of NU cultural authorities — particularly senior *kyai* — to maintain sufficient independence from PKB's electoral imperatives to preserve their credibility as religious rather than merely partisan voices. Where *kyai* are too visibly instrumentalised for electoral purposes, the symbolic distinction between cultural Islam and partisan Islam collapses, and PKB loses its distinctive positioning (Fealy & Bush, 2014). This structural vulnerability has no obvious institutional solution; it is an inherent tension in the model of a cultural Islamic party competing in a multiparty democracy.

3.2.3 Digital Politics, Generational Change, and Organisational Modernisation

The generational challenge PKB faces is not simply one of communication technology but of political identity formation. Younger Nahdliyyin voters inhabit a communication ecology shaped by platform logics, influencer politics, and rapid opinion cascades — conditions that, as Lim (2017) shows, tend to intensify affective polarisation and produce new forms of political belonging that are often less deferential to traditional authority structures.

The key analytical question is whether PKB's digital strategies are *transforming* its authority relations or *reproducing* them in digital form. The evidence reviewed suggests a hybrid pattern. On one hand, local PKB media centres (Safitri, 2024) and party-affiliated social media accounts (Adila & Eddyono, 2025) reproduce established cultural symbols — NU iconography, *kyai* imagery, religious language — in digitally communicable formats, suggesting continuity of authority relations rather than fundamental transformation. On the other hand, Triantoro (2024) finds that digital volunteering dynamics in Indonesian party campaigns can generate horizontal peer-to-peer mobilisation networks that partially bypass vertical *kyai*-mediated authority chains, potentially democratising intra-party communication but also introducing factional instability.

For PKB's long-term organisational sustainability, this analysis suggests that digital modernisation must be accompanied by *substantive* cadre development — equipping younger party workers with policy expertise and deliberative capacities, rather than merely communication skills. Digital visibility backed by policy credibility is more durable than virality alone (Rois, 2024). This conclusion implies a specific organisational reform agenda: investing in issue-based cadre training, developing policy platforms with genuine analytical depth, and creating institutionalised channels for young Nahdliyyin to contribute to party programme formulation.

3.2.4 Comparative Implications and the Limits of the PKB Model

PKB's trajectory offers theoretically productive comparisons for the broader study of Islamic party adaptation. Relative to Malaysian PAS, which Hamayotsu (2011) analyses as a party that has oscillated between pragmatic accommodation and ideological exclusivism, PKB has maintained a more consistent cultural pluralist identity — arguably because NU's theological traditions provide a more stable organisational anchor than PAS's more heterogeneous ideological base. Relative to Moroccan PJD, which Schwedler (2006) studies as a case of genuine inclusion-moderation, PKB differs in that its moderation preceded rather than resulted from inclusion in competitive democratic politics.

These comparisons suggest that the inclusion-moderation thesis requires contextual qualification. In contexts where Islamic party moderation is *culturally embedded* rather than *strategically induced* by democratic participation, the mechanisms Schwedler identifies may not operate. Instead, the relevant mechanism is the capacity of cultural organisations — in this case, NU — to provide an institutional grammar of moderation that constrains party behaviour from below rather than from above (through electoral competition). This represents a *cultural embeddedness hypothesis* that is distinct from but complementary to the inclusion-moderation thesis and may have broader applicability to other religiously rooted parties in Muslim-majority democracies where major cultural organisations occupy a position analogous to NU's.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to answer three research questions about PKB's adaptive trajectory: how cultural Islamic identity functions as both resource and constraint; what mechanisms explain the transition from grassroots education to electoral pragmatism; and under what conditions digital outreach reinforces rather than erodes the NU base. The synthesis of evidence across four analytical periods — PKB's foundational identity (1998–1999), grassroots consolidation (1999–2008), pragmatic recalibration (2010–2020), and adaptive integration (2024) — yields several theoretically grounded propositions.

First, PKB's cultural Islamic identity functions as a *conditional* strategic resource: it enables

coalition flexibility and programmatic adaptation when pragmatic choices can be framed as consistent with NU's cultural values of balance and tolerance, but it becomes a constraint when those choices are perceived as betraying grassroots priorities or as instrumentalising *kyai* authority for purely electoral ends. Second, the transition from grassroots democratic education to electoral pragmatism was not a simple abandonment of earlier commitments but rather a *restructuring of representation*, as the Pitkin typology illuminates: from a primarily descriptive mode (embodying NU cultural identity) towards a substantive mode (delivering policy outcomes), with the symbolic mode retained as an enabling foundation. Third, digital outreach appears to reinforce rather than erode the NU base when it reproduces established cultural symbols in digitally communicable formats and when it is backed by policy credibility — but risks generating factional instability when it privileges virality over deliberation.

The study's principal theoretical contribution is the *cultural embeddedness hypothesis*: in contexts where Islamic party moderation is institutionally grounded in a major cultural organisation (rather than strategically induced by democratic inclusion), the relevant mechanism of durability is not the inclusion-moderation dynamic but the capacity of the cultural organisation to provide an ongoing institutional grammar of moderation that constrains party behaviour from below. This hypothesis is applicable beyond PKB and invites comparative testing in other Muslim-majority democracies where culturally-rooted Islamic organisations — such as Egypt's Al-Azhar, Morocco's Tidjani Sufi networks, or Malaysia's ABIM — maintain an autonomous cultural authority that is distinct from but related to Islamic party politics.

Several limitations qualify these conclusions and should guide future research. As a critical narrative review, this study cannot generate new empirical claims about PKB's actual internal behaviour; it synthesises what the published literature reports, which may be subject to publication bias and underrepresentation of critical or dissenting perspectives. The digital politics analysis is constrained by a literature base that, though growing rapidly, remains thin on systematic evidence linking specific campaign strategies to measurable outcomes. The comparative analysis is illustrative rather than systematic, drawing on a limited range of comparators. Future research should address these gaps through: elite interviews with PKB cadres and NU leaders to investigate internal tensions over pragmatic coalition choices; computational content analysis of PKB's social media output across the 2019 and 2024 election cycles; survey-based analysis of how younger Nahdliyyin voters evaluate PKB's digital communication relative to its pesantren-based mobilisation; and comparative multiparty studies examining PKB alongside PKS, PPP, and Islamic parties in Malaysia and Morocco.

From a practical perspective, PKB's continued relevance will depend on its capacity to articulate policy platforms addressing youth priorities — education, employment, digital opportunity, and the creative economy — while preserving Islamic moderation as its principal differentiating identity amid intensifying polarisation. If it can sustain this balance between cultural rootedness, strategic pragmatism, and principled commitment to plural democracy, PKB is well placed to remain an influential force in Indonesian politics and to contribute constructively to the consolidation of democratic life in the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy.

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