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Roots and resilience: Tracing the rise of conservative Islamic movements in Indonesia

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Abstract

Although Indonesia is not formally an Islamic state, the idea of establishing one has remained a recurring theme in the country's political discourse. From the pre-independence period to the reform era, discussions surrounding the Islamic state have persisted and never entirely disappeared. The notion continues to develop, reflecting the aspirations of certain segments of Indonesia's Muslim population. These groups, often referred to as conservative Islamic factions, are characterised by their adherence to textual interpretations of Islamic teachings and their desire to integrate religion and state within a legal and governmental framework. The emergence of conservative Islamic groups in Indonesia was not spontaneous. Rather, their development follows a long historical trajectory traceable to the pre-independence or nationalist movement period, when the country was still under colonial rule. During this era, the embryonic idea of an Islamic state began to form within Sarekat Islam (SI), then the largest Islamic organisation in the archipelago. SI would later serve as a precursor to the rise of other Islamic movements, such as Masyumi and DI/TII, which also pursued the formal integration of religion into state structures. However, the aspirations of these conservative Islamic groups for an independent Indonesia grounded in Islamic principles were ultimately thwarted during the BPUPKI session on June 1, 1945, when Pancasila was adopted as the philosophical foundation of the Indonesian state.

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Introduction

Although Indonesia is not formally an Islamic state, the idea of establishing one has remained a persistent theme in the country's political discourse. From the pre-independence era to the reform period, debates surrounding the concept of an Islamic state have endured and never entirely disappeared (Wahid, 2009). The idea continues to evolve, reflecting the aspirations of certain segments of Indonesia's Muslim population. These groups, often

described as conservative Islamic factions, are characterised by their adherence to textual interpretations of Islamic teachings and their ambition to integrate religion and state within legal and governmental frameworks (Effendy, 2003).

The emergence of conservative Islamic groups in Indonesia did not occur spontaneously. Rather, their development follows a long historical trajectory traceable to the pre-independence or nationalist movement period, when the country was still under colonial rule. During this time, the embryonic idea of an Islamic state began to take shape within Sarekat Islam (SI), the era's largest Islamic organisation (Shiraishi, 2023). SI would later serve as the foundation for the rise of other Islamic movements, such as Masyumi and DI/TII, which similarly sought to formalise religion within the state's structure (Latif, 2012). However, the aspirations of these conservative Islamic groups for an independent Indonesia grounded in Islamic principles were ultimately rejected during the BPUPKI session on June 1, 1945. At this pivotal meeting, Pancasila was adopted as the philosophical basis of the Indonesian state (Latif, 2011).

Despite the failure to establish Islam as the ideological foundation of the state during the BPUPKI (Badan Penyelidik Usaha Persiapan Kemerdekaan-Investigating Committee for Preparatory Work for Independence) session, the narrative of an Islamic state did not entirely disappear from Indonesia's public sphere. The idea remained alive, embedded in the consciousness of those who continued to aspire toward its realisation. When Suharto's New Order regime collapsed in 1998, conservative Islamic groups found renewed momentum to express and articulate their aspirations for an Islamic state openly. The fall of the New Order ushered in a process of democratisation that enabled previously suppressed ideas to resurface—among them, the long-standing discourse on the Islamic state. During this period, certain Islamic groups attempted to insert their vision into the constitutional amendment process of the 1945 Constitution. However, the effort failed, as the majority of members of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) rejected the proposal (Al-Amin, 2012).

Following this constitutional setback, conservative Islamic groups that remained committed to the Islamic state ideal turned to non-state channels. They disseminated their vision through grassroots cadre development, as exemplified by Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI) (Movanita, 2017). Nonetheless, HTI ultimately failed to advance Indonesia toward an Islamic state. In fact, the organisation was officially dissolved by the government in 2017, because its objectives were incompatible with Pancasila, the state ideology. Since HTI's dissolution, no organisation has openly advocated for the establishment of an Islamic state. However, this does not mean the idea has disappeared. Rather, it has re-emerged in more nuanced political expressions that no longer invoke the Islamic state explicitly, but instead adopt alternative terms such as NKRI Bersyariah (kumparannews, 2019) (a Sharia-based Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia) or the enactment of regional Sharia-based regulations (*Perda Syariah*) in various localities (Anugerah, 2023). Although the terminology has changed, the underlying vision remains consistent: the formal implementation of Islamic law within Indonesia's legal framework.

The persistence of the Islamic state ideal, despite repeated political failures, suggests that it is not merely a utopian aspiration. Instead, it has evolved into a form of collective identity among its advocates. In social movement theory, collective identity is seen as the product of ongoing meaning-making processes. These processes take place through framing and ideologization, which, over time, crystallise into organised social movements (Snow et al., 1986). In this context, the Islamic state serves as a unifying frame that binds individuals within conservative Islamic groups, eventually giving rise to broader collective mobilisation.

This article seeks to investigate in greater depth the emergence of conservative Islamic groups in Indonesia as a social movement. It explores the historical, ideological, and socio-political contexts that have shaped and sustained the development of these groups. Snow et al. (1986) framing theory is employed to analyse the internal processes of meaning-making

among conservative Islamic actors, who have collectively converged around the Islamic state as a shared and enduring aspiration. Framing theory also provides a valuable lens for understanding how the discourse surrounding the Islamic state has adapted and persisted within Indonesia's complex and pluralistic political environment.

The first section provides the contextual background for the discourse on conservative Islam in Indonesia and elaborates on the framing theory used. The final section examines the historical trajectory, socio-political dynamics, and ideological foundations that underpin the aspirations of conservative Islamic groups in the country.

Method

This study utilises a qualitative descriptive approach to explore the early development of conservative Islamic groups in Indonesia. The primary method of data collection is a literature review. The researcher conducted a systematic analysis of various written documents, including books, online newspaper articles, and research reports related to conservative Islamic movements in Indonesia. These sources were drawn from both print and online platforms, such as Tempo Magazine, kompas.com, tempo.co, and others. This method was used to develop a general understanding of the socio-political context in which conservative Islamic groups emerged, and to examine the internal discourses within these groups that contributed to the formulation of the Islamic state as an ideological ideal.

The data gathered through the literature review were analysed using Snow et al. (1986) framing theory, which is part of the broader constructivist approach in social movement studies. According to Snow et al. (1986), the framing process in social movements takes place through three main steps: diagnostic framing (defining the problem and its causes), prognostic framing (formulating solutions and resolution strategies), and motivational framing (providing moral and emotional reasons to encourage participation). These three steps are reinforced by the frame alignment process, which involves aligning the movement's frame with the values, experiences, or interests of the audience through bridging, amplification, extension, and transformation strategies, thereby enabling social movements to expand support and mobilise collective action (Snow et al., 1986). This theory is used to understand how collective identity is constructed within conservative Islamic groups in Indonesia. It is especially relevant to this study because the diverse expressions of conservative Islamic activism are all bound together by a common commitment to the idea of an Islamic state. Despite variations in form and strategy, these groups share a historical and ongoing struggle toward realising that ideal.

Result and Discussion

Conservative Islamic Groups in Indonesia Before Independence

Conservative Islamic groups first emerged and began to take shape during the period preceding Indonesia's independence. In the early 20th century, when the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia) was still under colonial rule, an Islamic organisation known as Sarekat Islam (SI) was established in 1912 (Shiraishi, 2023). The formation of SI marked the first time Islam was explicitly adopted as the core identity of a modern mass organisation. It arose from a growing sense of injustice among indigenous Indonesians who felt oppressed by the colonial social structure imposed by the Dutch administration. These structural conditions prompted SI to pursue a political path, which it viewed as the most effective means of resisting the persistent social injustices experienced by the indigenous population (Achdian, 2023).

Research by Azra (1994) illustrates how the Dutch colonial government marginalised native Indonesians through discriminatory policies, particularly in education and racial classification. Beyond exploiting economic and natural resources, the colonial regime also deprived the indigenous population of their socio-political rights (Fogg, 2020). Against this backdrop, the emergence of SI represented a critical turning point in the organised resistance against colonial domination.

SI was the institutional transformation of Sarekat Dagang Islam (SDI), founded on 11 November 1911 by Haji Samanhudi, a wealthy Muslim merchant from Surakarta, Central Java. In 1912, SDI evolved into SI under the leadership of H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto, a capable and visionary organiser. While SI initially focused on defending the commercial interests of indigenous Muslim traders, it gradually expanded into a broader advocacy movement championing the socio-economic and political rights of the native population (Latif, 2012). Tjokroaminoto articulated this ideological shift during his address at SI's Annual Congress in Surabaya on 26 July 1915, where he famously declared *'de Islam is de godsientst van de armen en de verdrukten'* ("Islam is the religion of the poor and the oppressed") (Wertheim, 1956). This statement encapsulated a powerful message of resistance from indigenous communities subjected to colonial oppression.

The rise of SI marked the beginning of Islam's engagement with the state in the shaping of Indonesia's modern political configuration. In the long term, SI aspired to Islamize Indonesian society. For this vision to be realised, national independence was considered an indispensable prerequisite (Maarif, 2006). Tjokroaminoto emphasised this point in one of his writings, "...we Muslims must, without exception, achieve the independence of the ummah alongside national independence, and must exercise sovereignty over our own homeland" (Tjokroaminoto, 1958). He envisioned that once Indonesia achieved independence, Islam would serve as the ideological foundation of the state. SI thus became the ideological and organisational forerunner to many subsequent conservative Islamic groups that likewise pursued the Islamization of Indonesia.

The presence of SI significantly influenced Islam's rise as a nodal point in Indonesia's political landscape from the 1920s to the eve of independence. As a nodal point, Islam became a central reference and source of meaning for various anti-colonial resistance movements. It redefined the struggle against Dutch colonialism, reframing it from a secular rebellion into a jihad against non-believers.

It is important to note, however, that Islam was not the sole ideological current in the nationalist struggle. It competed with socialism, communism, and secular nationalism to become the dominant discourse within Indonesia's anti-colonial movement. A concrete example of this ideological contestation occurred during the formulation of the state's foundational philosophy at the BPUPKI session on 22 June 1945. Two major blocs emerged in the debate: the Islamic bloc and the nationalist bloc. The Islamic bloc included figures such as Abdul Kahar Muzakkir, Wahid Hasyim, Agus Salim, and Abikusno Tjokrosujoso.

In contrast, the nationalist bloc was represented by Soekarno, Mohammad Hatta, Muhammad Yamin, Subardjo, and Maramis (Van Dijk, 1981,1983). These individuals collectively formed the Panitia Sembilan (Committee of Nine), tasked with drafting the ideological basis of the Republic of Indonesia. The committee ultimately produced the Jakarta Charter, which later served as a foundational reference embedded in the 1945 Constitution (Maarif, 2006).

The Jakarta Charter initially established Pancasila as the ideological foundation of the newly independent Indonesian state, with an important addition to the first principle: "with the obligation to implement Islamic law for its adherents." These seven words were also incorporated into Article 29, paragraph 1, of the 1945 Constitution. Their inclusion effectively implied that Indonesia would become an Islamic state, as the enforcement of Islamic law for Muslims would be embedded within the formal legal framework of the nation. At first, Christian figures such as Johannes Latuharhary and A.A. Maramis expressed reservations about this formulation. However, on 16 July 1945, they ultimately agreed by acclamation to adopt the Jakarta Charter as the draft of the national constitution to be proclaimed by Soekarno (Nashir, 2013).

Following the declaration of independence on 17 August 1945, reports surfaced of opposition from communities in Eastern Indonesia who threatened secession if the seven words remained. According to Mohammad Hatta's account, he received a phone call from Nishijama, an aide to the Japanese Vice Admiral, who conveyed that numerous Protestant and Catholic representatives in Eastern Indonesia strongly objected to the inclusion of the phrase in the Jakarta Charter (Hatta, 1979). Amid rising tensions, and just moments before the Preparatory Committee for Indonesian Independence (Panitia Persiapan Kemerdekaan Indonesia, or PPKI) convened on 18 August 1945, Hatta persuaded several key Muslim leaders—Kasman Singodimedjo, Ki Bagus Hadikusumo, and K.H. Wahid Hasyim—to agree to remove the phrase. They ultimately consented, and the seven words were omitted from the final version of the Constitution (Hatta, 1979).

Conservative Islamic Groups in the Post-Independence Period

The removal of the seven words from the Jakarta Charter effectively ended the immediate effort to establish Indonesia as an Islamic state. Nevertheless, the idea did not vanish entirely from public discourse. Some supporters continued to advocate for the inclusion of Islamic principles in the country's political framework. This momentum re-emerged during the first general election in 1955, when Islamic parties representing the so-called "Islamic Bloc" won a significant share of the vote—43.73%. The bloc urged the newly formed Constitutional Assembly (Dewan Konstituante) to draft a new constitution that would accommodate Muslim aspirations, particularly the formal implementation of Islamic law (Feillard, 1999).

The Constitutional Assembly was formally inaugurated on 10 November 1956, with the mandate to replace the 1950 Provisional Constitution with a permanent one. The Assembly consisted of 550 members from various political parties and societal groups. Broadly, three ideological factions emerged, each with a different vision for the state's ideological foundation: *First,* the Pancasila bloc advocated Pancasila as the ideological basis of the Indonesian state. This bloc included members from the Indonesian National Party (PNI, 116 members), the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and the Proclamation Republic Faction (80), Parkindo (16), the Catholic Party (10), the Socialist Party of Indonesia (PSI, 10), the League of Supporters of Indonesian Independence (IPKI, 8), along with several smaller parties, amounting to a total of 273 members.

Second, the Islamic bloc supported Islam as the foundational ideology of the state. It was represented by Masyumi (112 members), Nahdlatul Ulama (NU, 91), PSII (16), PERTI (7), and four smaller Islamic parties, bringing the total to 230 members. Third, a socio-economic bloc emerged as a minority faction, composed of four members from the Murba Party and five from the Labour Party, who promoted a socio-economic ideological alternative (Ismail, 1999).

Deliberations within the Assembly between 1956 and 1959 were marked by prolonged stalemate. Although the debate began with three ideological options, it gradually narrowed to two opposing camps: the Islamic bloc and the Pancasila/nationalist bloc. The failure of either side to reach a compromise led to legislative paralysis, as neither bloc could secure the constitutionally required two-thirds majority (312 votes) to enact a new constitution (Ismail, 1999). The following table shows the voting results on the issue of the state's ideological foundation:

Table 1.
Voting Results on State Ideology in the Constitutional Assembly

Voting Date	Secular Nationalist Coalition	Islamic Parties Coalition
30 May 1959	269	199
1 June 1959	264	204
2 June 1959	263	203

Source: Adapted from Muhammad Yamin (1960) (Yamin, 1960).

The political deadlock within the Constitutional Assembly contributed to a broader climate of instability in Indonesia. In response, President Soekarno issued the Presidential Decree of 5 July 1959, which dissolved the Assembly and reinstated the 1945 Constitution. This decree marked the beginning of the Guided Democracy era, with Soekarno assuming full control of state leadership. The establishment of Guided Democracy effectively closed off any opportunity for Islamic groups to incorporate Islam into the state's legal framework. Following the decree, Soekarno's administration decisively terminated all negotiations aimed at positioning Islam as the foundation of the Indonesian state. Pancasila was officially affirmed as the sole national ideology.

The Emergence of DI/TII

Although the parliamentary path toward establishing an Islamic state was no longer viable, the aspiration persisted. The ideal of an Islamic state remained deeply rooted in the consciousness of various Islamic groups in Indonesia at the time. Among those who continued to pursue this goal was the Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII), led by S.M. Kartosoewirjo. In the early years of independence, Kartosoewirjo was affiliated with Masyumi, a prominent Islamic political party. He advocated implementing Islamic law and initially supported Masyumi's efforts to achieve an Islamic state through constitutional means (Dengel, 2011).

The turning point in Kartosoewirjo's trajectory came from his growing disillusionment with the Republic's leadership, which he viewed as too conciliatory toward the Dutch. As is well documented, following the 1945 proclamation of independence, the Netherlands attempted to reassert control over Indonesia. With Allied support, the Netherlands Indies Civil Administration (NICA) entered Indonesia, seeking to reclaim authority from Republican leaders. Armed conflict ensued for several years, eventually culminating in diplomatic negotiations.

One such negotiation, and a key catalyst for Kartosoewirjo's shift toward militancy, was the Renville Agreement, signed on 8 December 1947 (Dijk, 1983). Held aboard the American warship USS Renville, the talks were attended by Prime Minister Amir Sjarifuddin, representing Indonesia, and Raden Abdul Kadir Widjojoatmodjo, leading the Dutch delegation. The agreement was widely criticised for favouring Dutch interests. Under its terms, the Dutch were not required to return occupied territories, while Republican forces were ordered to withdraw from those areas. Additionally, plebiscites were to be held in the remaining Republican territories to determine whether they would remain with Indonesia or join a Dutch-led federation (Ruhiyat, 2022).

Paramilitary Islamic militias such as Hizbullah, Sabilillah, and other grassroots groups rejected the order to withdraw. Major political parties, including PNI and Masyumi, also opposed the agreement. The backlash was so severe that Amir Sjarifuddin was forced to resign as Prime Minister. Kartosoewirjo likewise rejected the agreement, going so far as to declare that it signalled the dissolution of the Republic. This deep dissatisfaction led Kartosoewirjo and his followers to formally establish DI/TII in 1949 (Formichi, 2012).

DI/TII was among the earliest expressions of conservative Islamic militancy in post-independence Indonesia. Whereas SI and Masyumi pursued Islamization through political means, DI/TII chose the path of armed rebellion. On 7 August 1949, Kartosoewirjo officially declared the formation of the Islamic State of Indonesia (Negara Islam Indonesia, NII) (Tempo, 2010). This declaration followed the 20th meeting of the Dewan Imamah (Imamate Council) in the village of Cisampang, Tasikmalaya, West Java, attended by Kartosoewirjo, KH. Gozali Toesi, Sanusi Partawidjaja, Raden Oni Syahroni, and Toha Arsjad (Formichi, 2012).

The NII established its strongholds in Tasikmalaya, Garut, and Ciamis, which served as its central base. After solidifying its presence in West Java, DI/TII/NII expanded its influence to other regions. The central government in Jakarta viewed the rise of NII as a serious threat to

the Republic of Indonesia. In response, the military launched Operation Pagar Betis to isolate DI/TII strongholds in West Java, particularly in Banten and Priangan. The operation eventually forced Kartosoewirjo out of hiding, leading to his capture on 4 June 1962. Three months later, on 2 September 1962, President Soekarno officially disbanded the NII (Santoso, 2013).

Following the dissolution of DI/TII, the influence of conservative Islamic groups openly advocating for the establishment of an Islamic state significantly declined. This deterioration was further accelerated by President Soekarno's decision to disband Masyumi on 17 August 1960, due to its alleged involvement in the 1958 PRRI (Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Indonesia) rebellion. Prominent Masyumi figures such as Mohammad Natsir, Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, and Burhanuddin Harahap were subsequently imprisoned by Soekarno's regime (Latif, 2012).

With the collapse of both DI/TII and Masyumi, public support for the Islamic state agenda was increasingly marginalised. Nevertheless, the ideological legacy of DI/TII persisted in various regions, not through institutional structures, but through the enduring values and spirit of resistance it had fostered. This influence became more visible following Natsir's release from prison. During the New Order period, Natsir played a key role in reigniting the conservative Islamic movement, which once again gained traction and inspired many. Islam came to be viewed as a moral and political solution to the nation's mounting crises. Natsir is often regarded as the ideological heir to the earlier Islamic state project that had failed to materialise.

Conservative Islamic Groups during the New Order

President Soekarno was officially removed from office on 12 March 1967, when the Provisional People's Consultative Assembly (MPRS) revoked his presidential mandate and appointed Major General Soeharto as Acting President. Soekarno's removal also signalled the end of Guided Democracy. His ousting was preceded by significant political upheaval in the 1960s, culminating in the 30 September 1965 incident, during which several senior Army officers were assassinated at Lubang Buaya. The perpetrators were active members of Cakrabirawa, the presidential guard unit, led by Lieutenant Colonel Untung Syamsuri, who was accused of orchestrating the killings (Roosa, 2008).

The incident marked a turning point in Soekarno's rule and triggered one of Indonesia's darkest periods: the mass killings of members, sympathisers, and suspected affiliates of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) (Robinson, 2018). Soekarno faced intense public criticism for his perceived leniency toward the PKI, leading to widespread riots and protests demanding the party's dissolution. In the aftermath of the September tragedy, Soekarno's political influence waned rapidly, while Soeharto, then Commander of the Army Strategic Command (Kostrad), rose in prominence. His leadership in suppressing the movement strengthened his political standing and ultimately led to his appointment as president (Friend, 2024).

Soeharto's rise to power ushered in a new era in post-independence Indonesia, known as the New Order. His regime was characterised by authoritarianism, military dominance, and a focus on political stability through security-centred governance. Under the New Order, political expression that diverged from the regime's narrative was systematically suppressed. Communism was outlawed, and individuals suspected of harbouring communist sympathies were subject to arrest (Purdey et al., 2023).

Once the communist threat had been neutralised, the regime turned its attention to Islam, which it viewed as the next major ideological challenge. As the religion of the majority, Islam was seen as a powerful vehicle for political mobilisation. Consequently, from the early years of the New Order, Islamic activists were subjected to state surveillance and intimidation. These fears were further reinforced by the outcome of the 1971 general election, in which two Islamic parties, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Parmusi, placed second and third, respectively (Aminuddin, 1999).

The regime interpreted this result as a warning signal. In response, the government implemented a party fusion policy in 1973, merging Islamic political parties into the United Development Party (PPP) and secular-nationalist parties into the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) (Kirbiantoro & Rudianto, 2006). This fusion effectively weakened Islamic political forces by forcing them into a single-party framework, thereby fueling internal competition and diverting attention from broader public concerns.

Simultaneously, the New Order embarked on a sweeping political propaganda campaign. On 16 August 1982, President Soeharto declared that all socio-political organisations in Indonesia must be based on Pancasila. The regime formalised Pancasila as the sole ideological foundation, banning any alternative ideologies—including Islam, socialism, and Marxism—from serving as the basis of political or civic organisations. Groups that resisted this mandate faced repressive measures, including surveillance, censorship, and the threat of state violence.

Islamic activists who opposed Pancasila as the sole foundation were labelled "far-right extremists," a rhetorical counterpart to the "far-left extremist" label used to discredit communists and socialists. Among the organisations that rejected the single-ideology policy were the Himpunan Mahasiswa Islam – Majelis Penyelamat Organisasi (HMI-MPO) and Pelajar Islam Indonesia (PII) (Aminuddin, 1999). Although the label initially applied only to those who explicitly resisted the policy, over time it was broadly extended to encompass all Islamic groups that opposed the regime—including Islamic-oriented political parties.

The policy of enforcing Pancasila as Islamic organisations did not universally reject the sole ideological foundation. Some Islamic groups accepted the policy, notably Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). NU's formal acceptance of Pancasila was declared during its 27th National Congress (Muktamar NU) in 1984, held in Situbondo, East Java. NU's leadership argued that Pancasila did not contradict Islamic teachings and therefore did not warrant rejection. A year later, Muhammadiyah also declared its acceptance of Pancasila during its 47th National Congress, held in Surakarta in 1985 (Aminuddin, 1999).

From Political Movement to Da'wah Movement

The repressive political climate under the New Order, which targeted any form of dissent against the status quo, significantly weakened the role and visibility of Islamic political movements. Whereas in the early post-independence period, Islamic groups had enjoyed relative freedom to articulate their political aspirations, under Soeharto's regime, such expression became increasingly restricted. Surveillance and intimidation by state security forces were common, particularly against individuals or groups perceived to hold divergent political views. These conditions compelled Islamic political activists to reassess their strategies and reorient their struggle.

During the New Order, many Islamic groups adopted underground strategies, shifting their focus from politics to *da'wah* (Islamic propagation). With formal political avenues effectively closed, pursuing change through constitutional means became nearly impossible. Former sympathisers and guerrilla fighters from DI/TII, who continued to harbour aspirations for an Islamic state, could no longer rely on armed rebellion as they had during Kartosoewirjo's time. Likewise, former Masyumi members were unable to advance their agenda through parliament. With the New Order formally defining Indonesia as a Pancasila-based state, all alternative political ideologies—including Islamic ones—were effectively banned. In this context, *da'wah* emerged as a strategic platform for regrouping and sustaining Islamic activism following the suppression of DI/TII and the dissolution of Masyumi (Solahudin, 2011).

One prominent figure who embraced *da'wah* as a means of struggle was Mohammad Natsir. Following his release from prison in February 1967, Natsir—together with Mohammad Roem, Mr Sjafruddin Prawiranegara, Rasjidi, Mr Burhanuddin Harahap, Prawoto Mangkusasmito, and Kasman Singodimedjo—founded the Indonesian Islamic *Da'wah* Council (Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia, DDII). Despite the founding of the Indonesian Muslim

Party (Parmusi) in 1968, a year after DDII's establishment, Natsir chose not to return to practical politics (Latif, 2012).

The emergence of DDII represented a significant development for conservative Islamic groups marginalised under the New Order. It became an intellectual and spiritual sanctuary for activists critical of the regime and committed to the long-term vision of Islamizing Indonesian society. DDII was designed as a cadre-training institution for aspiring *da'i* (Islamic preachers), equipping them with not only religious knowledge but also secular academic competencies. In addition to its educational role, DDII facilitated international collaboration with Islamic organisations throughout the Middle East.

One of DDII's notable early initiatives was a book translation project launched in the early 1970s. Within a few years of its founding, DDII had translated at least 12 seminal works by prominent Middle Eastern thinkers in the field of political Islam. These included Sayyid Qutb's *The Straight Path* (*Jalan yang Lurus*), and *This is Islam* (*Inilah Islam*), Hasan al-Banna's *The Message of Jihad* (*Risalah Jihad*), and Abul A'la Maududi's *Fundamentals of the Islamic Viewpoint* (*Pokok-pokok Pandangan Muslim*) (Solahudin, 2011). This initiative was widely regarded as successful—not only did it introduce influential Islamic political thought into Indonesia, but it also helped DDII forge meaningful ties with international Islamic networks.

Within the broader landscape of conservative Islamic movements during the New Order, DDII played a pivotal role. This was partly due to its close association with former DI/TII activists who remained committed to the idea of establishing an Islamic state. According to Solahudin, Kartosoewirjo had instructed his followers to continue the struggle for an Islamic state and to focus on recruiting new members to keep the vision alive. Those who adhered to this instruction found in DDII a platform to continue their efforts, making the organisation an important nexus for ideological continuity and regeneration (Solahudin, 2011).

The relationship between the Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII) and sympathisers of Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII) deepened significantly when Abdullah Sungkar and Abu Bakar Ba'asyir assumed leadership of DDII's Solo branch. Both were close associates and had previously been active in the Pemuda Al-Irsyad movement. In 1967, after parting ways with the Al-Irsyad Broadcasting Commission (ABC), they established Radio Dakwah Islamiyah Surakarta (Radis). Radis became a key Islamic broadcasting outlet in the Solo Raya region, disseminating Islamic doctrines with a modernist yet increasingly hardline tone. In 1970, Mohammad Natsir, as head of DDII, instructed Sungkar and Ba'asyir to establish an Islamic boarding school (*pondok pesantren*). This directive led to the establishment of Pondok Pesantren Al-Mukmin in Ngruki, Solo, Central Java (Solahudin, 2011).

Sungkar and Ba'asyir's closeness with DI/TII sympathisers was rooted in a shared vision: the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia. Both groups also aligned in their opposition to the New Order regime. The late 1970s marked a pivotal period for conservative Islamic movements in Indonesia. The success of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which overthrew Shah Pahlavi, sent shockwaves through the Muslim world. In Indonesia, this revolutionary spirit was received enthusiastically by many Muslim activists. Among Muslim intellectuals, works by Iranian Islamic thinkers were translated into Indonesian and widely read among Islamic student organisations. The Iranian Revolution also inspired members of the DI/TII network. In 1983, they reportedly devised a plot to assassinate President Soeharto. Although the plan failed, it prompted a massive crackdown by the government, resulting in the arrest of many DI/TII-affiliated activists (Solahudin, 2011).

This wave of arrests forced DI/TII sympathisers to adopt new strategies. They turned to a cadre-building model inspired by the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood (Ikhwanul Muslimin), known as the *usrah* system (Rahmat, 2008). This method emphasised personalised recruitment and internal consolidation through small, close-knit religious study groups, whose members shared familial-style bonds. Throughout the New Order era, the *usrah* model became

the dominant method through which conservative Islamic groups recruited and mobilised new members (Syukur, 2003).

Campus Da'wah Movements as Sites of Resistance

In addition to recruitment within established organisations such as DDII, conservative Islamic groups expanded their influence by targeting university students. This expansion paralleled the spread of *usrah*-style *da'wah* networks in the 1980s. Unlike earlier recruitment, which was centred on mosques or Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), these new efforts increasingly focused on campus-based *da'wah* organisations.

Campus-based *da'wah* activities intensified in the early 1980s, as universities became strategic sites for opposition groups to formulate and express resistance to state policies (Zarkasyi, 2008). One of the most prominent organisations was Jama'ah Shalahuddin (JS) at Gadjah Mada University (UGM), founded in 1976. JS quickly emerged as a critical platform for Islamic groups to articulate political critique. Its activities extended beyond religious gatherings to include intellectual discussions, cultural performances, and artistic productions.

JS gained additional momentum following the introduction of the Normalisation of Campus Life and Coordination Body of Campus Activities (NKK/BKK) policy in 1978, which banned political activity among students (Widjojo, 1999). While students were officially instructed to focus solely on academics, *da'wah* organisations creatively sustained engagement through alternative programming, often featuring intellectuals critical of the New Order. JS also held well-attended art events, including poetry readings and theatrical performances. One of its most memorable productions was *Lautan Jilbab* (The Sea of Veils) by Emha Ainun Najib, staged in 1987. This performance was a response to the regime's ban on the hijab in public schools, enacted on 17 March 1982.

Initially, campus *da'wah* organisations operated autonomously. However, in 1986, the Forum Silaturahmi Lembaga Dakwah Kampus (FSLDK) was formed, serving as a national coordinating body. This forum enabled cross-campus collaboration and alignment around a shared vision and mission. Despite being united under a common umbrella, campus *da'wah* organisations developed distinct identities shaped by various contextual factors. First, Islam was increasingly invoked as a vehicle for justice in response to historical political injustices in Indonesia, making it an appealing outlet for politically conscious students. Second, New Order policies such as NKK/BKK heavily restricted extra-campus organisations like HMI and PMII, creating a vacuum that *da'wah* movements filled. Consequently, campus mosques and their affiliated *da'wah* bodies became focal points of conservative Islamic activism under the New Order.

The conservative orientation of these organisations was also influenced by DDII's translation projects, which introduced Indonesian audiences to the ideas of Middle Eastern Islamic thinkers such as Hasan al-Banna, Sayyid Qutb, Abul A'la Maududi, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and Rashid Rida.

ICMI and a New Islamic Exponent: Shifts in the Regime's Attitude Toward Islam

Toward the end of the 1980s, a political shift occurred within the New Order regime. President Soeharto began seeking alternative political support beyond the military, which had long served as the backbone of his rule. This shift was triggered by an increasingly strained relationship between Soeharto and the armed forces. He grew suspicious that the military was manoeuvring to remove him from power. The rupture became evident when Soeharto dismissed General L.B. Moerdani from his position as Commander of the Armed Forces (Panglima ABRI), replacing him with General Try Sutrisno in 1988 (Said, 2016).

As his alliance with the military weakened, Soeharto turned to other political forces. He began to view Islam as a viable alternative power base capable of filling the void left by the military. This reorientation became especially clear when he supported the establishment of

the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (Ikatan Cendekiawan Muslim Indonesia, or ICMI) in Malang in 1990 (Hefner, 2000). Soeharto's endorsement of ICMI was surprising, particularly given that, for the previous two decades, he had systematically repressed Islamic movements through coercive and authoritarian measures.

ICMI emerged as a forum for Muslim intellectuals and was chaired by B.J. Habibie, a leading technocrat and one of Soeharto's most trusted government allies (Ricklefs, 2023). Habibie's appointment as chairperson raised expectations among modernist Islamic groups, who saw in him an opportunity to influence the state "from within." With his direct access to the president, Habibie was perceived as a conduit for conveying Islamic aspirations to the highest levels of political power (Amir, 2007).

Although ICMI enjoyed Soeharto's support, it was not without controversy. One of its most outspoken critics was Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), then chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Gus Dur argued that ICMI primarily served Soeharto's short-term political interests by appealing to the Islamic community (Barton, 2010). He also questioned whether ICMI's true vision involved the Islamization of the state or merely the integration of Islamic values into governance. Gus Dur's concerns were not unfounded: much like Masyumi before it, ICMI became a platform that brought together various Islamic factions, many of which shared the long-standing aspiration of establishing an Islamic state. His suspicions were further confirmed in 1992 when Habibie entered formal politics as a Golkar Party cadre.

Conservative Islamic Movements in the Reformasi Era

Soeharto resigned from the presidency on 21 May 1998, marking the collapse of an authoritarian, centralised regime that had dominated Indonesia for 32 years. His resignation ushered in the Reformasi era, a period characterised by political liberalisation and greater transparency. In this new climate, citizens were free to express their political views openly. This newfound freedom had a profound impact on the development of conservative Islamic movements in Indonesia. Individuals who had previously concealed their political aspirations for an Islamic state under the New Order were now able to express these goals openly.

In the early Reformasi period, proponents of an Islamic state or the formal implementation of Islamic law pursued their objectives through parliamentary means by proposing constitutional amendments to the 1945 Constitution (UUD 1945). Specifically, they advocated reinstating the Jakarta Charter as the Constitution's foundational spirit. Had this effort succeeded, the seven words previously removed from the Charter would have been restored, thereby establishing sharia as a formal legal framework in Indonesia. However, the proposal was ultimately rejected by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), marking yet another failed attempt to enshrine Islamic law in the constitution.

Despite this defeat, the vision of an Islamic state or formalised sharia law did not disappear. After setbacks at the national level, its advocates shifted their focus to local governance, promoting sharia-inspired regional regulations (Perda Syariah). According to Michael Buehler (2016), between 1999 and 2014, as many as 443 such regulations were enacted across the country (Buehler, 2016). This proliferation was closely linked to decentralisation reforms under Law No. 22 of 1999 on Regional Governance, which granted local governments the authority to exercise autonomy in managing their affairs. In this framework, autonomy was not only a democratic mechanism but also a means of enabling regional actors to implement locally relevant initiatives, including religious ones (Da Cruz, 2023).

In addition to legislative efforts, proponents of an Islamic state also mobilised through mass organisations. Two Islamic groups openly supported the establishment of an Islamic state or the formal implementation of Islamic law during the Reformasi era. The first was the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, or FPI), founded by Muhammad Rizieq Shihab. FPI quickly emerged as one of the most prominent and controversial hardline Islamic organisations

in post-New Order Indonesia (kompas.com, 2008). Known for its use of violence in proselytising (*da'wah*), the group often justified its actions under the banner of "commanding the good and forbidding the evil" (*amar ma'ruf nahi munkar*). It regularly conducted raids on nightclubs, disrupted public forums it deemed un-Islamic, and protested against interfaith events (Wilson, 2005).

FPI also played a central role in organising the 2016 mass protests demanding legal action against Jakarta Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), who was accused of blasphemy. The group further promoted the concept of a "Sharia-Based Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia" (NKRI Bersyariah). According to Rizieq Shihab, only sharia could protect the Indonesian state and Pancasila from the perceived threats of communism, socialism, and liberal capitalism. However, FPI's activities came to an abrupt halt when the Indonesian government officially disbanded the organisation on 30 December 2020 (Farisa & Galih, 2020).

Secondly, Hizbut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI)—like the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI)—envisioned Indonesia as an Islamic state. However, a fundamental difference distinguished the two. FPI imagined an Islamic state as an autonomous and sovereign nation-state rooted in Indonesia's national identity. Despite advocating for Islamic governance, FPI continued to recognise Indonesia as a legitimate modern nation-state. In contrast, HTI conceptualised the Islamic state in Indonesia as an integral component of a global caliphate. Within this framework, Indonesia would function as a subordinate entity within a transnational Islamic caliphate. HTI rejected the very notion of the modern nation-state and nationalism (Syeirazy, 2020), considering both incompatible with Islamic universalism.

Despite their ideological divergence, both FPI and HTI were united in their broader objective of establishing an Islamic state. The Indonesian government ultimately disbanded both organisations. HTI was officially dissolved in May 2017 due to its ideological platform conflicting with *Pancasila* and the 1945 Constitution (*UUD 1945*) (Erdianto, 2017).

The cases of FPI and HTI illustrate how the ideal of an Islamic state has served as a conceptual framework that guides and influences the political agendas of various movements. The Islamic state envisioned by both groups represents a continuation of the aspirations pursued by earlier conservative Islamic movements such as Sarekat Islam (SI), Masyumi, Darul Islam/Tentara Islam Indonesia (DI/TII), Dewan Dakwah Islamiyah Indonesia (DDII), and the Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI). Although these groups differ significantly in character, orientation, and method—from parliamentary engagement and armed rebellion to *da'wah* activism and intellectual mobilisation—they all converge around a common goal: the establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia.

The Evolution of Islamic Conservatism in Indonesia

Historically, there has been a strong common thread throughout all Islamic conservative movements in Indonesia. Although their organisational forms and strategies differ, all these movements share a clear commitment to the ideal of an Islamic state. In the pre-independence era, aspirations for an Islamic state were championed through formal political channels, such as the BPUPKI meetings/discussions. After Indonesian independence, the ideal of an Islamic state was championed through parliamentary channels, through the political dynamics of the Constituent Assembly. When the 1959 Presidential Decree halted the strategy of struggle through formal political channels, the struggle shifted to armed resistance, as seen in the case of the DI/TII.

The DI/TII model of struggle also failed to realise the aspiration for an Islamic state. Despite this failure, the ideal of an Islamic state remained alive, evolving into a da'wah movement and cadre education during the New Order era through the DDII network, Islamic boarding schools *(pesantren)*, and campus da'wah movements. When the New Order regime fell, the idea of an Islamic State regained strength, fueled by efforts by several Islamic groups to

restore the Jakarta Charter to serve as the basis of the Indonesian constitution. Like previous struggles, this amendment effort failed.

The failure to establish Indonesia as an Islamic state through amendments to the 1945 Constitution did not necessarily extinguish this aspiration. Instead, an Islamic state remained the ideal of conservative Islamic groups in Indonesia, only in a new guise (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019). In the reform era, the idea of an Islamic state was repackaged through the idea of "NKRI Bersyariah," promoted by Islamic groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI).

The emergence of the "NKRI Bersyariah" idea demonstrates that Islamic conservatism in Indonesia is not a passing movement but an enduring ideological tradition. It lives on through diverse figures, networks, and organisations, yet remains united in the ideal of an Islamic state (Facal, 2020; Khoiri et al., 2024). The transformation from the Sarekat Islam movement to the emergence of the term "NKRI Bersyariah (Sharia-based Unitary Republic of Indonesia)" during the Reform Era confirms that Islamic conservatism consistently finds new space to negotiate its existence within changing socio-political contexts. This pattern explains why the idea of an Islamic state persists, despite repeated political failures.

Conclusion

Conservative Islamic movements in Indonesia have deep and complex historical roots, dating back to the pre-independence era with the founding of Sarekat Islam (SI) and continuing into the Reformasi period with groups such as FPI and HTI. From their inception, these movements have been animated by a collective aspiration to establish Islam as the foundational principle of the state. Although this goal has consistently failed to materialise through formal political channels—whether during the sessions of the Investigating Committee for Preparatory Work for Independence (BPUPKI), the Constitutional Assembly (Konstituante), or the constitutional amendments during Reformasi—the idea of an Islamic state has never been absent from Indonesian political discourse.

Instead, the ideal has endured and evolved through a variety of adaptive strategies tailored to the unique circumstances of each era. These have included engagement in parliamentary politics and armed resistance, as seen with Masyumi and DI/TII; propagation through apolitical *da'wah* efforts, as exemplified by DDII during the New Order; and newer political expressions in the Reformasi period, such as the proliferation of regional sharia-based regulations (Perda Syariah) or the slogan of a "Sharia-Based Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia" (NKRI Bersyariah). These diverse expressions reflect the flexibility and persistence of the Islamic state ideal, which has functioned as a unifying identity marker for otherwise heterogeneous conservative Islamic groups. This study shows that the survival and continuity of conservative Islamic movements in Indonesia are not merely the result of political opportunity, but stem from an enduring process of meaning-making and collective identity construction—an identity actively maintained and reinterpreted by successive generations in response to evolving historical and political contexts.

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