



Reimagining Political Islam: The Habaib Group's Vision and Political Participation in Surakarta

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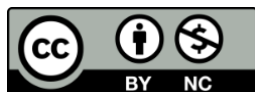
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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran politik Habaib, keturunan Nabi Muhammad, yang jarang dibahas dalam diskusi tentang keterlibatan politik Islam. Seringkali pembahasan terfokus pada pembentukan negara Islam berdasarkan hukum Syariah atau keterlibatan dengan politik sekuler. Sebaliknya, Habaib mempengaruhi politik melalui otoritas agama, pengaruh sosial, dan kepemimpinan moral. Penelitian ini berfokus pada Surakarta, menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan wawancara semi-terstruktur kepada enam informan, observasi lapangan, dan tinjauan pustaka. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa Habaib memandang politik Islam sebagai sarana untuk menyebarkan nilai-nilai Islam, bukan untuk mendirikan negara Islam atau terlibat langsung dalam politik. Partisipasi mereka lebih pada mendukung pemimpin yang mengedepankan prinsip-prinsip Islam tanpa ambisi menduduki jabatan politik. Penelitian ini memberikan wawasan baru tentang keterlibatan politik Islam di Indonesia, dengan menggeser pemahaman dualistik antara Islamisme dan sekularisme.

Abstract

This study examines the political role of the Habaib, descendants of Prophet Muhammad, whose influence has been largely overlooked in discussions about Islamic political involvement. While debates often center on establishing an Islamic state based on Sharia law or engaging with secular politics, the Habaib exert political influence through religious authority, social standing, and moral leadership. Focusing on Surakarta, the research uses qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with six informants, field observations, and a literature review. Findings reveal that the Habaib view political Islam as a means to promote Islamic values rather than to establish an Islamic state or participate directly in politics. Their involvement is marked by indirect support for leaders who uphold Islamic principles, not by seeking political office. This study offers new insights into Islamic political engagement in Indonesia, moving beyond the traditional dichotomy of Islamism versus secularism.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The intersection of Islam and politics in Indonesia has long been a subject of debate, influenced by historical legacies, ideological disputes, and socio-political transformations. In the habacontemporary era, this discourse primarily focuses on two central tensions. First, Indonesia's adoption of secular liberal democracy promotes the view that politics should be detached from religious influence, aligning with the framework of "desacralization of politics" (Poya, 2023). However, rigid secularism in Muslim-majority countries often faces challenges in ensuring stable democratic consolidation (Lubis et al., 2024). Second, the rise of identity politics especially those rooted in religion has contributed to polarization within Indonesia's political landscape (Arifianto, 2020; Meléndez & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2019). Identity politics is often narrowly understood, leading to the perception that any intersection of religion and politics contradicts the principles of the Indonesian state (Noury & Roland, 2020; Pătru, 2021). However, identity politics recognizes that various societal groups have distinct experiences and interests, necessitating political representation to advocate for their rights and needs. The state's attempts to further separate religion from politics have only intensified these tensions, particularly with the increased political intensity ahead of elections, deepening the polarization (Raile et al., 2024).

Within this broader debate, Islamic political engagement in Indonesia is often framed within two opposing perspectives (Akmaliah & Nadzir, 2024). The first perspective argues that the integration of Islamic values into governance is a necessity for Muslim-majority countries like Indonesia, asserting that religious principles should guide state policies (Schwadel, 2020). In contrast, the second perspective emphasizes secular inclusivity, prioritizing democratic values and viewing Islam as an ideology that, in practice, forms an imaginative concept, often shaped by Western political hegemony under the guise of Islam. However, these binary frameworks overlook the nuanced role of religious elites, particularly the Habaib descendants of the Prophet Muhammad who exert substantial political influence without formal political participation (Bhojani & Clarke, 2023; Mawardi & Permana, 2022).

Historically, the Habaib have positioned themselves as spiritual and moral authorities, engaging primarily through religious education and da'wah rather than direct involvement in electoral politics (Mawardi & Permana, 2022). Nevertheless, their extensive social networks have allowed them to subtly shape political discourse and mobilization (Kesuma et al., 2022). While prominent figures like Habib Rizieq Shihab have taken overt political stances, the majority of Habaib influence politics through informal mechanisms such as religious authority and political education (Rijal, 2020). This distinctive mode of engagement represents a form of Islamic political agency that combines historical legitimacy, social capital, and strategic non-alignment with formal political structures.

This research aims to examine the political Islam of the Habaib in Surakarta and how that meaning is manifested in the political participation of the Habaib in Surakarta, a city that serves as an ideal case study for several reasons. First, Surakarta functions as a cultural and political centre that reflects broader national political dynamics (Buchori et al., 2020). Second, as the birthplace of President Joko Widodo, the city has played an important role in shaping contemporary Indonesian politics (Rusman et al., 2022). Third, Surakarta is home to influential Habaib figures, such as Habib Ali bin Muhammad bin Husain Al-Habsyi,

which further underlines the significance of this city in discussions about Islam and politics (Al Fajar & Kamarudin, 2021; Mibtadin et al., 2022).

Existing research on political Islam in Surakarta has predominantly focused on the tension between Islamism and democracy, often framing the city as a battleground between radical Islamic movements and democratic consolidation (Adnan, 2021; Sadeghi, 2021). While many studies emphasize mass mobilization and Islamist activism, they tend to overlook the role of religious elites in shaping political participation. Similarly, research on hijrah communities and popular Islam frequently generalizes Islamic actors, failing to distinguish between mass-based activism and the influence of religious elites (Alam et al., 2023; Mibtadin et al., 2022). Furthermore, Setianto et al. (2022) explains how the Laskar Surakarta group influences local politics through confrontation, contrasting with the Habaib, who maintain Islamic authority through religious scholarship and gradual social influence. This study aims to fill this gap by focusing on the Habaib, a religious elite often misunderstood in discussions of Islamism and democracy, where their political intentions are frequently misrepresented as a pursuit of an unfounded Islamic state discourse.

Rather than advocating for systemic change through direct political participation, the Habaib influence politics through religious authority, social networks, and political education (Kesuma et al., 2022). By positioning the Habaib within the broader discourse on Political Islam, this study challenges dominant perspectives that equate Islamic political engagement with radicalization or formal party politics. This research will adopt Asef Bayat's concept of post-Islamism and Olivier Roy's theory of Islam's role in contemporary politics. Through the application of this framework, the study seeks to offer a fresh perspective on how the Habaib engage in political discourse while preserving their legitimacy in promoting Islamic values in the modern era. Rather than challenging democratic principles, the Habaib represent a distinct approach to Islamic political engagement rooted in religious authority, operating through incremental social influence, and demonstrating adaptability to the evolving dynamics of Indonesia's democracy.

2. METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach with a case study methodology to examine the political participation of the Habaib community in Surakarta, Indonesia, focusing on how Islamic norms and values, rooted in texts such as the Quran and Hadith, are interpreted and applied within the democratic framework of Indonesia (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Conducted from August to October 2024, the study employs purposive sampling, selecting six informants with in-depth knowledge of Islamic teachings and active involvement in the Habaib community's political engagement (Campbell et al., 2020). This method ensures that the data provides relevant insights into the community's views on Islam and politics, with informants representing diverse perspectives within the Habaib. Data collection will be conducted through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document analysis (Taherdoost, 2021). Interviews will provide direct insights into political beliefs and religious practices, while participant observation will involve attending religious activities such as majelis ilmu, ziyarah, and haul to understand the context of political participation. Document analysis will explore religious texts, political statements,

and other relevant writings. This timeframe ensures that the research captures current and relevant dynamics within the Habaib community's political engagement, offering timely insights into the intersection of religion and politics in contemporary Indonesia.

Table 1. List of Informants

No	Informant Names	Organization
1	Habib Hasan bin Anis Al Habsyi	Masjid Ar Riyadh
2	Habib Ja'far bin Ali Assegaf	Masjid Jami Assegaf
3	Habib Muhammad bin Yahya Baraqbah	Masjid Raya Sheikh Zayed
4	Habib Abdurrahman bin Sholeh Mulachela	Majelis Al Inaabah
5	Habib Abu Bakar Fahmi bin Muhammad Assegaf	Masjid Jami Assegaf
6	Habib Ali bin Hasan Al Habsyi	Rabithah Alawiyah Surakarta

Triangulation will be applied to ensure data validity, using methodological triangulation to compare findings from interviews, observations, and documents, and source triangulation to cross-check data from multiple informants. Data analysis will be conducted using thematic analysis to identify patterns related to political engagement and religious beliefs (Wiltshire & Ronkainen, 2021). While the methodology ensures a comprehensive approach, limitations, such as sample size and potential observer bias, will be acknowledged. Overall, this methodology provides a robust framework for understanding the intersection of Islam and politics through the lens of the Habaib's political participation in Indonesia.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Islamic Values and Democracy: The Habaib's Contribution to Inclusive Political Islam

This study explores the political Islam interpretation of the Habaib group in Surakarta, offering a unique approach that challenges the binary often present in Islamic political discourse. Traditional discussions of political Islam typically oscillate between the effort to establish an Islamic state based on Sharia law and a more liberal democratic approach, which often compromises Islamic principles (Akmaliah & Nadzir, 2024). These approaches frequently fail to realize ideal Islamic values within society and tend to create secular spaces instead. The Habaib group presents an alternative that avoids these extremes and offers a more pragmatic solution to contemporary challenges in Islamic politics. The Habaib's interpretation focuses on the moral responsibility of leadership (*ri'asah*), emphasizing social justice and community welfare over the establishment of an Islamic state or the imposition of Sharia through government. One informant explained:

"In Islam, the concept of politics is closer to ri'asah (leadership) or ziyadah (a leader who governs wisely)." (Habib Ja'far bin Ali Assegaf, 2024)

This approach aligns with Asef Bayat's concept of post-Islamism, which calls for the evolution of political Islam into a more inclusive and pragmatic model, harmonizing with democratic pluralism without the need to establish a formal Islamic state (Bayat, 2013; Hashas, 2024). Bayat's theory challenges deterministic views that associate the authoritarian character of governments in the Muslim-majority Middle East with Islam itself. He critiques the assumption that Islam is inherently undemocratic, misogynistic, or intolerant, arguing instead that Islam should not be seen as a static, uniform entity across the Muslim world.

According to Bayat, Muslim life is not entirely determined by Islam, and there is no singular “true Islam” (Bayat, 2013; Wagemakers, 2023). His research across various Muslim-majority countries reveals that Islamic practices and interpretations vary greatly, both across nations and within a single country. Bayat emphasizes that Islam itself does not determine whether a society will be democratic or authoritarian. Rather, it is the active engagement of Muslim citizens through social struggles and intellectual discourse that plays a central role in shaping a more democratic or authoritarian interpretation of Islam (Bayat, 2021). In this context, the Habaib group’s approach reflects Bayat’s rejection of the idea that Islamic political movements are necessarily incompatible with democratic principles. The Habaib, while conservative, seek to promote a moral and ethical framework that prioritizes social justice and community welfare, rather than focusing on establishing a state based on Sharia. As another informant elaborated:

“Democracy from an Islamic perspective means listening to one another, accepting input, and seeking the best path, as long as it remains within the boundaries of Islamic values. Islam accepts democracy as long as it is applied for the welfare of the community and does not undermine Sharia.” (Habib Abu Bakar Fahmi bin Muhammad Assegaf, 2024)

This positions them as part of a larger, evolving narrative of post-Islamism, where Islam is integrated into democratic frameworks without the imposition of an Islamic state. This selective acceptance of democracy mirrors the broader tensions Bayat identifies within political Islam. While Bayat advocates for an inclusive political Islam compatible with democratic systems, the Habaib’s limited acceptance of democracy contingent on its alignment with Islamic principles highlights their distinct interpretation of modern democracy. They embrace democracy only insofar as it aligns with Sharia, which prioritizes social justice, equality, and welfare. This reveals a cautious approach to democracy, where Sharia serves as a guiding framework, restricting full acceptance of democratic values such as pluralism and individual rights. The Habaib group’s view on the Islamic state further complicates this picture. They argue that the establishment of a formal Islamic state is unnecessary if Muslims can practice their faith freely in daily life. For them, the real Islamic state is not one based on political declarations or Sharia-based government, but one that emerges organically from the moral practices of a society living according to Islamic values. As one informant explained:

“For Muslims, any form of government—including democracy—can be accepted as long as it aligns with Islamic teachings. However, we need to study democracy critically and assess whether its principles are in line with Islamic values or not.” (Habib Ja’far bin Ali Assegaf, 2024)

This view resonates with Olivier Roy’s critique of political Islam, which suggests that the push for an Islamic state is often a response to political upheaval rather than addressing the social and economic needs of Muslim societies (Ibrahim, 2024; Roy, 1994). Roy argues that the contextual spread of Islamic values within society can be more effective in upholding Sharia and creating an Islamic state than political declarations, which often result in the creation of secular spaces far removed from Islamic ideals (Khairullin, 2022; Roy, 1994).

The Habaib's approach challenges this binary, showing that an Islamic state is not necessarily a political entity but a moral and ethical framework that can be integrated into existing political systems without needing to dominate or control them.

Bayat's post-Islamism offers further insight into the Habaib's position. Bayat critiques the idea of "Islamic revolution" by shifting the focus from the process of state-building to its outcomes. He suggests that the very concept of the Islamic state has faced significant opposition from various sectors, including religious scholars, women, youth, intellectuals, and minority groups (Bayat, 2021). These marginalized groups have protested against the exclusionary, non-democratic, and intolerant nature of the Islamic state, forcing many Islamic elites to reconsider the project of Islamization and to imagine alternatives that emphasize citizenship rights over religious duties. The Habaib group, in a similar vein, appears to reject the idea of a rigid, theocratic Islamic state, instead emphasizing moral and social reform as the means to achieve justice and equality in society. One informant stated:

"If everyone wants to follow the Islamic law, then the country automatically becomes an Islamic state, there is no need to proclaim it as an Islamic state. The important thing is the people; if the people are Islamic, then the state automatically becomes an Islamic state. But if it is forced to be an Islamic state, it might not (become an Islamic state), and in practice, it will certainly be difficult." (Habib Hasan bin Anis Al Habsyi, 2024)

Despite the promise of the Habaib's approach, significant challenges remain. One of the main issues is the consistent application of Sharia within a pluralistic and democratic society. The internal fragmentation within political Islam, as highlighted by Roy, poses a barrier to realizing an inclusive and just political Islam. Different interpretations of Sharia among Islamic groups can hinder the development of a cohesive political Islam that aligns with democratic ideals (Ibrahim, 2024). The Habaib group's selective approach to democracy may also limit their ability to engage with broader democratic ideals, particularly in areas where Sharia and liberal democratic principles come into conflict.

In conclusion, the Habaib group's interpretation of political Islam offers a valuable contribution to contemporary political discourse, demonstrating how Islam can adapt to modern political realities. Their approach challenges the conventional dichotomy between Islamism and secularism, offering a more inclusive model of political Islam that emphasizes the integration of Islamic values into everyday life. By focusing on moral principles, social justice, and community welfare within a democratic framework, the Habaib show that religion and democracy can coexist in a pluralistic society. However, the tensions between their conservative religious values and their engagement with modern democratic principles highlight the complexities of post-Islamism and the ongoing struggle to reconcile Islamic principles with the demands of contemporary democracy.

3.2 The Habaib's Unique Political Participation: A Moral and Non-Partisan Approach

The political participation of the Habaib group in Surakarta represents a distinct departure from traditional political Islam, which typically involves either a call for an Islamic state based on Sharia law or a compromise with secular democratic principles. In contrast,

the Habaib emphasize moral-driven social change rather than seeking political power. Grounded in their Islamic principles, their political involvement is characterized by offering moral support to those who uphold Sharia, without actively engaging in partisan politics or state development. As one informant stated:

“My teachings from my elders emphasize that we do not engage in politics. Everything is non-political. If we support, we support, but we do not proclaim our support for any figure publicly. We support those who truly implement Islamic law.” (Habib Abu Bakar Fahmi bin Muhammad Assegaf, 2024)

This approach aligns with Asef Bayat’s concept of post-Islamism, which advocates for a more pragmatic and inclusive political Islam that integrates Islamic values into democratic societies without the necessity of establishing an Islamic state (Bayat, 2013, 2021). The Habaib’s selective support for individuals who align with their interpretation of Sharia raises questions about how their involvement in Indonesia’s democratic politics influences broader political Islam discourse. Bayat’s theory emphasizes the need for political Islam to focus on social integration rather than state-building, a stance the Habaib group reflects by prioritizing moral participation over political power dynamics (Hashas, 2024). Furthermore, the Rabithah Alawayiah Surakarta, an institution supporting the Habaib group, enforces clear boundaries regarding political engagement. As one informant elaborated:

“As members of Rabithah, we are prohibited from directly engaging in political parties or becoming spokespeople for any party. If anyone does this openly, they could be removed from their position.” (Habib Ali bin Hasan Al Habsyi, 2024)

This non-partisan stance allows the Habaib to maintain religious independence and avoid the ideological conflicts that often arise in the political arena. Their focus on societal change through ethical leadership rather than political control highlights a distinctive model of political engagement. Both Masjid Assegaf and Masjid Riyadh, closely associated with the Habaib, exemplify this principle by refraining from endorsing any political figure or party, as emphasized by the following informants:

“Masjid Assegaf has independent rules and management. This mosque does not direct political choices toward any particular figure. Although candidates or community leaders are welcome to visit, Masjid Assegaf neither supports nor endorses any specific candidate.” (Habib Ja’far bin Ali Assegaf, 2024)

“Masjid Riyadh does not engage in politics at all, even though political figures come here, we do not engage in politics. Even my father, when it’s time for campaigning, refuses invitations. Political figures already know that if they ask for support at Masjid Riyadh, it’s not possible.” (Habib Hasan bin Anis Al Habsyi, 2024)

Olivier Roy’s critique of political Islam provides a critical layer of analysis. Roy argues that political Islam’s focus on establishing an Islamic state often overlooks pressing social issues such as poverty, inequality, and social justice (Ibrahim, 2024; Roy, 1994). Roy critiques political Islam’s idealistic vision of governance, which tends to neglect pragmatic

solutions to these challenges. In contrast, the Habaib group appears to address these critiques by emphasizing moral guidance and community welfare rather than seeking political power. They reject the notion that political control alone can resolve societal issues and instead focus on spiritual leadership and collective welfare.

Roy also discusses the challenge of reconciling modern democratic ideals with Islamic governance, particularly individual rights, pluralism, and liberal democratic principles (Alemzadeh, 2023). The Habaib's reluctance to engage in partisan politics is a direct response to the ideological conflicts inherent in traditional political Islam. By avoiding the imposition of an Islamic state based on Sharia, they emphasize guiding individuals toward a morally upright life. This resonates with Roy's argument that Islamic governance need not rely on state structures but can be promoted through the moral agency of individuals and communities.

Moreover, Roy highlights the fragmentation within political Islam, where competing factions claim the exclusive right to interpret Sharia (Ibrahim, 2024; Roy, 1994). This fragmentation often leads to political disarray. The Habaib's focus on unity, spiritual development, and community welfare enables them to avoid the ideological divisions that plague other Islamic movements. By steering clear of sectarian political struggles, the Habaib maintain a non-competitive approach to politics, focusing instead on collective well-being. This model offers a potential antidote to the disunity and ideological fragmentation that Roy identifies as one of the failures of political Islam. Additionally, political participation within the tradition of *thoriqoh* reveals that the majority of teachers and students are not directly involved in politics. However, they emphasize that this disengagement does not equate to an outright rejection of politics. As one informant explained:

"In the tradition of thoriqoh or spiritual paths, most teachers and students tend not to be directly involved in politics. But this does not mean they completely reject politics." (Habib Abdurrahman bin Sholeh Mulachela, 2024)

Roy also critiques political Islam's failure to adapt to globalization, where societies are increasingly interconnected and pluralistic (Ibrahim, 2024). Political Islam's attempts to impose a uniform vision of governance often neglect the needs of modern Muslim societies. The Habaib group, in contrast, operates within Indonesia's pluralistic democratic framework, demonstrating a form of political engagement that adapts to the global context without resorting to the creation of an Islamic state. Their refusal to support specific political parties or figures reflects their understanding that Indonesia's democratic landscape requires a more adaptable, pragmatic approach to Islamic involvement in politics.

In conclusion, the Habaib group's political participation offers a nuanced and pragmatic approach to political Islam that challenges traditional paradigms. Their non-partisan, morally centered model aligns with both Bayat's post-Islamism and Roy's critique of political Islam. The Habaib prioritize spiritual leadership, community welfare, and personal moral development over the pursuit of political power or the establishment of a theocratic state. This model of political Islam presents a viable alternative that focuses on social change through moral guidance and community solidarity rather than political domination. By responding to Roy's critique of political Islam's failure to address real-world

issues, the Habaib provide a more adaptable approach to integrating Islamic values within modern, democratic societies. Their approach exemplifies a redefined role for Islam in contemporary politics, where political participation is about fostering justice and social harmony through ethical leadership, rather than achieving power.

4. CONCLUSION

This study examines the political interpretation and participation of the Habaib group in Surakarta, revealing a distinctive approach to Islamic politics. The Habaib prioritize moral support over direct political involvement, focusing on upholding Islamic principles and social justice within the existing community framework. Their political engagement centers on spiritual leadership rather than the pursuit of power, reflecting a preference for political neutrality within religious institutions. This model aligns with a pragmatic form of political Islam, emphasizing individual and communal morality rather than the imposition of Sharia law or state-building. Their approach transcends the binary of Islamism versus secularism, offering an alternative interpretation of political Islam that is inclusive and contextually grounded in complex socio-political realities.

Their stance resonates with Olivier Roy's critique of political Islam, which highlights its failure to address pressing social issues such as inequality and poverty. By focusing on moral leadership rather than state control, the Habaib demonstrate a commitment to addressing societal challenges through ethical behavior and community welfare, in line with Roy's call for a pragmatic political Islam that prioritizes social change over state-building. In conclusion, the Habaib group's model presents an alternative framework for political Islam in contemporary democracies. Their emphasis on moral support, spiritual guidance, and social justice illustrates how Islamic values can contribute to democratic practices without the need for theocratic governance. This approach provides valuable insights into how religious values can shape political engagement in pluralistic societies, offering a more inclusive and ethically grounded form of political participation.

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