

# The Politics of Religious Space and Mosque Based Political Engagement in Indonesia

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June 12, 2025

August 08, 2025

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## Abstract

This article examines mosques as contested spaces of political meaning through Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. Challenging the conventional view of mosques as sacred and politically neutral spaces, it argues that even claims of neutrality are politically constructed through the classification and regulation of religious activities by state and non-state actors. The study addresses a gap in existing research, which has largely focused on electoral mobilisation, radicalism, and formal relations between religious institutions and the state, by examining the everyday processes through which mosque spaces acquire and negotiate political meanings. Using a qualitative approach, the study analyses three Indonesian mosques representing distinct religious communities: Pathok Negoro Mosque, associated with traditionalist Islam Husainiyah Jakarta, representing the Shia community and An-Nur Mosque, representing the Ahmadiyya community. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, direct observation, and secondary sources between October and November 2016. The findings demonstrate that mosques are actively produced through spatial practices, everyday religious routines, collective experiences, and interactions between internal and external actors, generating competing meanings as sacred, social, cultural, and political spaces. The study concludes that the politics of the mosque lies not only in explicit political mobilisation but also in ongoing struggles over representation, identity, recognition, belonging, and power.

**Keywords:** Mosque, space politics, ideological contestation, political discourse.

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## Introduction

This paper aims to study problem contestation interests, and the meaning of the mosque is examined according to the study of spatial planning politics. During this period, it was understood that the mosque is a place of worship, especially for prayer, for Muslim people, as a valuable sacred space, and has a religious-spiritual function commonly known as *habluminallah*. Generally, groups want a neutral mosque from political activity, whatever. One of the campaign groups that the author remembers is an advertisement service by the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) approaching the 2004 general election. In the advertisement, the scene shows several people and a *kyai* sneaking into the mosque to take the pulpit. Furthermore, the scene shows the pulpit placed in a tub car pickup for use as a campaign medium for political parties. The message of the advertisement is: Don't bring religion into campaign politics. Whether realized or not, the consequences are logical: a mosque is a public room with social and political dimensions. For example, in Indonesia, in the region where the writers stay, there is a general piece of knowledge like this: a mosque, though it seems neutral, is a cross-organizational public religious space we can still identify which organization is affiliated with it only by seeing the shape of the dome. Is there a moon and stars above it? Does the dome tend round or box? Even the idea of a mosque as non-political, like the JIL illustration above, can just be interpreted as politicization of space too.

Mosque as a room the public is very interesting, defined and interpreted by groups' competing interests for function according to their own will. Later, the mosque became increasingly sexy when the problem of terrorism and Islamic extremism spread. Many mosques were suspected of functioning as a place of recruitment and cadre formation for terrorists. Such as the Sulaiman Al-Hunaishil Mosque in Dau, Malang. In a way, the location of the mosque is not strategic because it is in the middle of teak, sengon, and graves. However, this condition is utilized well by the group Ansharul The pro-ISIS Caliphate as a base for hidden cadre development. Utilization of mosque space as a group base is extreme in reproducing values and resources. Power in the form of congregation has also been researched by CRCS UGM students with the title From the Mosque to Stage Politics. Research this track How Sunni-Shia conflict in Sampang is rooted in the struggle over mosque space that has marked a socio-economic path for Kyai Ali Karrar (Sunni) with Kyai Tajul Muluk and Iklil Al Milal (Shia).

A study of mosques as a room for producing violence and political extremist groups has already been done. The author is interested in seeing 3 mosques with unique functions that have not been widely discussed and are hopefully important to review from a political space perspective. The mosques are the Pathok Mosque Nagoro Babadan, Husainiyah Mosque ICC Jakarta, and Al-Nur Mosque owned by the Ahmadiyah Surabaya. The socio-historical context and background behind the ideology (stream) or sect, more precisely, which is unique, makes the four mosques each have their own uniqueness and function as public spaces. Based on this background, the article submits two main points/questions, namely. How are the dynamics of ideas and interests in politics that developed in the four mosques with the uniqueness of each of them so that they influence the function of the mosque as a public space? How does Henri Lefebvre's theory of

space as an instrument of theoretical political room explain the functional phenomenon of the four mosques as a public space? Method qualitative with in-depth interview technique, field observation, and secondary data analysis done to collect the required data.

## **Methods**

Studies on political room or socio-spatial studies generally refer to the ideas of four figures. These are: Henri Lefebvre, Manuel Castells, Edward Soja, and David Harvey. Related to the case of the mosque and its meaning as a public space, the writer chooses to use the framework of Henri Lefebvre, a famous Marxist intellectual. The idea about socio spatial Life poured out in his magnum opus titled *The Production of Space*, all at once becomes the main thing that the author uses. In a way, the idea developed from his observations about the phenomenon of social life in urban areas in France in the 1960s. For Lefebvre, space is not neutral. Because space is a product of politics, it is at once an instrument for socio-economic purposes. The description of space as political is interpreted as inevitable because actors are not neutral in making regulations and the practice of space. Spatial planning practices, according to Lefebvre, can be interpreted as the production and time reproduction of space inside it, there is a struggle between classes that strive to get and master space. Lefebvre said that this is a spatialization process. Spatialization consists of 3 elements routine individual in create zones, systematic and orderly, for example, development sector property and facilities, operational capital, etc. The existence of practice representation space and forms knowledge in formation space, for example, involvement of the government in the planning process in a technocratic way. Experience collective space. This is related with spaces experienced representation everyone. In this context, this is a building market system for the creation and accumulation of profit.

## **Result and Discussion**

In addition to the Kauman Grand Mosque located in the North Square of Yogyakarta, the city has another important religious landmark the Pathok Nagoro mosques. There are five Pathok Nagoro mosques, each established in accordance with the four cardinal directions. To the north is the Ploso Kuning Mosque in Sleman, whose original structure remains relatively well preserved to the east is the Ad-Darojat Mosque in Babadan, Banguntapan to the south is the Wonokromo Mosque in Plered to the southwest is the Dongkelan Mosque in Tirtonirmolo and to the northwest is the Mlangi Mosque in Sleman. As previously discussed, one of these five mosques that is particularly relevant for examination is the Ad-Darojat Mosque. Established in 1774 by Sultan Hamengkubuwono I, the mosque has historically been understood as a public and political space. Its establishment was intended not merely to provide a place of worship, but also to demarcate the territorial boundaries of the nagaragung domain of the Islamic Mataram Sultanate.

When examined through Lefebvre's three-dimensional conception of spatialization, several important aspects can be identified. First is the dimension of spatial organisation and systematic zoning. As is well known, traditional

Javanese royal urban planning was influenced by the mandala philosophy, which positioned the royal palace as the centre of the cosmic order of socio-political life. This mandala based spatial arrangement, also referred to as the Qibla Papat Lima Pancer cosmological principle, positioned buildings and territories outside the palace as operational extensions supporting the capital. From this perspective, the Babadan Mosque, together with the other four Pathok Nagoro mosques, can be interpreted symbolically as part of a political-religious public space designed to demarcate the territorial boundaries between the nagaragung and the territories beyond it.

Second is the representation of knowledge and the involvement of governmental authority in the production of space. As previously noted, the establishment of the Babadan Mosque was initiated in a technocratic manner by Sultan Hamengkubuwono I and was grounded in Islamic-Javanese knowledge. However, during the Japanese occupation in 1942, the mosque was severely damaged, leaving only its foundations. In the 1960s, a local community figure, Kyai Muthohar, sought permission and royal blessing to rehabilitate the mosque during the reign of Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX. Through this rehabilitation project, the Sultan's technocratic and symbolic involvement as a ruler concerned with the spiritual welfare of the community re-emerged. This involvement was reflected in the renaming of the Babadan Mosque as the Ad-Darojat Mosque. According to Suhari, the mosque's secretary, the name Ad-Darojat was associated with the childhood name of Sultan Hamengkubuwono IX, Dorodjatun. The naming of the mosque can therefore be interpreted as a form of political affirmation and as a means of constructing knowledge about the Sultan's significant role in the rehabilitation process.

Third is the dimension of collective spatial experience, which concerns the substantive functions performed by the Babadan Mosque. During the Islamic Mataram period, the mosque represented the religious authority of the Sultan, who held the position of sayyidin panatagama. Beyond its symbolic function as a territorial boundary marker, the Babadan Mosque also served a substantive administrative function as a kind of local governmental centre responsible for managing community affairs in the eastern area surrounding the palace. A judge or qadhi representing the Sultanate was responsible for resolving everyday legal matters at the mosque. This historical function leads the author to argue that the mosque, located near the present-day Jogja Expo Center, historically operated as a public space in which residents could position themselves as legal subjects of the Sultanate. Following the gradual decline of the Islamic Mataram Sultanate, however, the mosque did not lose its political significance as a public space. The function of the Babadan Mosque as both a public space and a product of political processes has continued into the present. The author's informal interview with Mr Jew, one of the mosque's key custodians, conducted in late October 2016, supports this argument. According to Mr Jew, the Babadan Mosque is open to anyone who wishes to worship, regardless of religious affiliation, group membership, or sectarian orientation.

"Anyone can worship and pray in this mosque. This mosque does not belong to any particular group. As you can see, the plaque in front also states that this mosque is open to everyone."

Although the mosque may, at first glance, appear to be free from political intervention, this statement actually demonstrates that the Babadan Mosque continues to construct a discourse of spatial inclusivity that is inherently political. This becomes clearer in Mr Jew's further explanation.

"We have IPIB here, the Babadan Islamic Youth Association. This is the youth organisation of the mosque. It is an official organisation. Many of its members have been involved since they were young. Now some of them have become soldiers, doctors, and so on. They have remained very active in religious study up to the present day. The organisation was established in the 1960s, during the PKI era."

The statement can be interpreted as evidence that the Babadan Mosque constitutes a space of contestation among religious community organisations and, more broadly, among competing ideological orientations. Over time, this contestation was institutionalised through IPIB, which has come to be regarded as capable of representing the Muslim identity of the Babadan community. IPIB therefore functions as a form of ideological stronghold and as a local actor with authority over the use and meaning of mosque space. This condition is consistent with Lefebvre's argument that space ultimately functions as a medium through which various forms of value and capital are accumulated. In the case of the Babadan Mosque, IPIB facilitates the accumulation of intangible rather than material capital. In particular, the successful development of mosque youth into socially recognised alums constitutes a form of social capital that strengthens IPIB's legitimacy as a representative institution of the Muslim community in Babadan. Thus, the mosque is not simply a place of worship but also a socially and politically produced space in which identity, authority, legitimacy, and community representation are continuously negotiated.

The Al-Huda Husainiyyah Mosque is located within the complex of the Iranian Islamic Cultural Center (ICC), situated in Pejaten, South Jakarta. The author first visited the site in 2013 and became interested in the uniqueness of the building and its functions. Established in 2002, the facility, according to Ustadz Abdullah Beik, the director of education at the ICC, functions less as a conventional mosque and more as a general religious centre or multifunctional space. It is used not only for congregational prayer but also as a centre for celebrating major religious occasions within the Shia Muslim tradition. Political and ideological values are embedded within the religious rituals and activities conducted at Husainiyyah. In this case, Husainiyyah, as a religious public space, is clearly the product of a process of spatialization rather than a neutral space. From the author's theoretical interpretation, the Al-Huda Husainiyyah Mosque functions, from the perspective of the Shia minority, as a space for the production and reproduction of Shia identity and ideology. Three interrelated dimensions influence this process.

First is the dimension of individual routines in the creation of systematic spatial arrangements. To support the function of Al-Huda Husainiyyah as a space for constructing Shia identity and consolidating its congregation, several supporting facilities have been established. These include a library containing a substantial collection of books on Shia studies and offices that function as

classrooms for studying the Persian language and Iranian culture. These facilities demonstrate that the mosque is embedded within a broader spatial system designed to sustain religious education, cultural transmission, and identity formation. Second is the representation of space and the role of knowledge in the production of space. As noted above, the Al-Huda Husainiyyah building is located within the Iranian Islamic Cultural Center. This institution forms part of the Iranian government's cultural and diplomatic mission in Indonesia. Because the space was developed under the influence of the Iranian government and placed under the leadership of the authoritative cleric Sayyid Muhammad Musawi, who originated from Iran, the author argues that political and ideological interests associated with Iran's presence in Indonesia played a role in the planning and development of Husainiyyah. In addition to the Iranian government's role as a technocratic actor in the development of the space, the physical and functional characteristics of Husainiyyah were also shaped by a specific body of religious and cultural knowledge.

This can first be observed in the physical architecture of the building, which strongly reflects the concept of Husainiyyah developed in Iran. The form of the mihrab, or prayer niche, for example, bears similarities to the architectural features of the shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad, Iran. Shia Muslims regard Imam Reza as the eighth Imam and a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. Second, the functional design of Husainiyyah in Jakarta is relatively similar to that of Husainiyyah institutions in Iran. Within the Shia tradition in Iran, Husainiyyah serves important social and religious functions, including hosting major religious celebrations, providing meeting spaces for discussing community issues, and supporting community empowerment through charitable activities such as *gharzolhasaneh*, a form of interest-free or microcredit lending for congregational economic activities. It also functions as a space for distributing food to congregants and people in need through the tradition of *nazri*. The knowledge embodied in the building's physical design and institutional functions, which were introduced through the Iranian government's involvement and implemented within Al-Huda Husainiyyah, consequently produces a political space that represents Iranian culture and state presence. At the same time, the space functions as a centre for the formation and consolidation of Shia ideology and identity among Shia communities in Indonesia, particularly in Jakarta.

The final dimension concerns the experience of collective space. As a political product, Al-Huda Husainiyyah has also become a space of contestation between two religious organisations that each claim to represent the Shia minority in Indonesia. Two major organisations are particularly relevant in this context: the Ikatan Jamaah Ahlul Bait Indonesia (IJABI), led by Dr Jalaluddin Rakhmat, and Ahlul Bait Indonesia (ABI), led by Ahmad Hidayat and Hasan Alaydrus. Although both organisations share the objective of advocating for the rights and social position of the Shia minority as Indonesian citizens, they have also regarded one another as competitors in several respects. From a Lefebvrian perspective, this rivalry has contributed to the use of Al-Huda Husainiyyah as a space through which ABI represents itself as an authoritative and legitimate socio-religious movement, both in the eyes of the Iranian government and within the broader Shia minority community. If Lefebvre's concept of spatial

accumulation is understood as the use of space to accumulate various forms of capital, then in this context Al-Huda Husainiyyah functions as a means of accumulating religious capital and congregational support rather than direct financial profit. Religious activities and celebrations are conducted openly and are not necessarily exclusive to established members of a particular organisation. This openness allows the space to attract potential new members and expand its religious community. Consequently, Husainiyyah operates simultaneously as a religious centre, a site of identity formation, and a contested political space in which authority, legitimacy, and religious influence are continuously negotiated.

As the capital of East Java and one of the regions where Nahdlatul Ulama has historically maintained a strong presence, Surabaya is also home to a minority Ahmadiyya community. One of the centres of Ahmadiyya activities is the An-Nur Mosque, located in Bubutan, North Surabaya. Historically, the mosque is among the older mosques in Surabaya and has a significant political history. About the history of the mosque before 1960, the author acknowledges that the account presented here is based primarily on secondary information obtained from the official website of the Indonesian Ahmadiyya Congregation (JAI), which has been paraphrased for this discussion. According to the available historical account, after the Ahmadiyya movement had developed for a considerable period following the arrival of an Indian missionary, Abdul Ghafoor, who began preaching Ahmadiyya teachings in the local community in 1926, the need for a dedicated prayer space became increasingly apparent. After moving between several locations and experiencing displacement during the Japanese occupation, the community eventually received permission from the Surabaya municipal government in 1943 to use a plot of land as a mosque. The Ahmadiyya community used this opportunity to establish the Al-Noer Mosque, later standardised as An-Nur Mosque. The building consisted of a main prayer hall, a library, and a room for the Imaillah committee, an organisational wing of the Ahmadiyya women's movement.

According to the same source, during the Japanese occupation, the treatment of the Ahmadiyya community was highly intimidating. The An-Nur Mosque played an important role as a centre for religious propagation and as a place of refuge for Ahmadiyya community members facing the threat of persecution, with protection reportedly provided by a religious figure named Maulana Abdul Wahid. Following the Indonesian independence revolution, the mosque returned to its original function as a centre for religious propagation through educational activities. From a broader social perspective, it is noteworthy that the An-Nur Mosque is situated within a neighbourhood predominantly inhabited by members of the Nahdliyyin community. Nevertheless, the presence of the mosque did not initially generate significant conflict within the wider community. This situation changed during the wave of anti-Ahmadiyya riots that occurred in 2011, which began in West Java and coincided with broader national controversy surrounding the Joint Decree of Three Ministers concerning the Ahmadiyya community. Ahmadiyya communities and mosques in Surabaya were also affected. As the primary centre of Ahmadiyya activities in the city, the An-Nur Mosque was temporarily forced to close. Its signboard was removed, and the mosque was placed under official security protection following threats of attack

from radical mass organisations. After anti-Ahmadiyya sentiment gradually subsided, the An-Nur Mosque resumed its activities. The mosque now functions as a medium for developing a more socially oriented and sympathetic approach to community engagement. For example, when the East Java Ahmadiyya community organised the “Tolerance Blood Donation” event in collaboration with the Sapta Dharma Believers community, the Interfaith Harmony Forum (FKUB), the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI), and the Indonesian National Police (Polri), the An-Nur Mosque served as the central venue for the activity. The An-Nur Mosque can be analysed from a Lefebvrian perspective through the following three dimensions.

The An-Nur Mosque emerged from the individual and collective efforts of figures such as Abdul Ghafoor and Maulana Malik Aziz Ahmad Khan, who influenced local Ahmadiyya followers to establish a dedicated mosque for religious activities and the teaching of Ahmadiyya doctrine. These efforts were successful partly because Mangkoe Wisastro, who served as the community leader at the time, was willing to donate land where he lived for the establishment of the mosque. Through this process, the mosque emerged as a public space produced through the interaction between individual initiative, religious mobilisation, and the needs of a minority community. Historically, the An-Nur Mosque has functioned as a spatial representation of Ahmadiyya identity. Its formation cannot be separated from processes of negotiation and political intervention. This is evident in the way the Japanese military initially adopted a repressive approach towards the Ahmadiyya community, which was perceived as potentially threatening to the stability of the occupation regime. Public spaces, including simple mosques belonging to minority communities, were confiscated and used for military purposes. Subsequently, negotiations between Ahmadiyya community members and the Surabaya municipal government resulted in permission to use a plot of leased land for the establishment of the An-Nur Mosque.

Nevertheless, the production of this space continued to be subject to political intervention by the Japanese occupation authorities, particularly through restrictions on the activities that could be conducted within the mosque. Thus, the history of An-Nur demonstrates that the production of religious space is not simply a matter of religious need but is also shaped by political power, negotiation, and the regulation of minority religious practices. As a public space that is not neutral and is deeply connected to the interests of the Ahmadiyya community, the An-Nur Mosque functions as a site for reproducing knowledge concerning the teachings of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. At the same time, the mosque constitutes a space of contestation and a site for accumulating both tangible and intangible forms of capital. Tangible capital can be understood in terms of congregational growth, while intangible capital includes reputation, legitimacy, and social recognition.

One significant contestation emerged when the mosque became the physical representation of Ahmadiyya activities and was targeted by fundamentalist organisations seeking its closure in 2011. The conflict demonstrated how religious space can become a site where competing claims to religious legitimacy and public authority are articulated. At the same time, the An-Nur Mosque has also

constructed an alternative collective representation of the Ahmadiyya community as tolerant and integrated within Indonesian society. This representation became visible when the mosque hosted the blood donation event involving Ahmadiyya community members, civil society organisations, interfaith groups, and state institutions. By engaging minority religious groups, civil society organisations such as Friends of KBB, and government institutions, the Ahmadiyya community sought to demonstrate that the An-Nur Mosque is open to different groups and is not an exclusive religious space. From the author's perspective, such practices can also be understood as a strategy for accumulating both tangible and intangible forms of capital. Tangible capital may take the form of potential new congregants who become interested in learning about Ahmadiyya through direct interaction with the community. Meanwhile, intangible capital is accumulated through the development of a positive public reputation and the strengthening of social legitimacy. Therefore, the An-Nur Mosque represents more than a site of religious worship. It is a socially produced and politically contested space in which the Ahmadiyya community negotiates its identity, legitimacy, public presence, and relationship with the broader Indonesian society.

## **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates that mosques cannot be understood as politically neutral or exclusively sacred spaces detached from social and political relations, as their meanings are continuously produced, negotiated, and contested through religious practices, collective identities, spatial representations, and power relations. The three cases reveal distinct but interconnected forms of the politics of religious space. Pathok Negoro Mosque functions as a space where religious traditions, historical memory, and local cultural identity intersect and are reproduced. Husainiyah Jakarta operates as a space for sustaining Shia religious identity and collective belonging amid broader contestations over religious difference and recognition while An-Nur Mosque represents a contested space in which Ahmadiyya identity, social legitimacy, and the right to occupy and define religious space are continuously negotiated in relation to dominant religious narratives and external perceptions. Comparatively, these cases demonstrate that the political character of mosque spaces does not necessarily emerge through explicit political mobilization or electoral activity but also operates through everyday spatial practices, the construction of religious boundaries, the reproduction of collective identities, and the classification of religious spaces as neutral, moderate, or extreme. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space, this study contributes theoretically by extending the politics of space into the analysis of religious spaces and demonstrating how spatial practices, representations of space, and representational spaces interact in producing the political meanings of mosques. Spatial practices reproduce everyday religious routines and collective identities, representations of space reflect institutional, state, and societal classifications of religious communities, while representational spaces embody lived experiences, memories, and struggles for recognition. Thus, the study moves beyond the general claim that mosques are not politically neutral by demonstrating how their political character is actively produced through the interaction of lived religious experiences, spatial

representations, identity formation, and relations of power. The findings further suggest that the boundaries between sacred and secular, religious and political, and neutral and contested spaces are not naturally fixed but are socially and politically constructed. By applying Lefebvre's framework to religious spaces in Indonesia, this study expands the analytical scope of the politics of space beyond conventional urban and secular contexts. It offers a more nuanced understanding of how religion, space, identity, and power are mutually constituted through everyday spatial processes.

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