

Religion, Environment, and Politics: An Eco-critical Discourse Analysis of NU and Muhammadiyah's Support for Indonesia's Forthcoming Capital Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN)

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ABSTRACT

State-led mega-development projects in ecologically sensitive regions increasingly depend on religious institutional endorsement to secure public legitimacy. This article examines how Indonesia's two largest Islamic mass organisations, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah, discursively mediate the legitimisation of *Ibu Kota Nusantara* (IKN), the government's controversial new capital city project in East Kalimantan, despite documented ecological risks including deforestation, biodiversity loss, and indigenous community displacement. The study adopted an eco-critical discourse analysis (eco-CDA) framework, combining the three-dimensional model of Norman Fairclough with the eco-linguistic techniques of Arran Stibbe. It analysed public discourse from national, regional, and organisational actors in the period 2022–2024. The results show that both

organisations are discursive brokers that diffuse environmental opposition through different but complementary strategies of legitimisation. NU sacralises growth, using religious imagery to frame IKN as a spiritual duty. This leads to *pseudo-sustainability*, when green language acts as a moral sanction rather than an ecological critique. Muhammadiyah applies a procedural-pragmatic strategy that contextualises the encounter in terms of institutional expansion. This is demonstrated by passive *eco-silence*, the systematic discursive absence of ecological discourse. These findings help explain when

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religious civil society organisations are vehicles of hegemonic developmental normalisation and when they are champions of ecological accountability.

Keywords: Eco-critical discourse analysis, eco-silence, Ibu Kota Nusantara, Muhammadiyah, Nahdlatul Ulama, pseudo-sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The tension between state-led developmentalism and environmental sustainability has become one of the key themes of twenty-first century politics around the globe, especially in the light of growing concerns with the climate crisis. The way in which this contestation is articulated, legitimised and disputed in public discourse influences which narratives ultimately dominate and whose interests are ultimately fulfilled (Kim & Thurbon, 2015; Zhouri, 2010). In this dynamic, the importance of religious institutions in framing development narratives has become particularly significant, especially in the Global South, where faith-based actors operate at an unusual nexus of moral authority and political power – a nexus where they emerge as central actors in public discourses about national development paths and their attendant costs (Epley, 2004; Karaçuka, 2018). Thus, the way they respond to either critical independence in such circumstances or loyalty to states' development ambitions has actual consequences for populations directly touched by their outcomes and at-risk ecosystems, and civil society itself.

This question is particularly pertinent in Indonesia, a developing country which,

as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy, has seen Islamic organisations historically at the centre of negotiating state power, public morality, and national identity (Hefner, 2000; van Bruinessen, 2013). In 2022, the government announced its most ambitious infrastructure project to move its capital from Jakarta to a brand-new city in one of the greenest regencies, Penajam Paser Utara Regency (East Kalimantan), called Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN). This USD 33 billion mega-project, legalised under Law Number 3 of 2022, is expected to accommodate a new capital city and administrative centre over an area of roughly 256,000 hectares (Chaniago & Siregar, 2025), much of it within or at least adjacent to ecologically sensitive forest functioning zones (Arfiansyah et al., 2024).

The government has set IKN in a sustainability and spatial equity, with 75 percent of its total territory designated as a conservation area. On top of that, several markers are deployed, such as '*kota hijau*' (green city) and 'smart city' as part of Indonesia's vision (Widodo, 2022). However, this official framing has been met with strong opposition from scientists and civil society organisations worried about the deforestation, biodiversity loss, displacement of indigenous peoples, and

poor environmental impact assessments done before project approval (Handyastono et al., 2025; Ridwanuddin, 2024; Wijaya et al., 2025). The gap between the government's green narrative and ecological reality has created a deficit of legitimacy, which the state has to cover to keep the public order intact. In other aspects of governance, the state has a commendable record in co-opting religious authority, mainly Islamic ones, to fill such vacancies amid the enhancement of political stability and socio-economic advancement (Arifianto, 2021; Metera, 2021; Setiawan et al., 2025).

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah are undoubtedly the main actors in this dynamic. With a combined following of roughly 150 million people (CNBC Indonesia, 2024), they wield a level of influence beyond the spiritual sphere as stewards over massive networks of educational, health, and social institutions at nearly every level of society. Throughout much of Indonesia's post-colonial political history, they have negotiated the balance between institutional autonomy from the state and cooperation in ways that have shaped both the religious landscape within Indonesian politics as well as their broader political culture. Whether in response to state-led development and service delivery plans or more significant national policy initiatives, their responses as pivotal civil society actors have mattered by influencing people's opinions on pressing issues and mediating relations between the citizenry and the state, while framing the vocabulary through which contentious political questions are debated (Al-Ansi &

Kartono, 2023). This positions them as, from the perspective of state actors, extremely valuable legitimising partners and, from an analytical point of view, especially suited subjects for exploring how religious and developmental discourse condition each other.

In the case of IKN, both NU and Muhammadiyah have publicly issued statements that are broadly in line with the government's developmental agenda (CNN Indonesia, 2024; Kompas.com, 2024). Such broader support raises significant questions about the role of religious endorsement in an environmentally contentious mega-project, beginning with the fact that both organisations have ecological programmes and theological mandates to protect nature. NU using its *bahtsul masā'il* (legal deliberation) mechanism for environmental matters, and Muhammadiyah through its *Majelis Lingkungan Hidup* (Council on the Environment) (Harimurti & Alam, 2024; Mufid, 2020). By virtue of the Islam-based environmental advocacy both organisations are committed to, they should be critical of big development projects that threaten ecosystems. Nevertheless, this affiliation means little at best. Because on the other hand, proximity to the state offers material incentives and infrastructural support that can strengthen their institutional assets (Arifianto, 2021). The tension between a theological mandate for environmental advocacy and institutional pragmatism makes the public discourse on NU and Muhammadiyah on IKN an urgent object of study.

Departing from this importance, this study investigates the discursive mechanisms through which NU and Muhammadiyah mediate the legitimisation of the IKN project, particularly along its ecological dimension. Whilst previous studies have frequently analysed both organisations through the perspective of political alignment or institutional pragmatism (Al-Ansi & Kartono, 2023; Al-Hamdi, 2022; Arifianto, 2024; Bush, 2009), systematic examination of how their public language addresses—or fails to address—the material ecological risks of state-led development remains lacking. By applying eco-critical discourse analysis (eco-CDA), integrating Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional framework with Arran Stibbe's (2015) ecolinguistic tools, this study examines how NU and Muhammadiyah's discourse on IKN constructs, appropriates, and forecloses ecological meaning across the dimensions of textual analysis, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice. The analysis of this study focuses on the specific linguistic strategies instrumentalised to translate the technical and often contested objectives of IKN into registers that resonate with religious publics. It then explores the extent to which these narratives privilege ecological preservation or, conversely, facilitate its marginalisation.

This article contends that NU and Muhammadiyah serve as discursive brokers in alleviating the effects of environmental opposition through two distinct forms of legitimation. NU uses a method of sacralised growth, with religious analogies

framing the capital's move as a spiritual and civilisational duty. This leads to a kind of pseudo-sustainability when the green language is used for moral affirmation rather than critical analysis. Meanwhile, Muhammadiyah has a procedural-pragmatic mode as it frames its participation as an expansion of Islamic institutions and social service channels. Here, eco-silence is actively played out in a pattern that silences environmental consequences in the interest of the organisation. Overall, these findings reveal the conditions under which faith-based organisations with high levels of organisational autonomy and moral authority become agents of hegemony rather than ecologically accountable advocacy. It delivers profound implications for both discourse studies and prospects for environmentally just development in Indonesia and elsewhere.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. The next section is a literature review of the use of religion to justify environmental sustainability in large-scale development projects. After that, we offer a conceptual framework including operational definitions and theoretical implications for both pseudo-sustainability and eco-silence. It is followed by a section on research methodology, which describes the research design and data sources used, in addition to other aspects of analytical methods. The results and discussion section is divided into three sub-sections based on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework. The article concludes with a summary and the broader theoretical and empirical implications of

the findings, while also addressing research limitations to provide directions for future study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly engagement with religion and ecology has grown rapidly since the late twentieth century, driven in large part by White's (1967) provocative thesis that Judaeo-Christian anthropocentrism bears historical responsibility for the global ecological crisis. Some scholars have supported White's thesis by demonstrating how certain theological themes can impede environmental understanding and mobilisation (Taylor et al., 2016). Subsequent research, however, has overwhelmingly shown that virtually all major world religious traditions contain doctrinal and ethical resources supportive of environmental stewardship, giving rise to the 'greening of religion' or a broad movement within religious institutions towards ecological awareness, environmental ethics, and green advocacy (Gottlieb, 2006; Jenkins & Chapple, 2011; Koehrsen, 2018; Narayanan, 2013). Drawing on some or all of these commitments, a growing number of both global and local religious leaders have sought to play a more prominent role in promoting ecologically responsible lifestyles among their followers and organisations and in mobilising them in support of progressive ecological movements (Guth et al., 1995; Ives et al., 2024).

In contemporary environmental theology, religious organisations are important institutions that help promote

sustainability narratives. They have considerable power to influence public opinion and the course of environmental policy, due to their large social networks, relatively high levels of public credibility, and committed membership (Guth et al., 1995; Koehrsen & Ives, 2025; Tarakeshwar et al., 2001). But such mobilisation is not always even or real. The literature on greening religion reveals considerable tensions, which suggests that the presence of ecological theology does not inevitably translate into political activism. Particularly, when religious groups are embedded into larger political and economic systems. In global developmentalism, states are increasingly seeking moral capital from religious organisations as a way of alleviating social costs of modernisation, implying that green religious narratives are employed as symbolic endorsement for state agendas under increased ecological scrutiny (Koehrsen, 2018; Tomalin, 2024). In such cases, religious organisations provide moral validity to efforts which would probably be strongly opposed if they were presented only in secular terms.

This phenomenon is well documented in Indonesia, for instance, in the form of its manifestation on issues such as palm oil production (land use change-related) or large infrastructure projects such as mining concessions or toll road beneficiaries (Gritten & Saastamoinen, 2010; Wicaksana, 2021). These studies illustrate the way the state employs sophisticated discursive strategies to repress dissent, including the strategic use of sustainability rhetoric, the mobilisation

of religious and community identities, and the framing of environmental opponents as obstacles to national development. Religious institutions are considered a significant resource in the construction of ideological consent, in the Gramscian conception of hegemony. In this, it generates a multi-layered bargaining space where the two fiercely contest the state trying to exploit this terrain, and the state attaches or mobilises through religious organisations where the latter strategically follow their institutional interests (Arifianto, 2021). This makes this contact a dynamic and participatory accommodation and discursive translation, not a one-directional co-optation.

NU and Muhammadiyah are the main actors in this link. Founded in 1926 on a traditionalist basis, NU is known for its strong grassroots base in rural areas through its pesantren network, and for its active historical relationship with state authority. That kind of nature has often been organisationally advantageous, but also a trial of its institutional autonomy (Bush, 2009). Muhammadiyah, established in 1912 as a modernist reform movement, is distinguished by its focus on rational discourse, its vast network of educational and social welfare institutions, and its more independent organisational position from direct political affiliations. However, its independence has not stopped pragmatic interactions with state actors when institutional interests necessitated such engagement (Burhani, 2018). Both of them hold significant social and moral capital, serving not just as religious authority but also as essential social intermediaries that

can validate or contest national political power. Compared to other civil society organisations, whether religious or secular, only NU and Muhammadiyah are sufficiently equipped to mobilise community-level networks for legitimising large-scale development in Indonesia.

The IKN mega-project is no different. The government has sought both symbolic and institutional support from the two, making efforts to normalise it. It has produced an intricate discursive space where moral principles and developmentalist goals are permanently debated in everything. Unfortunately, while it has been demonstrated that both NU and Muhammadiyah have the theological assets to be environmental advocates (Harimurti & Alam, 2024; Mufid, 2020), and this has included documenting both the ecological and discursive-political threats posed by the IKN project (Handyastono et al., 2025; Wijaya et al., 2025), no research has systematically compared how these two large organisations discursively construct their positions on IKN, how they include or exclude ecology from those positions, nor what differences in their respective discursive constructions reveal concerning the relationship between religious authority, state power and environmental governance in Indonesia more broadly. This lack is telling, not just in Indonesian studies but comparative religion, development and ecology at large since Indonesia is the world's largest Muslim-majority.

This study aims to fill that gap by using an integrated eco-critical discourse analysis

(eco-CDA) framework on the discourses of IKN from NU and Muhammadiyah. The study proposes ways to theorise *pseudo-sustainability* and *eco-silence* as critical analytical devices that are able to account for the different but mutually reinforcing mechanisms by which ecological critique is absent from discourse. The first key concept, pseudo-sustainability, is defined as a discursive formation where language congruent with the ideal of sustainability is used to give legitimacy and social currency to an intrinsically unsustainable development project, while tangible ecological risks are largely ignored (Kopnina & Bedford, 2024). This research reveals *pseudo-sustainability* through three conspicuous markers: the employment of sustainability discourse in official language, the muffled discussion of ecological hazards in recorded history, and the cooptation of environmental discourse to moral or symbolic ends of national growth.

Meanwhile, *eco-silence* is the systematic lack of ecological discourse in discursive structures that have the institutional authority to express such issues. Conceptually, it differs from pseudo-sustainability, which implies the non-substantial use of green jargon; *eco-silence* refers to a state in which the environmental components of a project become discursively invisible. The idea is based on general notions of absence and silencing in critical discourse studies (Verschuere, 2012). In addition, political ecology's concern with whose voices are systematically excluded from dominant development discourses (Forsyth, 2003).

In this view, *eco-silence* is not neutral but a form of tacit assent to state developmental priorities. Its formation is marked by distinct discursive mechanisms that this study seeks to explore.

This research identifies subtle strategies of legitimation, or other techniques that can be characterised as an institutionalized form which produces legitimacy and even goes beyond it with *pseudo-sustainability* and *eco-silence*. It becomes a religious authority to domesticate ecological contentiousness technocratic goals and brings to life new ways of conceptualising religious organisations as discursive brokers. Such as mediators that are able to translate ecological trade-offs into moral or rational imperatives that gain public traction. Accordingly, this study not only offers a fresh perspective on how developmentalist hegemony is reproduced across the Global South, but also a critical lexicon for analysing how environmental dangers are often discursively sidelined in public discourse.

METHODS

We employ a qualitative design through eco-critical discourse analysis (eco-CDA) that is curated from Norman Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model and Arran Stubbe's (2015) integrative ecolinguistic framework. The model developed by Fairclough offers essential resources for questioning the power, ideology, and hegemonic relations that are inscribed in the texts. It is operationalised at three levels, namely the textual level which attends to

particular features of language at a micro-level such as lexical choice, metaphor, syntactic structure and rhetorical strategy; the discursive practice level which examines meso processes by which discourse is produced, distributed and consumed across institutions and media channels; and finally the sociocultural practice level whereby discursive formations are placed within wider macroscopic structures of power/ideology/historical context that shape what can be said, by whom, and with what kinds of legitimising force. This structural framework is conditioned through the ecolinguistics of Stibbe (2015), which structures a methodological way to assess discourse ecologically to critically analyse linguistic features that both aid and prevent more sustainable relations between humans and the rest of nature integrated in one viewpoint. This articulation of both frameworks allows the study to elucidate how the master narrative of sustainability used by NU and Muhammadiyah is thus reeking with legitimising IKN while sidelining other voices.

The data gathering strategy is founded on a purposive technique. The unit of analysis is the discursive statement, which includes text segments ranging from clauses to paragraphs that perform recognisable legitimising, ecological or ideological functions. The research corpus is public speech produced by or related with NU and Muhammadiyah in the period of January 2022 – December 2024. The time span was selected as it includes the phase of most intense public debate, from the enactment of

Law Number 3 of 2022 on the State Capital to the end of President Joko Widodo's term, when public legitimisation efforts for the IKN project were most aggressively pursued. The selection procedure yielded a full set of primary and secondary texts. Their distribution and categorisation are outlined in Table 1.

Data selection was limited to the strict application of four criteria for scientific analytical rigour. First, the source must publicly be referenced to NU or Muhammadiyah figures, both on a national or regional level. Second, the text needs to explicitly address the IKN project in terms of contextualisation related to institutional orientation. Third, texts released via readily available avenues should have been notified as a means of assuring discursive reach. Fourth, texts must pertain to the core thematic dimensions of the research: development justification, ecological framing, religious legitimation and national identity. All texts were examined in their original language (Indonesian) so as not to lose any of the semantic and rhetorical meanings of religious-specific lexicon or organisational usages, with the English translations created by the researcher for this paper's purpose only. From the perspective of an institutional hierarchy and those actual individuals who contribute to public narrative, Table 2 shows a detailed overview for key stakeholders identified from both organisations.

The analytical approach was conducted in three consecutive yet iterative stages according to the model of Fairclough and guided all along by the tools of

Table 1

Summary of the research data corpus (January 2022–December 2024)

Organisation	Type	Platform/Medium	Category	Total Texts (n)
Nahdlatul Ulama	News article, podcast/video, organisational editorial, official statement	<i>Swara NU</i> (YouTube), <i>TVNU Televisi Nahdlatul Ulama</i> (YouTube), <i>NU Online</i> , <i>NU Kaltim</i>	Organisational platform	4
		<i>Kompas</i> , <i>Viva</i> , <i>CNN Indonesia</i> , <i>CNBC Indonesia</i> , <i>Kumparan News</i> , <i>Okezone</i>	National mainstream media	8
		Tribun Kaltim Official	Regional media	2
Muhammadiyah	News article, organisational article, institutional press release, campus-affiliated statement	<i>Muhammadiyah</i> , <i>Suara Muhammadiyah</i> , <i>Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta</i> , <i>Kabar Muhammadiyah</i> (Instagram)	Organisational platform	4
		<i>Rakyat Merdeka</i> , <i>CNN Indonesia</i> , <i>Pontas</i> , <i>Antara News</i> , <i>TVRI</i> (YouTube)	National mainstream media	6
		<i>Tribun Kaltim Official</i> , <i>Suara Jogja</i>	Regional media	2
		<i>Sekretariat Presiden</i>	State official media	1
Total Corpus				27

ecolinguistics of Stibbe. The first phase, textual analysis, focused on micro-linguistic characteristics, such as the metaphorical registers informing IKN and the syntactic structures encoding authority and spiritual obligation. The second stage, the analysis of discursive practices, turned the attention to the institutional conditions of text production and the distribution of discourse to Muslim audiences. The third step of sociocultural practice analysis

contextualised the discursive patterns observed in the previous stages within the macro-level setting of state-religion interactions in Indonesia and the prevailing ideology of developmentalism. Analytical categories were constructed abductively. Initial coding was theoretically informed; the notions of *pseudo-sustainability* and *eco-silence* were further refined by continuous and iterative interaction with the obtained material.

Table 2
Actors identified as producing discourse

Organisation	Category	Actor	Total Actors (n)
Nahdlatul Ulama	National leadership	Yahya Cholil Staqf (General Chair), Yaqut Cholil Qoumas (Minister of Religious Affairs)	2
	Institutional representatives	Myrna Safitri (Deputy for Environment and Natural Resources of the IKN Authority)	1
	Regional leadership	Muhammad Askin Bahar (Chairman of the Kutai Kartanegara Branch Board)	1
Muhammadiyah	National leadership	Haedar Nashir (General Chair), Abdul Mu'ti (General Secretary)	2
	Regional/youth leadership	Mariman Darto (PWM Kalimantan Timur), Edi Rahman (Chairman of the Muhammadiyah Youth Association for Kutai Kartanegara Regency), Yamin Hadi Firmadi (Chairman of the Kutai Kartanegara Regional Board), Afandi (Chairman of the North Kalimantan Muhammadiyah Youth Association)	4
	Academic figures	Ma'mun Murod Al-Barbasy (Rector of Universitas Muhammadiyah Jakarta), Muhamad Yusuf (Rector of Universitas Muhammadiyah Palangkaraya)	2
Total Corpus			12

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sacralising Development and Rationalising Participation

This section presents the textual analysis (micro-level) of NU and Muhammadiyah's public discourse in turn. With regard to dominant metaphors and lexical choices, NU's vocabulary is saturated with religious-spiritual framing. Participation in sustainable development is construed as '*bagian dari ibadah*' (part of worship) (Swara, 2023), IKN is positioned as an arena for '*membangun peradaban*' (building civilisation) (Kompas.tv, 2022), and the Nusantara acronym is reinterpreted as '*NU, Santri, Pemerintah, Rakyat*' (NU,

Santri, Government, People) to encode institutional identity (Okezone, 2022)—thereby transforming a state geographical designation into an organisational claim of presence. Expressions such as '*tuntutan spiritual*' (spiritual responsibility) further immerse IKN in a moral-religious teleology where involvement in the project is an expression of Islamic commitment rather than political choice. At the dominant narrative level, the discourse of NU constructs a very affirmative and optimistic image of IKN by liberally utilizing state promotional vocabulary such as '*kota hijau*' (green city), '*smart city*', '*ramah lingkungan*' (eco-friendly), '*kota 10 menit*'

(10-minute city), *'ekowisata'* (ecotourism), and *'kota layak huni'* (livable city) (Swara, 2023). These emerge in NU's messages regularly, without critical elaboration or independent evidential underpinning. The cumulative impact is one of narrative convergence: NU's view of IKN is, in its broad outlines, the state's vision of IKN rendered in a religious and organisational idiom.

Thus, the sacralisation and moral-spiritual authorisation are the main modes of legitimisation of NU. It combines the creation of IKN with Islamic worship and morals, making political backing a spiritual requirement and participation in—and by extension criticism of—the project a religious, not political, concern. A syntactic structure with imperative, authoritative and collectivist grammatical orientations is also reinforcing this discursive technique. Expressions such as *'Jangan termakan hoaks'* (Don't be taken in by hoaxes) (Swara, 2023, 23.30–23.35), *'Sampeyan mau jadi pecundang selama-lamanya?'* (Want to be a loser for life?) (KumparanNews, 2023; CNN Indonesia, 2024), and *'PBNU mohon izin untuk ikut menempati IKN'* (PBNU wants permission to occupy IKN) (NU Online, 2022) collectively enact a discursive authority that speaks on behalf of a collective moral community, delegitimising dissent and positioning organisational participation as a shared obligation. The imperative mood, in particular, performs a closure function, framing the appropriate response as already determined and thereby foreclosing deliberative space.

The lexical register of Muhammadiyah, on the other hand, is a rational–technocratic vocabulary. It includes terms like *'rasional'* (rational), *'objektif'* (objective), *'konstruktif'* (constructive), and in combination with their previous value dichotomy, such as, *'kontribusi nasional'* (national contribution) and *'amal usaha'* (charitable ventures) (Muhammadiyah, 2024; RM.id, 2023; Suara Jogja, 2024), framing the organisation as a deliberative civic actor who assesses IKN by institutional rather than spiritual criteria. In this way, NU's language works affectively as a matter of religious identity and obligation, whilst that of Muhammadiyah is procedural signalling organisational independence and discipline. As such, the dominant narrative among Muhammadiyah is one of rational vigilance. Phrasings like *'faktor kompleks'* (complex factors), *'pertimbangan strategis'* (strategic consideration), and *'pertimbangan hati-hati'* (careful consideration) repeatedly repackage IKN not as something that is settled, but just as a moral commitment that needs prolonged deliberation (CNN Indonesia, 2022; Muhammadiyah, 2024). This narrative stance places Muhammadiyah not as a reluctant but an unreceptive interlocutor, which can deny or untie endorsement from the basis of institutional pragmatism.

Muhammadiyah's syntactic register similarly tends towards the declarative and evaluative. They also risk an opening syntax that implicitly insists on institutional positions in constructions like *'memanfaatkan peluang'* (utilising the opportunity); *'tidak terikat dengan*

kedudukan ibu kota negara (not bound by the location of the state capital); *memerlukan pertimbangan strategis* (requires strategic consideration) or *berdasarkan Anggaran Dasar Muhammadiyah* (based on Muhammadiyah's Articles of Association) (CNN Indonesia, 2022; Suara Jogja, 2024). These proclamations do not rule out further deliberation as they merely ground organisational action in procedural authority rather than moral imperative. This grammatical restraint may be read as a legitimisation strategy that performs the rationality and deliberativeness Muhammadiyah claims as organisational values. It is reinforced by the organisation's consistent emphasis on institutional process, statutory authority, and evidence-based deliberation—avoiding direct religious justification in favour of pragmatic arguments grounded in socio-economic benefit and organisational mandate. Thus, whilst NU's legitimisation sacralises the IKN mega-project, Muhammadiyah's tends instead to rationalise its own participation, a distinction that reflects not merely a difference in rhetorical preferences, but a fundamentally different conception of how a religious organisation ought to relate to state power. The comparison of linguistic and lexical strategies of both organisations is summarised in Table 3.

Organised Consensus and Cautious Engagement

NU's discourse of IKN is made in an almost centralised and elitist framework at the level of senior organisational leadership, directly formed by long-standing and high-intensity

interactions with state actors. Above all, the makings of NU's discourse on IKN are its key producers: the PBNU Chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf; Minister of Religious Affairs Yaqut Cholil Qoumas (Yaqut) and Myrna Safitri as members of IKN Authority that brings together authorities in both religious and state agencies. There are essentially two spheres crucial in shaping its contents and directions. This becomes apparent via three mechanisms of organisational opportunities, national mainstream media and regional media, the last in a much-reduced way. Distribution patterns suggest a top-down organisational model of communication in which messages produced by senior leadership are disseminated down the organisational hierarchy and via mass media, with few indications of dialogic or reciprocative conversation with rank-and-file members. Internally, the discourse takes place among and for NU members, while externally it addresses both the state and general public.

Muhammadiyah's discourse production, by contrast, is characterised by a semi-centralised structure that tends towards internal fragmentation—a condition that reflects, and partly constitutes, the organisation's deliberative institutional culture. A significant and analytically consequential divergence exists between the cautious, evaluative stance of central leadership figures such as Haedar Nashir and Abdul Mu'ti, and the more affirmative orientation of regional bodies such as PWM East Kalimantan and the Muhammadiyah Youth branch in Kutai Kartanegara.

Table 3
Comparison of linguistic/lexical strategies of NU and Muhammadiyah textual dimensions

Textual Aspect	Nahdlatul Ulama	Muhammadiyah
Metaphors and Key Vocabulary	Religious-spiritual: 'Worship protects the environment', 'Participate in building civilisation', 'Nusantara' as an acronym for NU, Santri, Government, People, 'Civilisation building', 'Spiritual duty'.	Rational-technocratic: 'Rational', 'Objective', 'Constructive', 'National contribution', 'Charitable act'.
Dominant Narrative	Affirmative optimism: 'Comfortable city', 'Green city', 'Smart city', 'Eco-friendly', '10-minute city', 'Ecotourism', 'Livable city', 'Restore and rehabilitate forests'.	Rational vigilance: 'Complex factors', 'Strategic evaluation', 'Careful consideration', 'No discussion yet', 'Institutional autonomy'.
Syntactic Structure	Imperative, authoritative, collective: 'Do not believe hoaxes about the IKN development', 'Do you want to be losers forever?', 'God willing, we will build educational and health facilities', 'PBNU asks permission to participate...'	Declarative, evaluative, cautious: 'Muhammadiyah is utilising the opportunity...', 'Muhammadiyah is not bound by the capital's location', 'Requires strategic consideration', 'Based on Muhammadiyah's Statutes'.
Legitimation Strategy	Sacralisation and moral-spiritual: Connecting the IKN development project with religious worship and morality, making participation a religious obligation (spiritual imperative).	Procedural rationalisation: Emphasises procedural and institutional aspects; avoids direct religious justification; uses pragmatic arguments based on socio-economic benefit.
Approach to Environmental Issues	Symbolic morality: 'Environmental protection as worship'. There is no analytically in-depth elaboration of negative ecological impacts.	Minimal pragmatic: Provides no specific elaboration on environmental issues; ecological concerns are sidelined in favour of a focus on business charity and institutional social contributions.
Response to Public Criticism	Delegitimising criticism through imperative and authoritative language: Criticism is framed as a hoax or a 'loser's attitude'.	Critical tolerance with a rational approach: Criticism is implicitly accepted through cautious and evaluative sentences, maintaining an institutional distance from the official state narrative.

Rather than a mere product of organisational inconsistency, this divergence more accurately reflects Muhammadiyah's statutory commitment to internal deliberation prior to the adoption of formal institutional positions. Discourse production is explicitly

referenced to organisational bylaws and internal decision-making procedures, such that no single actor—even at the level of central leadership—can unilaterally commit the organisation to a discursive position without the sanction of collective

deliberation. The result is a production process that is inherently evaluative and procedurally grounded, in contrast to NU’s more directive and authority-driven model.

A different model also applies to the distribution strategy of Muhammadiyah. It draws much more on organisational platforms, national mainstream media and a regionally larger share of media than is allocated to NU. Such a trend mirrors the decentralised nature of the organisation and its responsiveness to local regional contexts. With regard to consumption audiences, Muhammadiyah’s discourse is broadly directed at both internal and external registers, just as NU.

However, its orientation is not the same. It is internally narrated and addressed to Muhammadiyah cadres through a narrative of institutional contribution in the form of educational initiatives, charitable work and community empowerment programmes. It does so internally by encouraging individual Muhammadiyah members, especially educators, to take up leading roles in all aspects of the community. Externally, Muhammadiyah actors position themselves as a more critical partner to the state than other Muslim organisations (such as NU). In Table 4, we contrast how these texts were produced and consumed.

Table 4
Comparison of discursive dimensions of NU and Muhammadiyah support for IKN

Discursive Dimension	Nahdlatul Ulama	Muhammadiyah
Discourse Production	Centralised and elitist. Conducted by NU elites (Yahya Cholil Staquf, Myrna Safitri). Directly linked to intensive interaction with the state (the president, IKN Authority). Conducted in formal forums (istighatsah, presidential audiences, official forums).	Semi-centralised, tending towards fragmentation. Divided between a cautious central leadership (Haedar Nashir, Abdul Mu’ti) and more affirmative regional branches (PWM East Kalimantan, Muhammadiyah Youth). Rooted in the principles of the statutes and internal Muhammadiyah resolutions. Deliberative and evaluative.
Discourse Distribution	Utilises national mainstream media (<i>Kompas</i> , <i>Viva</i> , <i>CNN Indonesia</i> , <i>CNBC Indonesia</i> , <i>Kumparan News</i> , <i>Okezone</i>) and organisational platforms (<i>NU Online</i> , <i>Swara NU</i>). Top-down vertical communication model. Leverages symbolic momentum (religious holidays, religious forums). Predominantly symbolic and steeped in spirituality.	Utilises national (<i>Rakyat Merdeka</i> , <i>CNN Indonesia</i> , <i>Antara News</i>) and regional media channels (<i>Suara Jogja</i> , <i>Tribun Kaltim Official</i>). Semi-horizontal and educational distribution model. Based on rational and informative argumentation, devoid of explicit religious symbolism. Promotes public awareness regarding the urgency of education and social welfare.

Table 4 (continued)

Discursive Dimension	Nahdlatul Ulama	Muhammadiyah
Discourse Consumption	Internal: Aimed at NU members through religious symbolic narratives (worship, contribution to the ummah, civilisational building). External: Aimed at the public and the state to politically legitimise government projects, such as land acquisitions and sociopolitical investments.	Internal: Aimed at Muhammadiyah cadres with a narrative of institutional contributions to education, charity, and community empowerment. External: Positioned as a critical partner to the state, projecting an image of an independent yet constructive organisation focused on mitigating social and economic impacts.
Eco-CDA	Frames environmental issues within a religious symbolic structure ('environmental worship'). Fails to provide substantive criticism or ecological impact analysis. Establishes 'pseudo-sustainability' by using environmental terminology ('eco-friendly', 'green city') without in-depth discussion of the potential physical environmental impacts of the IKN project. Implicitly supports a state development agenda that may marginalise critical environmental voices.	Places environmental issues in a marginal or minimalist position. Lacks explicit ecological discourse critical of IKN's development. Ecological issues are eclipsed by considerations of institutional social benefits, such as the expansion of commercial charities, education, and healthcare. Indicates a form of 'passive eco-silence,' where the organisation indirectly contributes to the normalisation of the dominant development discourse without questioning ecological implications.
Relationship with the State and Political Agenda	Strong hegemonic alignment with the state. Participates in reproducing the state's dominant narrative within a religious and nationalist framework. Fully supports government projects explicitly and formally, without critical questioning.	Maintains a cautious institutional distance from the state. Not fully beholden to the state's agenda, yet open to limited collaboration that is institutionally advantageous. Avoids direct religious justification of state projects, opting for a pragmatic-rational approach when adopting a supportive stance.

The Sociocultural Praxis of NU and Muhammadiyah in IKN's Discourse

What do the NU and Muhammadiyah discourses reveal about the structural roles that religious authority, state power, developmentalist ideology, and environmental accountability play in contemporary Indonesia? No matter

how different at the micro and meso levels, they converge at the macro level. While operating from very different socio-cultural bases, both contribute to the entrenchment of a developmentalist paradigm that works systematically to disregard real ecological critique.

The deepest historical roots and the structural closeness of this organisation to the state is perhaps one of the most important fundamental sociocultural determinants of NU's discourse on IKN. It occupies a position at the nexus of religious authority and political power among many groups in Indonesia (Bush, 2009; van Bruinessen, 2013). Its position makes it a useful tool for the state, allowing controversial policies to be legitimised under its mantle; and yet this same position would leave it vulnerable, as perhaps a compromised actor when developmental interests favoured by the state cause stronger damages successively on communities and ecosystems where their members live. The state's use of NU as a 'discursive broker' in securing public consent for a mega-project around which substantial ecological and social contestation is likely to concentrate can be explained precisely because NU has been building its institutional identity on its proximity to power over decades. In this case, NU acts more as an institutional handmaiden to state developmentalism than a civil society actor independent from the state. It lends religious legitimacy to a project whose environmental costs have already been thoroughly documented by scientists, indigenous rights advocates and civil society organisations.

The legitimacy processes are best characterised as discursive sacralisation of secular-modernist language and claims about the state forms it should develop (and others that ought not be adopted), to an extent that technocratic discourse

can no longer sustain itself without being appropriated in religious and civilisational registers for moral authority. This is much more than lexical borrowing. It is a very subtle device where the semantic content of state language remains, but its ideological framing changes. Thus, development, far from being a mere political ideal, is framed as an expression of a spiritual imperative. Thus, NU speaks to its audience not as citizens asked to adopt a certain form of state policy, but as believers invited to labour in service of a God-willed civilisational charge. This is where forms of civil society are absorbed or at least co-opted by the order of governance, and the organisation instead presents a more sociocultural construction whose institutional interests and incentives become so intermingled with those of government that true independence becomes structurally elusive.

The limitation of intertextual strategies has ideological implications. By sacralising state developmental discourse, NU seems to foreclose the discursive space for any alternative possible intertextual connections to be established, especially those with environmental science, indigenous rights frameworks, or ecological theology (fiqh al-bi'ah). It might provide a serious theological critique of development as it has been understood by the state. For example, according to the concept of intertextual closure, alternative discourses in NU are at least not so much countered as rendered structurally impossible on account of NU's own strategies of discourse practices. Reading through Fairclough

(1995), the appropriation of phrases like 'green city', 'eco-friendly industry', and 'forest restoration and rehabilitation' never attains a level of critical scrutiny that could permit an absolutist separation between language and practice. This strategy allows NU to look good on environmental issues while avoiding engagement with real environmental data, a process we call *pseudo-sustainability*. It is not an outright denial of ecological wreckage but the embedding of environmental discourse into a representational system where immediate critique has structural impotence.

On the other hand, Muhammadiyah generally has a more subtle sociocultural position toward the state. Historically, it has kept a greater institutional distance from state power than NU by anchoring its public identity in the values of organisational autonomy, rational deliberation and civil independence (Al-Hamdi, 2022; Jung, 2014). In the case of the IKN where this history is explicit in terms of a political agenda resisting symbolic co-optation, Muhammadiyah's central leadership has set aside space for moral authority outside the bounds of state-development narrative. So the organisation emphasises procedural deliberation and community benefit over political allegiance. However, it is not independence as in "full autonomy," though. As shown by the more upbeat orientations of some branches and affiliated bodies of Muhammadiyah, the temptation of the IKN development pie is putting pressure on organisational coherence. This creates a socio-cultural tension between centre's caution and regional pragmatism.

Such a construction of modernist Islamic identity shapes Muhammadiyah's mode of legitimisation, which is rational-technocratic in nature. Here, rather than absorbing and sacralising state discourse as NU does, Muhammadiyah practises a type of selective intertextual appropriation. Further, bits and pieces of the state-developmental discourse are surreptitiously plucked out from their original context (like a symbol of nationhood or breaking the poverty cycle) and reset into an institutional backdrop particularly centred around Muhammadiyah's social mission on community service. As a consequence, the organisation neither adopts the overall state narrative nor declares itself in opposition; instead, it picks components—especially dimensions about social infrastructure and human development—that suit well with its own objectives and selectively reorganises them while remaining discursively distanced from many of the project's more expansive political/ideological horizons. Both central and regional figures exhibit this pattern, though the former are far more cautious and measured: the IKN mega-project is acknowledged and responded to, but only through the intertextual lens of *amal usaha*—Muhammadiyah's institutional tradition of philanthropic ventures. The state's civilisational and nationalistic rhetoric is absent from these formulations; what is reproduced instead are the developmental opportunities the project offers for the organisation's expansion in Kalimantan.

On the one hand, this intertextual position situates Muhammadiyah in a relation of neither inside nor outside the

dominant IKN narrative by engaging it within a framework of its own (institutional discourse). However, it also creates virtually complete detachment from environmental critiques. The way this organisation institutionalises philanthropic giving systematically marginalises environmental questions from its related discourse on IKN not through symbolic appropriation like NU, but through a form of issue prioritisation where ecology is neither mentioned nor addressed. This *eco-silence* is not a function of active repression, but the result of more structural inattention. While ecology might have been a possible

area for critique, it was blocked out as an institutional incentive or object of analysis, a credit to the organisation's identity and mission frameworks. As a result, concerns with the environment have not entered into its dialogue, even while the organisation has come to claim itself as potentially a key and institutional partner of the state. Thus, this silence is a lost structural possibility for religious civil society to take on the valuable ecological function that is otherwise so clearly blocked by the dominant developmentalist discourse of the state. Table 5 displays these macro-level differences.

Table 5
Comparison of NU and Muhammadiyah sociocultural analyses of IKN project support

Sociocultural Dimension	Nahdlatul Ulama	Muhammadiyah
State-Religion Relations	Close relationship with the state; integrated into the government's hegemonic strategy.	Maintains institutional distance; resists symbolic co-optation by the state.
Basis of Legitimacy	Moral-spiritual; religious symbols are utilised as tools for political legitimisation.	Rational-technocratic; legitimacy is secured through pragmatic institutional considerations.
Development Ideology Narratives	Modernist narrative imbued with religious symbols (civilisation, worship, progress of the <i>Ummah</i>).	Rational modernist narrative, prioritising institutional and educational social contributions.
Response to Environmental Criticism	Symbolic neglect via spiritual narratives (pseudo-sustainability).	Pragmatic neglect, lacking a substantial critique of environmental issues (eco-silence).
Role as a Civil Society Actor	Tends to legitimise the state, thereby diminishing its critical function.	Seeks to be a critical partner of the state; maintains independence and avoids the role of mere political legitimisation.
Construction of Organisational Identity	'Partner of civilisation'; religious, affirmative of government development policies.	Rational and cautious, employing a deliberative approach oriented towards long-term social transformation.

CONCLUSION

The study has uncovered a significant legitimacy gap, in which the material ecological threats of deforestation and biodiversity loss are highly challenging state discourses on IKN as a sustainable forest city. The findings show that NU and Muhammadiyah, the two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia and among the largest in the world, function as important 'discursive brokers' that bridge this gap by absorbing state developmentalism into religious and rational registers. We argue that while both organisations employ distinct modes of legitimisation, both effectively facilitate the marginalisation of ecological concerns in favour of accelerating national development. NU applies a mode of sacralised development resulting in pseudo-sustainability, while Muhammadiyah adopts a procedural-pragmatic mode that manifests as passive eco-silence. By absorbing the language of ecological sustainability into spiritual narratives or replacing it with institutional objectives, they—intentionally or otherwise—provide the moral and social capital necessary for the state to proceed amidst sporadic yet sharp ecological critiques.

Empirically, the study offers a systematic and comparative analysis of the ways in which Indonesia's two main Islamic groups engage with state-led development projects that are purportedly sustainable. This research maps the differences between the top-down spiritual consensus of NU and the decentralised rationalistic participation of Muhammadiyah. It gives a detailed

description of the variety in Islamic political discourse. We theoretically extend the horizon of eco-critical discourse analysis by operationalising *pseudo-sustainability* and *eco-silence* as two separate analytical categories. These ideas prompt academic debate beyond the truism that religion accompanies the state, toward more tangible indicators of how environmental rhetoric is employed or overlooked in the service of developmentalist hegemony. The framework outlines what kinds of discourse and activities might leverage religious power to reframe environmental trade-offs as necessity or responsibility.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study raises wider ethical questions about the degree to which religious institutions have a role in legitimising modes of state developmentalism that marginalise environmental concerns. That suggests the restricted political space of much of Indonesian civil society, where state-centred forms of developmental accommodation have pushed environmental issues and indigenous rights to a far corner. Instead, common sense may succumb to environmental care being swallowed up whole by economic nationalism, in which development triumphs over conservation. This calls for more nuanced syntheses of ecological effects, surrounding potential future projects on religious legitimation to shed light on environmental impacts as ceremonial icons versus meaningful eco-critical readings.

That is also the point of this work: to contribute to expanding the literature on faith-based environmental politics, particularly in an environment where religious narratives often feature state-led development.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The research is inherently public-facing, has a strong corpus bias, and contains no inside discussions or private opinions. Mediated materials allow for editorial framing of the content. National narratives ignore regional differences as well, especially among the affiliates of NU and Muhammadiyah. It calls for more in-depth research from the grassroots perspective, and whether or not rank-and-file members agree with or contest elite narratives, to provide a richer portrait of how religious communities enact environmental and development work. In such fashion, comparative research studies in different developing nations could also investigate whether or not patterns of pseudo-sustainability and eco-silence might be more widespread and universal.

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