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Nested Dependency: President Joko Widodo's Politics Strategy in Coopting Nahdlatul Ulama, 2014-2024

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Abstract

This article analyzes Joko Widodo (Jokowi)'s systematic strategy to incorporate Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—Indonesia's largest Islamic organization—into his efforts to ensure the stability of his presidency (2014–2024). Using Johannes Gerschewski's three-pillar framework of autocratic stability—legitimation, repression, and co-optation—adapted to Indonesia's democratic backsliding, this qualitative case study combines critical discourse analysis of presidential speeches and NU documents, process tracing of key political events, and interviews with two key informants familiar with NU–state relations. The findings identify three interconnected mechanisms. First, Jokowi used NU as a source of legitimacy by securing its institutional endorsements and framing NU as the embodiment of "moderate Islam," encouraging grassroots political passivity. Second, NU functioned as a tool of symbolic repression against opposition Islamic groups—FPI, HTI, and the 212 movement—through the reinforcement of the moderate–radical dichotomy, delegitimizing dissent without direct coercion. Third, Jokowi co-opted NU elites through political appointments and economic enticements, creating what this study terms "nested dependency," a multilayered form of dependence linking elite, organizational, and grassroots levels.

Keywords: Jokowi, Nahdlatul Ulama, de-politicization, nested dependency

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Introduction

The 2014 presidential election marked the beginning of Joko Widodo (Jokowi)'s systematic strategy to incorporate Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—Indonesia's largest civil Islamic organization—into efforts to shore up the stability of his regime. Jokowi secured public support from Said Aqil Siradj, General Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama's Executive Board (PBNU), which translated into organizational backing[2] for the then-president. This represented second time NU had provided quasi-formal endorsement for government since the organization's 1984 policy of distancing itself from political power (referred to as NU's "Return to the 1926 *Khittah* [Organizational Guided Principles]") and marked the starting point of a decade-long incorporation strategy.[3] Over time, this support evolved into unprecedented integration of NU elites into the state apparatus, including approximately twelve cabinet ministers with NU backgrounds, extensive representation in state-owned enterprises, and a 26,000-hectare coal mining concession granted to NU's business entity through Government Regulation No. 25 of 2024.[4] These developments represent the most systematic co-optation of a civil society organization by any Indonesian president, raising broader questions about government–civil society relations in procedural democracies. However, as this study shows, Jokowi's strategy was constrained by an inherent limitation: nested dependency proved temporally bounded by presidential incumbency. After Jokowi left office, NU recalibrated its alignment toward the new president, indicating that its accommodation reflects principled pragmatism rather than personal loyalty.

[2] Kompas.com 2014

[3] Support from Said Aqil for Jokowi in 2014 continued a pattern seen when Hasyim Muzadi backed Jusuf Kalla in 2009. However, neither represented a formal endorsement by NU, since both were personal elite initiatives rather than official organizational decisions, despite NU's post-1984 commitment to political non-partisanship under the "*Khittah* 1926." See NU Online 2009

[4] CNN Indonesia 2024

This pattern is not unique to Indonesia. Across Southeast Asia, leaders of democratic backsliding have similarly co-opted civil society for regime consolidation,[5] as seen in Thailand's military alliances with royalist networks and the Philippines' selective engagement with religious constituencies.[6] Yet Indonesia is distinctive given its status as the world's largest Muslim-majority democracy and NU's role as the region's most influential Islamic organization, making it a crucial case for understanding democratic erosion through civil society incorporation rather than overt repression.

While scholarship on democratic backsliding has focused primarily on institutional decline and the erosion of democratic checks and balances, it has paid less attention to how civil society can function as an active instrument of regime consolidation.[7] Studies of NU under Jokowi remain largely descriptive, lacking a theorization of incorporation mechanisms.[8] The central puzzle, therefore, is not only how Jokowi succeeded in positioning NU within his regime-stability efforts, but also what this reveals about the mechanisms and limits of civil society incorporation under democratic backsliding, and the institutional logic of NU's pragmatism.

This article proceeds as follows: the next section outlines the methodology and theoretical framework; the results detail the application of the Johannes Gerschewski's three pillars of regime stability; the discussion analyzes these pillars' configuration, introduces nested dependency, and identifies its boundary conditions; and the conclusion reflects on implications for democratic backsliding and state–civil society relations in Southeast Asia. This article expands on the pragmatism–patronage distinction to explain why civil society incorporation may be effective but temporally bounded by presidential incumbency, with the

[5] Hadiz 2016; Slater 2010

[6] Buckley, Brooke, and Kleinsteuber 2022; Larsson 2018

[7] Bermeo 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Lührmann and Lindberg 2019

[8] Fealy 2020; Saat and Dewayanti 2020

forthcoming 35th NU Congress (August 2026) serving as a natural experiment for future research.[9]

Method

This study employs a qualitative instrumental case study design.[10] NU was selected as a key case due to its status as Indonesia's largest civil Islamic organization and its long and varied history of engagement with state power, including its pivotal 1984 "Return to the 1926 *Khittah*." The case selection logic is that if Jokowi successfully co-opted even this well-established and relatively autonomous organization, the identified mechanisms are likely transferable—subject to contextual variation—to broader government–civil society relations in Indonesia and comparable Southeast Asian settings. The temporal scope covers Jokowi's presidency (2014–2024) and includes state actors (Jokowi and NU-affiliated officials), NU structures (PBNU leadership), opposition groups (FPI, HTI, 212 movement), and major media outlets (Kompas, Tempo, NU Online).

Data were drawn from two sources. First, documentary materials from 2014–2024, including presidential decrees, Government Regulation No. 25/2024, official speeches (2021 Lampung Congress, 2022 PBNU leadership inauguration, 2023 Centennial Reception), PBNU statements, congress reports, and national media coverage identified through systematic keyword searches. These were supplemented by scholarly literature on Gerschewski's framework,[11] Indonesian politics,[12] NU's historical development,[13] and democratic backsliding to contextualize

[9] At the time of revision, the organizing committee had officially announced August 2026 as the schedule for the 35th NU Congress. See NU Online 2026
[10] Gerring 2009; Stake 2010
[11] Gerschewski 2013, 2024
[12] Aspinall and Berenschot 2019; Fealy 2020
[13] Arifianto 2022; Barton and Fealy 1996; Fealy 2003; Rickard 2009; Saat and Dewayanti 2020; Suryana 2025

findings.[14] Second, two semi-structured interviews were conducted in May 2026 with informants possessing direct knowledge of NU–state relations and who were, selected for their involvement in organizational dynamics during the Jokowi era. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and anonymized, and primarily used to contextualize and corroborate documentary findings, particularly regarding the 2021 NU Congress, mining concessions, and post-Jokowi realignment toward the Prabowo administration.

Table 1. List of Interview Informants

Informant Code	Category	Position (Anonymized)	Interview Date
Informant A	NU Elite	Senior PBNU Executive	May 11, 2026
Informant B	NU Activist	NU Activist with direct organizational experience	May 6, 2026

Our analysis proceeded in two stages. First, we undertook critical discourse analysis utilizing Fairclough's framework examined the diction, discursive practice, and social practice in presidential speeches, PBNU statements, and media narratives.[15] Second, we performed process tracing to reconstruct causal mechanisms linking Jokowi's strategies to outcomes within NU, identifying key events (e.g., 2017 HTI dissolution, 2021 Congress, PP 25/2024), tracing sequential interventions, and evaluating alternative explanations, particularly NU's historical

[14] Bermeo 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2021; Hay 2007; Levitsky and Way 2010
[15] Fairclough 2013

pragmatism.[16] We also triangulated data across government documents, NU records, and media sources to ensure analytical robustness.[17]

We acknowledge several limitations in our approach. The small number of interviews limits the breadth of internal NU perspectives, suggesting the need for future research incorporating grassroots members and intra-organizational factions. The single-case design constrains external generalizability and thus encourages comparative studies, particularly with organizations such as Muhammadiyah. While process tracing supports causal inference, residual uncertainty remains. Finally, our arguments regarding grassroots depoliticization are based on inferences from public discourse and require further ethnographic or survey-based validation.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Johannes Gerschewski's framework of three pillars of autocratic regime stability, which posits that a durable regime rest on the mutually reinforcing mechanisms of legitimacy, repression, and co-optation.[18] Legitimacy targets the public by constructing the belief that the ruler is correct and deserving of obedience; repression targets opposition through a spectrum ranging from hard coercion to soft, discursive stigmatization; and co-optation integrates rival elites into the power structure, reducing their incentives for opposition by embedding them within the system. While originally developed for authoritarian contexts, the framework is increasingly relevant for analyzing democratic backsliding, including Indonesia under Jokowi. This study extends the framework by identifying a boundary condition: civil society incorporation

[16] Beach and Pedersen 2013; Collier 2011
[17] Rickard 2009
[18] Gerschewski 2013

produces de-politicization that is effective within presidential incumbency but structurally constrained once political the contexts shifts.

Gerschewski further distinguishes between two governing logics structuring these pillars: over-politicization, which mobilizes citizens through polarization and ideological friend–foe distinctions, and de-politicization, which demobilizes citizens through performance-based legitimacy emphasizing stability, development, and governance outcomes rather than ideological engagement.[19] Jokowi's governance reflects the latter, encapsulated in his "work, work, work" approach.[20]

Building on this framework, the study advances three propositions. First, Jokowi's strategy with regards to NU simultaneously mobilized the organization as a source of legitimacy, a tool of symbolic repression against Islamic opposition groups (FPI, HTI, and the 212 movement), and an object of elite co-optation through state positions and economic resources. Second, these pillars operated under a de-politicization logic that rendered NU's grassroots politically passive through stability-oriented legitimacy. Third, the three pillars functioned synergistically, producing a reinforcing cycle in which NU's legitimacy enabled symbolic repression, which in turn strengthened its privileged position and deepened elite dependency on the state.

By extending Gerschewski's framework to civil Islam in Indonesia, this study demonstrates that the three pillars of stability operate not only at the regime level but also through the systematic incorporation of civil society organizations, particularly under conditions of democratic backsliding.

[19] Gerschewski 2024

[20] The phrase "work, work, work" (*kerja, kerja, kerja*) derives from Jokowi's early presidential speeches, in which he repeatedly emphasized "working hard" and collective action as the primary means of achieving national goals; See Kompas.com 2019

Results: Jokowi's Systematic Strategy toward NU

Jokowi introduced a more systematic and structurally embedded approach to managing relations with NU compared to previous presidents. Rather than developing sporadically, the relationship was institutionalized through PBNU's unprecedented formal endorsement in 2014, which was linked to concrete social and *pesantren*-based programs.[21]

This strategy operated through two interlinked schemes producing what can be termed "nested dependency." Politically, NU elites were systematically incorporated into state structures through an unprecedented number of appointments as ministers, vice ministers, SOE commissioners, special staff, and ambassadors, with selection processes that favored loyal and cooperative figures. Economically, the state provided large-scale access to resources, particularly through mining concessions, which increasingly aligned NU's organizational agenda with state funding streams and reduced its autonomy relative to cadre-based organizations such as Muhammadiyah. Together, these political and economic channels bound both individuals and the institution in a mutually reinforcing structure of dependence.[22] Unlike Muhammadiyah, which relies on member-based philanthropy, NU was systematically steered toward dependence on state resources.[23] The combination of elite access (binding individuals) and economic access (binding institutions) produced a nested dependency that fundamentally altered NU's relationship with the state.

Interview data further indicate that mining concessions were not merely distributive but functioned as long-term instruments of political alignment, with strategic calculations extending beyond Jokowi's presidency toward the 2029 electoral cycle.[24] At the same time,

[21] Hasyim 2025
[22] Fealy 2018
[23] Arifianto 2022
[24] Informant B provided a detailed account of the mining concession scheme and institutional design offered to NU during Jokowi's presidency. According to the informant, Jokowi's strategy

informants noted an inherent tension: while NU required these resources, it also risked being instrumentalized by the state, reflecting the ambivalence embedded in nested dependency.[25]

As a result of these mechanisms, NU was simultaneously positioned as a source of legitimacy, a tool of symbolic repression, and an object of co-optation. This distinguishes the Jokowi era from his predecessors, as NU became not only a partner but an integrated component of regime stability at an unprecedented scale and depth. Interview data consistently characterize this period as structurally distinct in its systematic incorporation of NU, operating under a broader logic of de-politicization that is elaborated in the subsequent sections.[26]

Legitimacy: NU as a Source of Morality

The first pillar of Jokowi's strategy was the functional positioning of NU as a key source of regime legitimacy. In Gerschewski's framework, legitimacy refers to efforts to convince society that rule is right and deserving of obedience.[27] In Indonesia's Muslim-majority context, endorsement from the largest Islamic organization carries exceptional political weight. PBNU's formal declarations of support for Jokowi in 2014 and 2019 thus became the core of this legitimizing structure, signaling to millions of members that backing the government aligned with religious and organizational loyalty—an instance of identity-based legitimation.[28]

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operated through two mechanisms: first, prohibiting cooperation with the previous concession holder or its affiliates, as stipulated in Article 5C (3) of Presidential Regulation No. 76/2024 (See Sekretariat Negara 2024b); and second, directing NU to cooperate with mining companies selected by Jokowi himself, a policy that, according to the informant, placed NU in a disadvantageous position.

[25] Interview with Informant B, May 6, 2026

[26] Interview with Informant A, May 11, 2026.

[27] Gerschewski 2013

[28] CNN Indonesia 2018a; Detik News 2023

This was reinforced through elite endorsements by PBNU chairmen, including Said Aqil Siradj and Yahya Cholil Staquf, alongside NU's provision of moral arguments in support of controversial policies such as the Anti-Corruption Commission (KPK) Law revision, the Omnibus Law on Job Creation, and the relocation of the national capital to Kalimantan.[29]

Legitimacy was further constructed through discourse portraying NU as the embodiment of "moderate Islam" and a guardian of *Islam Nusantara*, a narrative endorsed by the state and amplified in both domestic and international arenas.[30] Jokowi's speeches—particularly at the 34th NU Congress—consistently framed NU as the "bulwark of Pancasila" and defender of diversity, a languange that,[31] in Fairclough's terms, naturalized political loyalty as moral duty.[32] This narrative was also projected globally, where NU-linked actors presented Indonesia as a model of moderate Islam, helping bolster international legitimacy while deflecting criticism of democratic decline.[33]

NU's legitimizing role also extended internationally, where the Jokowi administration promoted the organization as a global model of moderate Islam to strengthen Indonesia's democratic image and mitigate criticism of domestic democratic regression. During U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's visit to Indonesia, for example, the General Chairman of NU's youth wing GP Ansor, Yaqut Cholil Qoumas presented Indonesian Islam as a model of moderation.[34] This diplomatic framing simultaneously projected Indonesia as a tolerant Muslim-majority democracy while complicating international narratives of democratic decline or repression against Muslims.

[29] Kumparan 2019; NU Online 2020; Kumparan 2023

[30] NU defines *Islam Nusantara* as a distinctive expression of Islam in the Indonesian archipelago characterized by moderation, cultural accommodation, and peaceful coexistence.

[31] Republika 2021

[32] Fairclough 2013

[33] Fealy 2018

[34] VOA Indonesia 2020

Within Gerschewski's framework, the primary target of legitimacy are the masses. NU's grassroots were thus the central audience of this strategy, as repeated endorsements and moral framings encouraged acceptance of state policies as aligned with *maslahah* (public good), while dissenting voices were often delegitimized as uninformed or opposed to Islam. Over time, this contributed to the depoliticization of NU's base, reducing their propensity to critically engage with or contest government policy.[35]

Symbolic Repression: NU as a Counter to Opposition

The second pillar of Jokowi's strategy was repression, though primarily in its symbolic rather than coercive form. Following Gerschewski's distinction between hard repression (physical coercion and arrests) and soft repression (discursive stigmatization), the Jokowi administration relied heavily on the latter, with NU functioning as a central symbolic intermediary.[36] Instead of directly confronting opposition groups, the state positioned NU as the embodiment of "moderate Islam," thereby implicitly casting rival Islamic actors as "radical" or "non-moderate."

Groups such as the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), and 212-affiliated movements were consistently juxtaposed against NU. At the 34th NU Congress, PBNU chairman Said Aqil highlighted NU's perceived responsibility in moderate balance to Indonesia's "two extreme poles," — usually a reference to extremist interpretations of religion on one end and left wing ideology on the other — explicitly referencing FPI and HTI as examples of religious extremism.[37] This framing, while articulated by NU figures, aligned closely with Jokowi's broader strategy of positioning NU as the state's symbolic counterforce to

[35] Gerschewski 2013
[36] Gerschewski 2013
[37] Kompas.com 2021

opposition Islamist narratives.[38] This framing aligned with Jokowi's broader strategy of elevating NU as a symbolic counterforce, a process that also absorbed the discourse of *Islam Nusantara* into state-aligned narratives of deradicalization and diplomatic soft power. NU's role thus extended beyond legitimation to active political alignment, including social pressure that supported the state's decision to ban HTI.[39]

The "moderate versus radical" dichotomy functioned as a key discursive mechanism of symbolic repression. Through processes of recontextualization, events such as the 212 protest mobilizations were reframed not as political expression but as threats to stability, justifying state intervention.[40] Within this narrative, NU was constructed as the guardian of tolerant Islam, while opposition groups were stigmatized as intolerant and anti-Pancasila. This binary approach was reinforced by NU elites, pro-government media, and aligned intellectuals, producing a form of discursive hegemony that delegitimized dissent without overt coercion.

This symbolic configuration was most visible in the 2017 ban on HTI and the state's containment of FPI. NU publicly endorsed the government's actions, with PBNU praising the dissolution of HTI and defending state officials such as Yaqut Cholil when they were attacked by FPI.[41] Such endorsements enabled the government to frame repression as collective moral defense rather than political suppression, with Jokowi himself praising NU's role in countering extremism.[42]

From a structural perspective, the effectiveness of this strategy lay in its indirectness: for as long as NU sustained its symbolic authority as "moderate Islam," opposition groups were delegitimized without direct

[38] Informant A confirmed NU's institutional support for Jokowi's policies in dissolving both the FPI and HTI, framing these measures as necessary for safeguarding national stability and protecting the state ideology of Pancasila.
[39] Fealy 2018
[40] Fairclough 2013
[41] NU Online 2017; BBC News Indonesia 2020
[42] NU Online 2023

state coercion.[43] The repression pillar therefore targeted non-co-opted Islamic actors rather than NU itself, which functioned as the intermediary through which symbolic exclusion was executed. This configuration was only possible due to NU's prior incorporation into the regime's stability architecture, making symbolic repression an extension of co-optation and a central mechanism of de-politicization.

Co-optation: NU as an Object of Elite Incorporation

Building on the legitimacy and symbolic repression already in place, the third pillar—co-optation—bound NU elites directly to the state through mutually reinforcing political and economic channels. In Gerschewski's framework, co-optation integrates rival elites into the ruling structure to reduce incentives for opposition.[44] This was pursued through two mutually reinforcing channels: political and economic.

Politically, this was achieved through the government providing unprecedented access for NU to formal institutions, with at least twelve ministers and deputy ministers in Jokowi's cabinets having NU backgrounds, including Khofifah Indar Parawansa[45] and Yaqut Cholil Qoumas, alongside the appointment of senior cleric Ma'ruf Amin as vice president, which secured PBNU's institutional backing in the 2019 election.[46] Interview data further indicate that Ma'ruf Amin's nomination was also driven by NU elites who assessed him as offering greater electoral value than Mahfud MD — another figure with an NU background — underscoring the mutually constitutive nature of this co-optation. Economically and bureaucratically, NU figures were also placed in state-owned enterprises, ambassadorial posts, and non-ministerial agencies

[43] Gerschewski 2013
[44] Gerschewski 2013
[45] ANTARA News 2014
[46] CNN Indonesia 2018b

through a selective process that rewarded compliance and consolidated elite alignment.[47]

Table 2. NU Figures in Joko Widodo's Cabinet 2014–2024

Name	Position	Description
Lukman Hakim Saifuddin	Minister for Religious Affairs (2014–2019)	An NU figure with a United Development Party (PPP) background, active in religious organizations.
Khofifah Indar Parawansa	Minister for Social Affairs (2014–2018)	An NU women's wing (Muslimat) figure, known as a women's activist; resigned to run for Governor of East Java.
Hanif Dhakiri	Minister for Manpower (2014–2019)	From (NU's student organization) PMII, active in NU-affiliated National Awakening Party (PKB), focuses on labor issues.
Muhammad Nasir	Minister for Research, Technology, and Higher Education (2014–2019)	An academic from an NU background, formerly Rector of Diponegoro University.
Imam Nahrawi	Minister for Youth and Sports (2014–2019)	Affiliated with PKB and NU; resigned due to a legal case.
Marwan Ja'far	Minister for Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration (2014–2016)	An NU figure through PKB; replaced in a reshuffle.

[47] Interview with Informant B, May 6, 2026.

Eko Putro Sandjojo	Minister for Villages, Development of Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration (2016–2019)	Succeeded Marwan Ja'far; has a PKB background and NU affiliation.
Yaqut Cholil Qoumas	Minister for Religious Affairs (2020–2024)	General Chairman of GP Ansor; appointed in the Onward Indonesia Cabinet reshuffle. Yaqut is also the younger brother of Yahya Cholil (General Chairman of PBNU)
Abdul Halim Iskandar	Minister for Villages, Development for Disadvantaged Regions, and Transmigration (2019–2024)	Known as Gus Halim; an NU and PKB figure, brother of Muhaimin Iskandar (General Chairman of PKB).
Ida Fauziyah	Minister for Manpower (2019–2024)	From NU's womens's youth wing (Fatayat) and PKB; focuses on manpower and women's issues.
Zainut Tauhid Sa'adi	Vice Minister for Religious Affairs (2014–2019 and 2019–2022)	An NU figure through PKB; active in education and religious sectors.
Saifullah Yusuf	Minister for Social Affairs (2024)	Known as Gus Ipul; Secretary General of PBNU; appointed at the end of Jokowi's term replacing Tri Rismaharini.

The depth of Jokowi's co-optation strategy is further evidenced by his intervention in NU's internal leadership. Prior to the 34th Congress in

Lampung, Said Aqil publicly urged the president to not intervene in the Congress, signaling NU elites were aware of potential government meddling.[48] In 2025, Said Aqil confirmed in a podcast interview that Jokowi had intervened in the Congress, leading to Said Aqil's defeat, and securing the rise of Yahya Cholil, whom Jokowi saw as a more controllable figure.[49] Although the precise mechanisms of this intervention remain opaque, Said Aqil's claim was corroborated by interview data indicating a widespread perception within PBNU that the president had exerted influence over the congress outcome. Co-optation thus extended beyond distributing positions and resources to shaping NU's internal power structure and leadership selection process.[50]

Economic channel operated in parallel. At the Lampung Congress, Jokowi offered mining concessions to NU members, later formalized through Government Regulation No. 25/2024 granting NU's business entity rights over 26,000 hectares of coal mines.[51] His statement—"I will prepare the concessions; please take the initiative"—framed co-optation as collaborative participation, consistent with Fairclough's notion of legitimation through participation.[52] This framing was reinforced at the 2022 PBNU leadership inauguration, where Jokowi recontextualized the offer as a governmental commitment delivered "professionally and as soon as possible," shifting from personal patronage to institutional policy, invoking intertextual continuity, and compressing deliberative space through urgency.

A broader discursive pattern is evident across speeches. At the 2023 NU Congress, Jokowi's call for the government and NU to jointly

[48] Detik News 2021

[49] Said Aqil Siroj: "Manipulasi Habib, Sejarah Islam Ekstrim dan Cawe-Cawe Jokowi di NU" 2025

[50] Informant B explained that during the 34th NU Congress in Lampung, Jokowi supported the candidacy of Yahya Cholil over Said Aqil, primarily because Jokowi perceived Said Aqil as politically difficult to control.

[51] Setkab.go.id 2021

[52] Fairclough 2013

work towards "Golden Indonesia 2045" constructed an inclusive "we" that blurred state–organization boundaries, producing synthetic personalization and framing alignment as patriotic duty.[53] NU discourse mirrored this logic, with Yahya Cholil's statement that NU "needs mining projects as a revenue source" reflecting naturalization of dependency. By linking concessions to social programs, NU further employed legitimation through goal orientation, framing economic incorporation as socially beneficial.[54]

This discourse translated into material dependency as state-funded programs increasingly flowed to NU, altering its resource base and raising the cost of dissent. The convergence of political and economic channels produced nested dependency, in which elite placement facilitated organizational access while organizational dependence reinforced elite compliance.[55]

Still the mining concession generated internal debate within PBNU.[56] Despite this, interview data indicated that a disputes between Supreme Leader Miftachul Akhyar and General Chairman Yahya Cholil over the concessions centered not on their acceptance, but on which corporate partner should manage it. This suggests that dependency was not contested in principle, but negotiated in its allocation, reflecting restructuring rather than absence of agency.[57]

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[53] Setkab.go.id 2023

[54] Tempo.co 2024

[55] Harian Disway 2024

[56] The conflict began when the Supreme Leader of PBNU issued an ultimatum demanding the resignation of the General Chairman of PBNU. After receiving no response, the Supreme Leader subsequently issued an official dismissal letter removing the General Chairman from his position. See Tempo.co 2025

[57] Informant B strongly argued that the internal conflict within PBNU between the Supreme Leader and the General Chairman was fundamentally driven by disputes surrounding the mining concession issue. According to the informant, the faction associated with Miftachul Akhyar was aligned with Jokowi, while the faction surrounding Yahya Cholil was politically aligned with President Prabowo. Informant B further emphasized that the conflict was directly fueled by

Within Gerschewski's framework, NU elites functioned as rational actors who calculated that cooperation yielded greater benefits than opposition. Positions, projects, and recognition thus incentivized alignment while eroding critical distance from the state. Informants confirm there was a broad sense among PBNU figures that the organization had suffered a loss of autonomy during the Jokowi era.[58] The result was not passive incorporation but a systematic transformation of NU into a stakeholder in regime stability, narrowing the boundaries of political contestation and reinforcing de-politicization through nested dependency.[59]

Discussion: The Synergistic Configuration of Jokowi's Strategy

Jokowi's three strategies—legitimation, symbolic repression, and co-optation—operated simultaneously and reinforced one another, positioning NU as an active instrument of regime stability. NU functioned multidimensionally: as a source of public legitimacy, a symbolic tool to neutralize Islamic opposition, and an object of co-optation securing elite loyalty. Through this integrated political architecture, Jokowi not only silenced NU but incorporated it into sustaining regime stability, marking a qualitatively distinct approach from previous presidents who engaged NU more sporadically. Interview data consistently identified the Jokowi era as a high point for NU's proximity to state power in recent history.[60] Addressing the study's research gap, these findings demonstrate that the three-pillar framework—extended to civil society—effectively explains how Jokowi systematically incorporated NU into his regime-stability project.[61]

individuals within PBNU who instrumentalized NU for personal interests, although the informant did not deny that Jokowi also exerted an indirect influence over the dispute.

[58] Interview with Informant B, May 6, 2026.

[59] Flinders and Wood 2014

[60] Interview with Informant A, May 11, 2026. See also Fealy 2018

[61] Gerschewski 2024

The reciprocal reinforcement between political and economic co-optation produced what we term nested dependency—a multilayered, mutually constitutive form of dependence that is qualitatively distinct from a conventional patron-client relationship.[62] In traditional clientelism, a client relies on a patron for a specific resource but retains autonomy in other spheres; dependency is reversible by finding alternative patrons. Nested dependency, however, operates across three interconnected levels simultaneously:

First, elite-level dependency arose because NU figures who received state positions—ministries, state-owned enterprise directorships, ambassadorial posts—depended on the executive for their status, influence, and continued access to resources. *Second*, organizational dependency emerged as NU came to rely on state-linked revenues—mining concessions,[63] infrastructure projects, and state-owned enterprise contracts—to fund its programs, shifting its priorities from advocacy to project management.[64] *Third*, grassroots dependency developed as ordinary NU members, benefiting indirectly from state-funded social services (*pesantren* rehabilitation, community programs), lost independent channels of political articulation while their leaders became preoccupied with government-linked activities.

These finding highlights a key distinction between pragmatism and patron-driven actions in understanding civil society incorporation. NU's accommodation of Jokowi reflected principled pragmatism—a longstanding institutional orientation toward cooperating with executive power—rather than personal loyalty to a single patron. This orientation predates Jokowi and is rooted in NU's historical adaptability across different regimes, from Sukarno's Guided Democracy to Suharto's New Order.[65] Jokowi therefore encountered not a permanently malleable

[62] Aspinall and Berenschot 2019
[63] Sekretariat Negara 2024
[64] Fealy 2018
[65] Fealy 2003; Rickard 2009

organization, but a pragmatic one whose support remained contingent on his control of executive power. This distinction explains why nested dependency succeeded during Jokowi's presidency yet weakened after his departure, suggesting that de-politicization through civil society incorporation is effective but temporally limited. In this context, the forthcoming 35th NU Congress in August 2026 represents a critical natural experiment: continued Jokowi influence over leadership selection would indicate greater durability of nested dependency, whereas full alignment of PBNU with President Prabowo would confirm its dependence on presidential incumbency.

Based on the guidelines for theory-testing process tracing, we now explicitly outline the causal mechanism that links Jokowi's strategies to the depoliticization of NU.[66] The hypothesized mechanism consists of five interconnected steps, each supported by specific documentary evidence.

Step 1: Legitimation through symbolic capital – Jokowi consistently positioned NU as a guardian of moderate Islam. In his speech at the 34th NU Congress in Lampung (2021), he publicly thanked NU for "safeguarding tolerance and diversity", framing the organization as a moral authority indispensable for national stability. This discursive construction endowed NU with heightened symbolic capital,[67] making its endorsement crucial for public acceptance of government policies.

Step 2: Reduced political cost for repression – NU's enhanced symbolic capital was then leveraged to delegitimize opposition Islamic groups. By reinforcing the moderate-radical dichotomy, NU's statements made state actions against those groups appear as a defense of national stability rather than mere repression. For instance, at the 34th NU Congress, PBNU

[66] Beach and Pedersen 2013; Collier 2011
[67] Fairclough 2013

General Chairman Said Aqil explicitly mentioned FPI and HTI as extremist organizations, discursively placing them outside the bounds of legitimate Islamic discourse. This framing, reproduced by mainstream media, normalized the state's repressive measures.

Step 3: Strengthened privileged position – The success of this symbolic repression further solidified NU's privileged relationship with the state. Jokowi publicly praised NU for "confronting radical movements and shielding the nation from identity politics and extremism" at the Centennial Reception in Sidoarjo.

Step 4a: Elite co-optation becomes rational – With NU's privileged position established, co-optation through political appointments and economic concessions became a rational strategy for individual leaders. The gradual position of NU figures in cabinet posts, state-owned enterprises, and advisory roles created an elite stratum whose material interests aligned with regime continuity. Jokowi's offer of mining concessions at the Lampung congress—"I will prepare the concessions; please take the initiative"—and its realization through Government Regulation No. 25/2024, granting NU-linked entities rights over 26,000 hectares of coal mining areas, further reinforced incentives for collaboration. Yahya Cholil's statement that NU "needs mining projects as a revenue source" illustrates this rational cost–benefit calculation.[68]

Step 4b: Direct organizational control — Beyond distributing positions and economic resources, interview data revealad that Jokowi actively intervened in NU's 34th Congress leadership selection, supporting Yahya Cholil over incumbent Said Aqil Siradj on the grounds that the latter was

[68] Sekretariat Negara 2024

perceived as difficult to control.[69] This intervention — corroborated by Said Aqil's own public statements in a 2025 podcast interview — suggests that co-optation extended to actively engineering NU's internal power structure, ensuring organizational leadership remained aligned with presidential interests. Mining concession subsequently generated internal friction between NU's Supreme Leader and the General Chairman of PBNU — not over whether to accept the concession, but over which company NU should use to manage it[70] — revealing that nested dependency had already been so deeply established that refusal was no longer a seriously considered option.

Step 5: Nested dependency and continuous legitimation – The combination of elite-level and organizational dependency produced nested dependency, ensuring a steady flow of legitimacy back to the regime. However, interview data revealed a critical boundary condition: when Jokowi left office, PBNU reoriented itself toward the newly elected President Prabowo — confirming that NU's pragmatism follows the presidency as an institution, not any individual patron, and that Jokowi's design of the mining concession as a long-term control instrument failed to transcend this deeper institutional logic.[71]

[69] Detik News 2021; Said Aqil Siroj: "Manipulasi Habib, Sejarah Islam Ekstrim dan Cawe-Cawe Jokowi di NU" 2025

[70] Interview with Informant B, May 6, 2026.

[71] As noted in the previous footnote regarding the internal conflict within PBNU, Informant B stated that, in relation to the mining concession issue, Yahya Cholil tended to wait for investment directives and strategic guidance from President Prabowo, whereas Miftachul Akhyar continued to favor investors previously endorsed by Jokowi during his presidency; See also NU Online 2025

Table 3. Process Tracing Evidence

Step	Evidence	Probative Value	Explanation
1: Legitimation through symbolic capital	Jokowi's speeches thanking NU for safeguarding tolerance and diversity (Lampung 2021, Sidoarjo 2023); PBNU formal declarations of support (2014, 2019); statements by NU chairmen endorsing Jokowi.	Strong hoop test	This evidence must be present for the legitimation step to hold; without such public endorsements and discursive construction of NU as a moral authority, the mechanism would fail. The consistent repetition across multiple events strengthens its hoop value.
2: Reduced political cost for repression	Said Aqil's statement at 34th NU Congress referring to FPI and HTI as extremist organizations; media framing of HTI dissolution; PBNU defense of Yaqut Cholil Qoumas against FPI criticism.	Smoking gun	Directly highlights discursive delegitimization of opposition groups. These statements explicitly position NU against "radical" groups, providing moral legitimacy for state repression. This evidence strongly confirms the mechanism; absence would have significantly weakened the argument.

3: Strengthened privileged position	Jokowi's praise at NU Centennial Reception; continued presidential attendance at NU events; appointment of NU figures to strategic positions beyond cabinet (ambassadors, state-owned enterprise commissioners).	Hoop test	Necessary condition for strengthened position. The consistent public recognition and ongoing access to state positions indicate NU's privileged status was maintained. Absence of this would disconfirm the mechanism, but presence alone is not sufficient without the other steps.
4a: Elite co-optation becomes rational	Appointment of Khofifah Indar Parawansa and Yaqut Cholil; Jokowi's mining offer at the Lampung congress; Government Regulation No. 25/2024; Yahya Cholil's statement that NU "needs mining projects as a revenue source."	Multiple hoops + smoking gun	The appointments and mining concession are necessary conditions (hoop tests) for elite co-optation. Yahya Cholil's explicit statement about needing revenue serves as a smoking gun, directly revealing the rational calculation that drives elite collaboration with the state.

4b. Direct organizational control	Said Aqil's public claim of Jokowi's intervention in the 2021 Congress; internal PBNU friction over mining concession partnership.	Smoking gun	Said Aqil's public statement directly confirms presidential intervention in NU's internal leadership selection. Corroboration by informants with direct knowledge strengthens the probative value significantly. The internal friction over mining partnerships further confirms that nested dependency had reached a point where refusal was no longer a seriously considered option.
5: Nested dependency and continuous legitimation	Government Regulation No. 25/2024; NU's business entity (PT Berkah Usaha Muamalah Nusantara); state-funded projects for *pesantren*; PBNU statements acknowledging reliance on state funding; decline in critical advocacy; interview data	Straw-in-the-wind + boundary condition	Institutionalization of dependency through state regulation and economic access created material conditions for nested dependency. However, interview data introduced a critical boundary condition: nested dependency proved temporally bounded by presidential incumbency, as PBNU

	confirming NU's post-Jokowi realignment toward Prabowo		reoriented toward President Prabowo upon Jokowi's departure — confirming that NU's pragmatism follows the presidency as an institution rather than any individual patron.

Table 3 summarizes the process-tracing evidence, classifying each piece according to its probative value following Bayesian logic.[72] The consistency and strength of the evidence across all five steps lend strong support to the hypothesized mechanism.

We now consider three plausible alternatives to the causal mechanism proposed above.

Alternative 1: Historical pragmatism of NU NU's accommodation of Jokowi arguably reflects a long-standing tradition of pragmatic adaptation to political realities predating the Jokowi era. Scholars have documented NU's pragmatism across regimes: during Sukarno's Guided Democracy, NU initially resisted his NASAKOM framework (bringing together nationalist, religious and communist social and political forces) due to concerns over communist inclusion but ultimately accepted it as a strategic accommodation to maintain access and relevance. Similarly, under Suharto's New Order, NU accepted Pancasila as the sole

[72] Following Beach and Pedersen (2013), a hoop test requires that evidence must be present for the mechanism to be valid; if absent, the mechanism is disconfirmed. A smoking gun, if present, strongly confirms the mechanism; if absent, it weakens but does not eliminate the mechanism. Straw-in-the-wind evidence provides circumstantial support but is neither necessary nor sufficient.

organizational basis at its 1984 Situbondo Congress while simultaneously declaring its Return to the 1926 *Khittah*, reflecting a dual strategy of withdrawal from formal politics and regime accommodation.[73] As Fealy notes, the Jokowi era nonetheless represented the peak of this proximity, suggesting not mere continuity but intensification.[74]

We do not dispute NU's historical pragmatism—indeed, interview data confirmed its persistence into the post-Jokowi period, as PBNU recalibrated its alignment toward President Prabowo after Jokowi's departure. [75] However, three features distinguished the Jokowi period from others: the simultaneity of legitimation, symbolic repression, and co-optation; the unprecedented scale of economic incorporation; and the institutionalization of dependency through formal state mechanisms, producing a form of nested dependency that constrained exit in ways earlier patron-client relations did not.

Alternative 2: Routine coalition politics – Another interpretation might view the appointment of NU-affiliated ministers as normal coalition politics in Indonesia's multiparty system. However, if this were merely coalition politics, PKB's fluctuating coalition status would have affected NU's cabinet representation—but it did not. The stark contrast with the minimal appointments allocated for rival organization Muhammadiyah also suggests selectivity beyond routine coalition bargaining.[76] Furthermore, interview data from this study corroborate this distinction: informants consistently emphasized that the scale and depth of NU's incorporation under Jokowi went far beyond routine coalition bargaining,

[73] Barton and Fealy 1996; Rickard 2009

[74] Fealy 2018

[75] Interview with Informant A, May 11, 2026.

[76] For instance, Muhadjir Effendy served as Minister of Education and Culture from 2016 to 2019, and later as Coordinating Minister for Human Development and Cultural Affairs, while Raja Juli Antoni served as Deputy Minister of Agrarian Affairs and Spatial Planning from 2022 to 2024. The contrast with the twelve NU-affiliated ministers is documented in the Results section (see Table 2).

reflecting a deliberate and systematic strategy rather than transactional political accommodation.[77]

Alternative 3: NU as a self-interested actor — A third alternative posits that NU actively pursued access to state resources rather than being passively co-opted. This does not weaken our argument; rather, it aligns with Gerschewski's framework, which holds that co-optation is most effective when elites behave as rational actors who judge collaboration to be more beneficial than opposition[78] NU leaders' own calculations—as reflected in statements such as Yahya Cholil's claim that NU "needs mining projects" and internal framings of state patronage as supporting organizational programs and social services—constitute the very mechanism through which nested dependency is produced. Accordingly, this interpretation complements rather than contradicts our process-tracing analysis. The selection of Jokowi's vice-presidential running mate further illustrated this mutual process, as interview data indicated that the decision proceed with Ma'ruf Amin over Mahfud MD was influenced by NU elites who assessed Ma'ruf Amin as offering greater electoral value.[79]

Alternative 4: Direct organizational control as an extension of co-optation — A fourth alternative, emerging from interview data, suggests that Jokowi's co-optation strategy extended beyond conventional mechanisms to include direct intervention in NU's internal organizational dynamics. Rather than merely distributing positions and resources, Jokowi actively shaped NU's leadership composition through intervention in the 2021 Congress — ensuring that only cooperative figures occupied strategic positions within PBNU. This goes beyond what conventional co-optation theory would predict and suggests a more interventionist form of

[77] Interview with Informant A, May 11, 2026.
[78] Gerschewski 2024
[79] Interview with Informant B, May 6, 2026.

incorporation. However, rather than constituting a separate alternative explanation, this finding deepens our nested dependency argument: direct organizational control represents a fourth layer of dependency — beyond elite, organizational, and grassroots levels — operating at the level of internal power structure itself. The fact that this intervention was perceived as legitimate and went largely unchallenged within PBNU circles confirms that nested dependency had already reached a point where external interference in internal affairs was structurally normalized.[80]

The Indonesian case invites comparative questions for Southeast Asia. Similar patterns of civil society incorporation appear elsewhere: under Rodrigo Duterte, the Philippines government cultivated alliances with religious groups to bolster its legitimacy while marginalizing critics within the Catholic Church;[81] in Thailand, successive military-backed governments have sought to co-opt Buddhist institutions to neutralize potential opposition.[82] These parallels suggest that the mechanisms identified here—legitimation, symbolic boundary-drawing, and nested dependency—may be observable across the region, offering a fertile agenda for future comparative research.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Jokowi systematically incorporated NU into his regime-stability project through three mutually reinforcing pillars—legitimation, symbolic repression, and co-optation—operating under a de-politicization logic. These pillars produced nested dependency across four levels: elite dependency via state appointments, organizational dependency through economic concessions, grassroots dependency through state-funded services, and structural dependency through intervention in internal leadership selection, most notably the

[80] Interview with Informant B, May 6, 2026.
[81] Buckley, Brooke, and Kleinsteuber 2022
[82] Larsson 2018

2021 Congress. The findings extend Gerschewski's framework to civil society, advance the first systematic account of Jokowi's incorporation strategy, and introduce nested dependency as a concept for explaining how multi-level co-optation can foreclose exit options and render incorporation difficult to reverse.

A key boundary condition was also identified: nested dependency is temporally constrained by presidential incumbency. NU's behavior reflects principled pragmatism rooted in its historical trajectory—from accommodating Sukarno's NASAKOM to accepting Suharto's Sole Organizational Principle (Pancasila) at the 1984 Situbondo Congress—rather than loyalty to a specific patron. Accordingly, after Jokowi's departure, NU recalibrated its alignment toward President Prabowo, confirming its tendency to follow the presidency as an institution rather than any individual patron. This reveals a miscalculation in treating NU as permanently bindable through material incentives, when its accommodation remained contingent on presidential continuity. The distinction between principled pragmatism and patron loyalty thus carries broader implications for the durability of civil society incorporation under democratic backsliding, suggesting that such incorporation is powerful but inherently time bound. The forthcoming 35th NU Congress in August 2026 offers a natural experiment for assessing the persistence of nested dependency, while future research should examine whether similar boundary conditions appear in other Southeast Asian contexts.

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