In the post-9/11 world, scholars and policy makers alike have grappled with the interplay between religion and politics. Islam has garnered a disproportionate amount of attention relative to other world religions. It has been turned upside down in search of insights into its potential as a source of radicalism and terror or, conversely, to be an agent of civil society development and a source of civic activism. In Indonesia, quite apart from the global post-9/11 dynamic, Islam was and is a vital element of politics. Indeed, it is often said that you cannot understand Indonesian politics without understanding Islam in Indonesia.

In recent years, the heightening of global tensions related to the ‘war on terror’ and the perceived antagonism between the ‘West’ and the ‘Muslim world’ have frequently brought Indonesia into the limelight as an example of a nation where democracy and Islam successfully cohabitate — indeed, where one cannot be separated from the other. Crucial to the uniqueness of Islam in Indonesia are the roles of the two largest mass-based Muslim organizations in the world — Nahdlatul Ulama or NU.
Nahdlatul Ulama and the Struggle for Power

(literally, ‘Revival of the Muslim Scholars’) and Muhammadiyah. These massive socio-religious organizations, which together represent over 75 million Indonesians, comprise vast interconnected networks of women, students, labourers, teachers, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), hospitals, schools, universities, legal aid agencies and many more affiliated units, reaching down to the village level across the country. They both represent a remarkable channel for constructive civic engagement. But Islam in Indonesia is very complex, and the historical rifts between NU and Muhammadiyah are indicative of the highly politicized nature of both organizations.

In an effort to shed light on the tangled web of Islamic politics, and to explore the example that Indonesia provides of a strong and thriving Islamic civil society, I take up in this book the case of NU. As this volume will show, NU is far from a monolithic organization. The contestation within NU on issues of identity, politics and religion affords the observer of Indonesian politics and Islam valuable insights into important developments within Islamic thought in the late New Order and early reform (reformasi) periods.

NU is the larger of the two mass-based organizations mentioned above. Founded in 1926, today it claims approximately 50 million members. Long active as both a political party and a religious organization, in 1984 it withdrew from formal politics in a move called Kembali ke Khittah 1926, or ‘Return to the Guidelines of 1926’. This gave NU room under the repressive Soeharto regime to develop a nascent civil society movement. In the twilight of the New Order period (1966–98) and during the early reformasi period, this movement became more critical of the state and at the same time gained momentum internally. One element of the discourse it produced was an opposition to ‘Islamist’ politics — a stance that was deeply embedded in the historical modernist–traditionalist conflict colouring intra-Islamic relations in Indonesia for the previous century. In 1999, Abdurrahman Wahid stepped down from the leadership of NU to become the fourth President of Indonesia. This significantly complicated the position of NU’s civil society movement, which had gradually established for itself a ‘watchdog’ role towards the state.

This book examines the emergence of this civil society discourse in the historical context of Kembali ke Khittah 1926 — also called Khittah ‘26 throughout this volume — and explores the response of NU’s pro-civil society activists to political developments during Wahid’s presidency. In
particular, it analyses the underlying role of the modernist–traditionalist conflict in shaping not only understandings of ‘civil society’, but also important movements within Islam in Indonesia more generally. The case of NU reveals a great deal about the intersection between Islam and politics during this crucial time of transition to democracy; the contestation within NU itself about its identity as a ‘religious’ or as a ‘political’ organization is indicative of the fluid and shifting public perceptions of both politics and religion during this transformative period. As such, the case of NU provides important insights into the New Order period — why the regime fell, and how Indonesians envisioned, and continue to construct, a post-New Order society.

This book also examines in detail the phenomenon of what may seem counterintuitive to many international observers — a civil society movement led by Muslim intellectuals. It explores the origins of this movement, the political exigencies that underpin it, and the point at which it begins to take on a life of its own, separate from its primary architect, Abdurrahman Wahid.

These historical and contemporary developments in Indonesia serve as the empirical basis informing a broader analysis of the relationship between religion and politics.

**CIVIL SOCIETY AND ISLAM**

In recent decades a significant accumulation of scholarship has developed to counter the empirically inaccurate yet deeply ingrained and ideologically weighty history of separation between religion and politics in Enlightenment-derived thought. Especially important in this context has been the body of literature demonstrating, in Talal Asad’s words, that ‘even in Western liberal societies “modernized religion” and “secular culture” have supported each other in crucial, if often indirect, ways’ (Asad 1992: 3). The false construction of the ‘secular West’ versus the ‘religious, emotional, irrational East’ has been undermined by work revealing the symbiotic relationship between the Church (both Catholic and Protestant) and politics in Europe and America.²

The resurgence of religion in the public sphere more generally,³ and the global phenomenon of Islamic revivalism in particular, has forced both academics and policy makers to rethink their preconceptions about the role of religion in politics. This is especially crucial given the prevailing
empirical reality that democracy, in the broadest possible sense of the term, has become the most prominent political system worldwide, and is, according to John Esposito and John Voll (1996: 13), ‘the dominant discourse of politics’. In the case of Islam, this evokes the historically long and often-heated debate about whether Islam is ‘compatible’ with democracy. A long line of thinkers from non-Muslim and Muslim traditions alike have argued, sometimes vehemently, that Islam is inherently incompatible with democracy. This already multi-layered debate has been given another overlay in recent years, with the addition of ‘democratization’ to the Bush administration’s foreign policy agenda. This is discussed further in the final chapter of this book.

The classical orientalist view was of the ‘despotic’ and ‘irrational’ East where the weakness of society precluded constraints on an all-powerful state. As Turner (1994: 23) notes, ‘the orientalist view of Asiatic society can be encapsulated in the notion that the social structure of the oriental world was characterized by the absence of a civil society’. Orientalist roots in the Western intellectual tradition led to a stark choice presented to Muslim nations between modernization and continuing to maintain the role of Islam in public life.

This variant of early modernization theory soon became problematized by post-modern scholarship. However, its legacy lingers in the work of still-influential scholars like Bernard Lewis (1964: 48), who argued that Islamic societies contain no institutions (such as representative assemblies) capable of restraining the power of the state, as well as in the thinking of US policy makers, who view democratic institutions as those ‘that would and could be “exported”’ from the United States to strengthen global democratization (Esposito and Voll 1996: 19). Samuel Huntington’s contribution to such neo-orientalist thinking has been well documented and overdiscussed. His controversial ‘clash of civilizations’ thesis rests on the foundation of a lifetime of work portraying Muslim societies as untrusting and untrustworthy (Huntington 1968: 29); undemocratic and unlikely to become democratic (Huntington 1984: 217); and violent (Huntington 1993: 34–5). There have been numerous refutations of his argument from both Muslim and non-Muslim quarters, but one significant example is Norris and Inglehart’s (2002) analysis of the 1995–2001 results of the World Values Study, used to compare beliefs and values in 75 Muslim and non-Muslim nations. They found that in fact Muslim and non-Muslim societies held ‘strikingly similar’ political values, and that Huntington was mistaken in assuming a difference in democratic culture between the two groups.
There is also no shortage of Muslim thinkers arguing the incompatibility of Islam and democracy. Well known for such views was the founder of the Pakistani Islamist party Jamaati-i Islami (Islamic Party), Abul A’la Maududi (1903–79), who called for an Islamic state in which all authority and sovereignty belonged to God and all laws were derived from sharia. Similar, and influenced by Maududi, is the thought of Egyptian thinker Sayyid Qutb (1906–66), who argued that Islam was a ‘total’ way of life, and that even nominally Muslim societies belonged to the pre-Islamic period of ‘ignorance’ (jahiliyah) unless they practised total submission to God through sharia.

Nevertheless, there is an equally significant effort, again among both non-Muslim and Muslim scholars, to argue that democracy is not the sole domain of the United States or even of the ‘West’, and that Islam contains democratic traditions and institutions of its own. Esposito and Voll (1996: 21) argue that in the Islamic context, religious resurgence and democratization:

... are contradictory and competitive only if democracy is defined in a highly restricted way and is viewed as possible only if specific Western European or American institutions are adopted, or if important Islamic principles are defined in a rigid and traditional manner.

Furthermore, they argue that the central Islamic principles of consultation (shura), consensus (ijma) and independent judgment (ijtihad) are fundamental building blocks for democracy within Islam (Esposito and Voll 1996: 25–38). Similarly, Robert Hefner (2000: 12) describes what he calls a ‘civil pluralist Islam’ that rejects ‘the wisdom of a monolithic “Islamic” state, ... instead affirming democracy, voluntarism, and a valance of countervailing powers in a state and society’. Charles Kurzman, one of the foremost proponents of ‘liberal Islam’, argues that among the many interpretations and expressions of Islam, there is a ‘tradition that voices concerns parallel to those of Western liberalism ... [such as] opposition to theocracy, support for democracy, [and] defense of freedom of thought’ (Kurzman 1998: 4). Asef Bayat (2007) makes the important point that what is incompatible or compatible with democracy is not the religion itself (noting that early Christian leaders also rejected democracy) but the practice of religion; he argues that new social movements within Islam have the potential to democratize the practice of Islam. This argument will be supported in multiple ways throughout this book.
The Muslim thinkers variously labelled ‘liberal’, ‘neo-modernist’, ‘progressive’ and ‘substantialist’ are too many in number and too widely ranging in argument to detail here, but they include figures like Farid Esack, the young South African scholar known for his articulation of a ‘progressive Islam’;\(^8\) Muhammad Arkoun, the Algerian post-modernist Muslim scholar who rejects an ‘authentic’ Islam;\(^9\) the Egyptian intellectual and reformist Hassan Hanafi;\(^10\) the late Nurcholish Madjid, one of the architects of Indonesian neo-modernist Islam;\(^11\) and Abdulaziz Sachedina.\(^12\)

What these thinkers have in common is their conviction that there is not just one ‘right way’ to do democracy (despite the contrary opinion prevailing among many US policy makers and academics), but that democracy is a multivalent and varied political system that must be adapted to the socio-historical and cultural context in which it is applied. For many seeking to reconcile Islam and democracy, this usually means a rejection of the relegation of religion solely to the private, domestic or social sphere.\(^13\) On the contrary, many of these thinkers seek to locate a role for Islam precisely in the public sphere.

The small but growing literature dealing explicitly with the relationship between Islam and civil society provides a rich empirical foundation from which to counter stereotypical views of both Islam and civil society. There is, however, little construction of concrete frameworks or criteria for measuring or evaluating civil society within an Islamic context. Still, two fairly loose but nevertheless useful frameworks proposed in the literature may help to give some structure to the present evaluation of NU’s civil society discourse.

The first is found in Esposito and Voll’s (1996) *Islam and Democracy*. The authors argue that in many countries, democratization and Islamic revivalism, both of which experienced resurgences during the 1970s, were not two separate movements but, rather, deeply interconnected:

The most effective opposition to authoritarian regimes is expressed through a reaffirmation of the Islamic identity and heritage. … [D]emocratization loses its secular dimensions as it becomes a popular, and more truly democratic, movement. In this way, the pressures for democratization in the Islamic world reinforce and give added strength to the Islamic resurgence (Esposito and Voll 1996: 16).

Based on a spectrum of what they call ‘new Islamic movements’ in six countries, Esposito and Voll find three main types of relationship between Islamic resurgence and democracy. In the first, a militant, populist Islamic
movement overthrows a Westernizing regime; in the second, legal Islamic movements participate in the political system; and in the third, illegal Islamic groups oppose the government (Esposito and Voll 1996: 9). Clearly the second category is the one in which one is most likely to find an Islamic organization functioning as an agent of civil society.  

Examining the case of Indonesia within this framework will be illustrative not only of the fact that it represents a significant departure from the norms of state–Islam interaction in most of the Muslim world, but also of the ways in which a new Islamic movement might operate within a political system not dominated by Islam.

Esposito and Voll use three criteria to assess the relationship between democratization and Islam in each of the six countries. They are: (1) the legality or illegality of the Islamic movement; (2) the degree to which the movement opposes or is cooperative towards the regime; and (3) whether the state permits political participation by the movement (Esposito and Voll 1996: 9). These criteria should help us explore the political context from which NU operated and developed its discourse on civil society; the shifting stances it adopted vis-à-vis the state; and the extent and nature of the political participation of its members as the degree of NU’s autonomy from the state strengthened or waned.

Hefner’s approach to the relationship between Islam and the state is also useful, not only because he explicitly raises the possibility of Muslim organizations promoting democratization by building ‘mediating institutions in which citizens develop habits of free speech, participation, and toleration’ (Hefner 2000: 13), but also because his work focuses on the experience of Islam in Indonesia. Hefner argues that the voluntary organizations that characterize Islam in Indonesia have the potential to be agents of civil society and democratization by promoting civil participation, if they are able to transcend sectarianism and promote a ‘public culture of equality, justice, and universal citizenship’ (Hefner 2000: 20). He challenges Robert Putnam’s (1993) emphasis on the structure of voluntary organizations, arguing that their culture and discourse are equally important, but he also emphasizes the necessity of what he calls a ‘civilized and self-limiting state’ (Hefner 2000: 215).

Hefner posits three conditions that must be met for a civil society to emerge: (1) local intellectuals must find from their own experience a ‘model of political culture that affirms principles of autonomy, mutual respect, and voluntarism’; (2) these values must be generalized ‘beyond their
original confines to a broader public sphere”; and (3) these values must be supported by a variety of institutions, including the state (Hefner 2000: 36). He provides a useful analysis of the relationship of various Islamic organizations, including NU, to democratization and to the state. However, due to the breadth of the topic, he is unable to provide an in-depth look at the discourse and activist agenda of NU’s civil society movement. This book will seek to do that, using the criteria and conditions given above.

This study concludes that both Esposito and Voll’s as well as Hefner’s emphasis on the state as a cooperative force — not just a sparring partner — in fostering civil society is relevant in the NU case. As will be seen, NU’s civil society discourse, while coloured by oppositional rhetoric, emerged as a direct result of the Khittah ‘26 decision, a political move that was seen by many as a strategy to effect a reconciliation with the state. Thus, clearly, a zero sum state versus civil society paradigm is not relevant in this case. In terms of Hefner’s conditions, while NU does have a political culture of mutual respect and voluntarism, its autonomy from the state has at times been compromised — most notably after Abdurrahman Wahid became president.

Nevertheless, the success of NU’s civil society movement in generalizing values of pluralism and religious tolerance beyond their usual confines ‘to a broader public sphere’ has been perhaps surprisingly successful, if judged by the degree to which NU is associated in the public mind with civil society values. That success is not unqualified; again, there appear to have been serious lapses in NU’s commitment to those values during the Wahid presidency. Still, seven years after Wahid was deposed, NU is still recognized as one of the primary forces promoting a pluralistic, tolerant and anti-sectarian expression of Islam in Indonesia. Given the growing concern over militancy in Southeast Asia, this is a significant achievement.

**ISLAM AND POLITICS IN INDONESIA**

Islam has always been an important player on the Indonesian political stage; some of the fiercest debates waged in the country’s history have been about the role that Islam was to play *vis-à-vis* the state. In a post-9/11 context, the role of Islam in Indonesia — the third-largest democracy in the world — takes on heightened significance. Perhaps counterintuitively, most of the conflicts involving Islam throughout Indonesian history have
been intrafaith rather than interfaith conflicts — conflicts among Muslims themselves.

I argue in this book that the modernist–traditionalist divide (to be discussed in depth later) remains the primary division in Indonesian Islam. In exploring this claim, I find it useful to utilize the *aliran* model. From the 1950s until the mid 1980s (though less so after 1965), both Indonesian and non-Indonesian scholars primarily employed the *aliran* model for analysis of the relationship between Islam and politics. This model informed and inspired constructs such as ‘modernist’ and ‘traditionalist’ Islam, each with its respective political implications. These tools for explaining the relationship between Islam and politics also inform (and in turn are elucidated by) my own research.

First articulated by Clifford Geertz, the *aliran* model was based on the premise that Javanese society could be divided into cultural ‘streams’ (*aliran*) that stretched vertically from Jakarta down to the village level, and that were affiliated with particular political parties. These *aliran* crossed class, socio-economic and educational differences, and were marked by ‘primordial’ loyalties to a particular cultural and ideological affiliation. The central argument was that *aliran* determined political party affiliation, so that Javanese elite bureaucrats (*priyayi*), nominally Muslim, were associated with the secular-nationalist Indonesian Nationalist Party (PNI); modernist Muslims were involved with the Consultative Council of Indonesian Muslims (Masyumi) or the Indonesian Islamic Union Party (PSII); traditionalist Muslims voted for NU; and the workers and peasants followed the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) (Geertz 1959: 37, 1963: 14).

A core element of this model, and an approach to Indonesian Islam that dominated Western and Indonesian scholarship until the 1980s, was Geertz’s renowned distinction between *santri* and *abangan* Muslims. *Santri* Muslims were market-based, orthodox, ‘“true Moslems” as they call themselves’ (Geertz 1960: 123), while *abangan* Muslims were religious relativists, ritual-oriented and ‘indifferent to doctrine’ (Geertz 1960: 127). The *santri* category was further broken down into ‘modern’ urban *santri* and ‘old-fashioned’ (*kolot*) rural *santri* (Geertz 1960: 130). This view of Indonesian Islam was contested by scholars such as Marshall Hodgson (1974, Vol. 2), who argued that it relied on an assumption of reformist/modernist Islam as the standard for pure Islam, and by more recent scholarship documenting the centrality of Islam (undiluted by Hindu–Buddhist beliefs) to Javanese society as early as the eighteenth century.
Geertz claimed that the *santri–abangan* split was the primary predictor of political party affiliation. His great contribution was to articulate the process by which divergences in religious tradition and belief came to inform political identity so deeply. I argue that this process is still relevant to an understanding of intra-Islamic relations in Indonesia today, so it may be useful to quote Geertz rather extensively here:

The highly urbanized elite forged their bonds to the peasantry not in terms of competing political and economic theory, which would have had little meaning in this rural context, but in terms of concepts and values already present there. Thus the major line of demarcation among the elite was between those who took Islamic doctrine as the overall basis of their mass appeal and those who took a generalized philosophical refinement of the indigenous syncretic tradition as such a basis, so in the countryside *santri and abangan soon became not simply religious but political categories*, denoting the followers of these two diffuse approaches to the organization of the emerging independent society. When the achievement of political freedom strengthened the importance of factional politics in parliamentary government, the *santri–abangan* distinction became, on the local level at least, one of the primary ideological axes around which the process of party maneuvering took place (Geertz 1957: 50–1). [emphasis added]

However, while the *santri–abangan* model, as originally formulated, may have had some explanatory power for village-level voting patterns, it did not explain elite-level political alliances in the early 1950s. A *santri–abangan* model would assume an alliance of the Muslim parties (NU and Masyumi) against the secular nationalists and communists. Instead, in 1952 NU withdrew from Masyumi, and in 1953, in a move cast by Masyumi as a betrayal of Islamic interests, joined PNI and the Greater United Party (PIR) in the first Ali Sastroamidjojo cabinet. In a thorough examination of this phenomenal rejection of Islamic solidarity, Greg Fealy (1998: 120–8) argues that it was motivated primarily by a desire to maintain national unity and a functioning government. While this is undoubtedly true, other explanations also shed light on why this was not just a one-time political deal, but rather the beginning of an alliance that has existed, with some fluctuations, through to the present day.

How is it that *abangan*-based parties like PKI and PNI could form an alliance with a *santri* (*kolot*) party, NU, in opposition to another *santri* party, Masyumi? Dan Lev (1966: 77) explains it on the basis of a shared socio-cultural background:
The NU kiaji [religious leader], the PNI prijadi, and the PKI peasant speak the same language, frequently enjoy similar entertainment, and share the same stereotypes of the non-Javanese for whom Masjumi spoke.

This idea of a shared cultural background or community identity can be extended to explain the gaping chasm between groups of Javanese Muslims as well. As Lev notes elsewhere, historical and sociological differences emerged between socially conservative, land-owning, Sufist-influenced Muslims who collaborated with aristocratic elites, and the coastal-dwelling, more commercially oriented, reformist/modernist Muslims who had more to gain from change than from upholding the status quo (Lev 1994: 2–3). A sense of community identity emerged out of these layers of historical, sociological, doctrinal and ideological differences that was to create a fundamental gap between Indonesians from the same ethnic background, religion and even class.

Ultimately, this volume will show that Geertz was right about the way in which the aliran influence shaped the lives of Indonesians. He explained that:

… it becomes a symbol of his social identity, rather than a mere contrast in belief. The sorts of friends he will have, the sorts of organizations he will join, the sort of political leadership he will follow … will all be strongly influenced by the side of this ideological bifurcation which he adopts as his own (Geertz 1957: 37).

The problem with Geertz’s conflation of abangan Muslims and traditionalist Muslims — pointed out by many observers — was corrected eventually, not as a result of academic reconstructions, but as a result of political developments within Indonesia. After the 1965 communist purge, when it was no longer safe to take a desultory attitude towards religion, many previously abangan Javanese affiliated themselves with NU, because traditionalist Islam was more accepting of local and communal rituals and practices than modernist Islam. At this point the use of the term aliran came of its own accord to refer to the cultural and ideological split between modernists and traditionalists.22

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, political scientists and other scholars began to take note of an emerging phenomenon that appeared to bridge the historical gap between traditionalists and modernists. Partly as a result of the repression of Islamic political activity, it seemed that energy and effort were being channelled into more intellectual arenas, leading to the
emergence of a cadre of intellectuals in both camps calling for a renewal of Islamic thought. Following Indonesian scholars Fachry Ali and Bahtiar Effendy (1986), Greg Barton (1995) called this ‘neo-modernism’, a term originally coined by Fazlur Rahman. He put forward Abdurrahman Wahid and Nurcholish Madjid as its foremost representatives. Barton identified consistent themes of pluralism and anti-sectarianism in the thinking and writing of Wahid and Madjid from the 1970s onwards. This, he argued, was ‘of great significance because it represents a movement of thought that combined progressive, liberal convictions with strong religious faith’ (Barton 1995: 8). According to Barton, the emergence of neo-modernism rendered aliran ineffective as an analytical tool. For example, he said that ‘to speak of NU as representing a single aliran now makes very little sense’, because NU spanned such a wide spectrum of views, from liberal to conservative Islamic thinking (Barton 1994: 144). He argued that neo-modernist thinkers like Wahid and Madjid had more in common with each other than they did with some members of their respective organizations, NU and Muhammidayah (Barton 1994: 144).

Bahtiar Effendy also noted the development of liberal intellectual thought among Muslim scholars from the 1970s onward, categorizing it as ‘substantialist’ (Effendy 1998: 212). Effendy’s substantialism was slightly more modernist-oriented than Barton’s neo-modernism, but still included traditionalist Islam as represented by Wahid. Substantialist Islam, he posited, was ‘inclusive’ and ‘integrative’, and opposed to the ‘formalistic’ and ‘legalistic’ expression of Islam (Effendy 1998: 212–3). According to him, substantialist scholars rejected the ideological and symbolic issues of political Islam — such as an Islamic state — in favour of issues that affected Indonesian society as a whole, namely ‘democratization, religious and political tolerance, socio-economic egalitarianism and political emancipation’ (Effendy 1998: 213–4).

William Liddle, under whose supervision Effendy wrote the dissertation in which he originally formulated the concept of substantialism, gave his student’s term its first major play in Western academic circles in an article recounting the war-in-print between himself and the militant Islamic monthly magazine Media Dakwah (Liddle 1996). In it, he elaborated further the notion of substantialist Islam, and positioned it as directly countering ‘scripturalist’ Islam. Thus, substantialist Islam assumed most basically that ‘substance or content of belief and practice is more important than the form’, that Islamic texts must be continually reinterpreted by each generation, that tolerance of and dialogue with non-Muslims is important,
and that Indonesia’s current form of government is final — that Indonesia should not become an Islamic state (Liddle 1996: 268). In Liddle’s article, scripturalist Islam is represented primarily by the Islamic Education Council of Indonesia (DDII), described as ‘among the most extreme or militant scripturalist organs tolerated by the government’ (Liddle 1996: 270). The scripturalists’ agenda is described as anti-American, anti-Jew, anti-Israel and anti-Christian, and deeply hostile towards substantialist Muslims (Liddle 1996: 270).

After Soeharto fell from power in 1998, and what Liddle would call scripturalist Islam proliferated as he had predicted it would,26 Liddle appeared to grow more convinced that the two most important contending forces in Indonesian Islam were no longer traditionalism and modernism, but rather moderate Islam and militant Islam. In 2002, Liddle and a PhD student, Saiful Mujani,27 presented a paper at a Jakarta conference in which they argued directly that:

The major source of this exaggeration [of the possibility of an Islamic state in Indonesia] is the widespread misperception that there is a great religious divide between Muslims and non-Muslims, or, in some formulations, Muslims and nationalists, in Indonesian politics. In our view, the actual great divide is between non-Muslims, syncretist, traditionalist and liberal modernist Muslims on one side and conservative modernist Muslims on the other (Liddle and Mujani 2002: 3).

Thus, for them, the moderate versus militant divide had become more relevant than the *aliran* divide, leading them to the optimistic conclusion that Islamic formalism and militancy were not likely to grow in Indonesia, as the moderates (when combined with non-Muslims, and when spanning both modernist and traditionalist circles) far outnumbered the militants.

I argue, on the other hand, that the declaration of an end to *aliran* politics is premature. I find that the conflict with the modernists — still often referred to collectively as ‘Masyumi’ — is far from forgotten, at least from the perspective of traditionalist intellectuals. This conflict underlies and informs the content and dissemination of a discourse among NU civil society activists opposing ‘political Islam’, and has been used to justify many of NU’s political manoeuvres, including those that led to the ascent of Wahid to the presidency. Even when given the opportunity to ally themselves with progressive modernists in order to combat increasing Islamic militancy, NU activists have been unable to overcome their deeply rooted hostility towards modernist Muslims.
It is not the intention of this study to reinscribe or solidify the borders of a dichotomy that, it should be emphasized, are highly blurred and porous. There is a great deal of overlap between modernists and traditionalists, and many important neo-modernist thinkers, such as Nurcholish Madjid and Azyumardi Azra, come from NU backgrounds. Similarly, many NU civil society activists and progressive modernist intellectuals are close friends, and share a common vision. But despite such ideological or philosophical commonalities, there is a sense of ‘difference’ between the two groups that seems to flare up at times of political crisis. Thus, while many scholars would perhaps like to be able to move beyond aliran politics as a means of understanding Islam and politics in Indonesia, I argue that, when used in reference to the traditionalist–modernist divide, it is still the most relevant explanatory tool available.

**NU: USING POLITICS FOR RELIGIOUS ENDS**

NU’s birth and early history are examined in detail in Chapter 2. But in brief, NU was established in 1926 primarily because traditionalist religious scholars (ulama) in what was to become Indonesia felt threatened by the wave of modernism and reformism sweeping the Muslim world. They banded together into an organization in order to protect the traditional rituals and practices they adhered to. NU played an active role in the fight for Indonesian independence, and became a political party in 1952. In 1984 it withdrew from formal politics as part of the Kembali ke Khittah 1926 movement. While it has never again become a political party, NU has remained active in the world of Indonesian politics since 1984.

Structurally, NU has an Executive Board (PBNU) at the national level, and boards at the provincial, district, subdistrict and village levels. Governance is carried out by the PBNU’s three councils: the Supreme Council (Syuriah), the Administrative Council (Tanfidziyah) and the Advisory Council (Mustasyar) (see Figure 1). Originally the Syuriah was viewed as the highest governance body within NU, with the Tanfidziyah serving as an implementing body. As will be seen later, the actual status and power of these two councils reversed over time. In addition to this formal governance structure, in the early 2000s (the period of most interest to us in the later chapters of this book), NU had nine autonomous bodies, eleven institutes and five committees, most of them boasting branch offices throughout Indonesia’s 30 provinces and hundreds of districts. Examples
of autonomous bodies include the NU Women’s Organization (Muslimat NU), the NU Young Women’s Organization (Fatayat NU), the Ansor Youth Group and the NU high school students’ associations (IPNU and IPPNU). Examples of NU institutes include the NU Family Welfare Institute (LKKNU), the NU Agricultural Development Institute (LP2NU) and the Pesantren Institute (RMI). Examples of committees include the Astrology Committee (Lajnah Falakiyah) and the Committee for Religious Problem Solving (Lajnah Bahtsul Masail). A complete list of the autonomous bodies, institutes and committees in 2008 is given in Appendix 1.

In 2006, NU described its vision as being ‘the establishment of social justice and democratic order, based on the Islamic doctrine of ahlussunah waljama’ah, and its mission as being ‘to influence the legal system and promote policies that ensure social justice and democratic order, as well as community empowerment’ (PBN 2006). The official PBNU website (http://www.nu.or.id) states that NU’s aim is to ‘institute the teachings of Islam, based on ahlussunah wal jama’ah, throughout society, within the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia’.
As will be detailed in this book, despite ridding itself of its political party status and underscoring its identity as a socio-religious organization, NU remained politically active, and some elements within the organization continued to advocate strongly for a more overt political role for NU. When the New Order ended, affording NU an opportunity to revisit its own interests and inclinations, these elements pushed forward, leading to the formation of the National Awakening Party (PKB) and three other NU-affiliated parties. The machinations and discourse behind this process of political party formation reveal much about the rhetoric, motivations and political orientation of NU, as well as shedding light on the wider political landscape in Indonesia at that tumultuous time. The debate among the new NU-affiliated parties also showcases the broader debate in the early 2000s about the role of political Islam, the Jakarta Charter and an Islamic state. This volume shows how, in the early reformasi period, the discourse of Khittah ’26 enabled both the ‘political’ and ‘social’ wings of NU to aim at the same target — ‘political Islam’.

THE STUDY OF NU

Scholars of Indonesian politics have long recognized the importance of NU both as a political player and as a producer of religious discourse. However, there is somewhat of a generation gap in the scholarly literature on NU. In the 1950s and 1960s, a series of important analyses of Indonesian politics contained substantial examinations of NU, primarily as a political party. These included The Transition to Guided Democracy by Daniel Lev (1966), The Decline of Constitutional Democracy in Indonesia by Herbert Feith (1962) and The 1971 Election in Indonesia by Ken Ward (1974). By and large they treated NU as just another political party — it’s ‘Islamicness’ was not a central element of the analysis.

During the 1970s and 1980s, European, Australian and North American observers seem to have been more interested in modernist Islam than in NU, and little was written about the organization during that time. A very important exception was a short article by Sidney Jones (1984), which is still commonly cited by scholars. The 1990s, however, witnessed a renewed flurry of interest in NU, this time with a focus on NU itself as an organization. As discussed above, in the mid 1990s Greg Barton began to discuss the thinking of Abdurrahman Wahid, and in 1995 Douglas Ramage included a chapter on Wahid and NU in his Politics in Indonesia. The first
book-length works on NU by non-Indonesian authors also appeared around this time. The first was *NU: Tradisi, Relasi-relasi Kuasa, Pencarian Wacana Baru* [NU: Tradition, Power Relations and the Search for a New Discourse] by Martin van Bruinessen (1994). The second was *Islam et Armée dans l’Indonésie Contemporaine* [Islam and the Army in Contemporary Indonesia] by Andrée Feillard (1995), though this important contribution did not attract widespread attention among non-French-speaking academics until it was published in Indonesian in 1999.

In 1996, the English-speaking academic world was given its first detailed, analytical look at NU with the publication of *Nahdlatul Ulama, Traditional Islam and Modernity in Indonesia* edited by Greg Barton and Greg Fealy (1996). It included chapters by all of the contemporary leading experts on NU: Barton and Fealy themselves, Douglas Ramage, Andrée Feillard, Mitsuo Nakamura and Martin van Bruinessen. It examined NU’s political and religious thinking as well as its political history, from the transition to the New Order until the mid 1990s. In 1998, Fealy made another significant contribution to academic understanding of NU through his dissertation, ‘Ulama and Politics in Indonesia: A History of Nahdlatul Ulama, 1952–1967’. In 1999, Suzaina Kadir explored the relations between NU and the state through her dissertation, ‘Traditional Islamic Society and the State in Indonesia: The Nahdlatul Ulama, Political Accommodation and the Preservation of Autonomy’.

In short, the literature in the 1950s and 1960s tended to approach NU as just one among many political players, while later work focused on NU itself and, more specifically, on its relations with the state.

This volume departs from the existing work in two important ways. First, rather than looking at NU’s interests and power relations *vis-à-vis the state* as the most important explanatory variable in its behaviour, I argue that it is NU’s relationship with *modernist Islam* that shapes much of its public and political behaviour. I find that NU’s political interactions with the state and its public political rhetoric were primarily, if covertly, intended to improve NU’s political position *vis-à-vis the modernist Muslims* — not, as one might expect, to strengthen its position *vis-à-vis the state*. The consistent rationale even for the formal political manipulations of Khittah ’26 was the need to protect NU’s political territory against modernist Muslims, hence protecting the traditionalist way of life and set of beliefs. And when NU intellectuals and activists began to articulate a discourse of ‘autonomous’ civil society in the mid 1990s, the aim was not so much
to take a critical stance towards the New Order regime as to demonstrate the complicity of modernist Muslim intellectuals with the state apparatus. Thus, while NU’s actions and motivations were certainly political, they were often informed more by the struggle over divergent sets of religious beliefs, cultural norms and identities than by the desire to advance NU’s own position with regard to the state.

Similarly, factoring the modernist–traditionalist conflict into the analysis allows us to explain Wahid’s flip-flop in the late 1990s from virulent critic to docile supporter of the state, as well as his ascension to the presidency after campaigning for 15 years to keep NU out of formal politics. This volume will show that the civil society rhetoric produced by many of NU’s civil society activists contained a subtext directed at modernist Muslims, which again explains why the critical edge of this rhetoric was dulled somewhat during Wahid’s presidency. At the same time, I conclude that the commitment of most activists to the promotion of religious tolerance, pluralism and the need to restrain state power was not politically motivated, in spite of the highly political motivations of the movement’s founder, Abdurrahman Wahid.

A second distinction between this work and other analyses of NU is that it is the only one to focus on the civil society movement and civil society discourse, especially from the perspective of the activists and intellectuals that made up the movement. This volume examines the political context in which NU’s civil society movement emerged, and explores the political and religious motivations that informed the civil society discourse that resulted. It questions both the intent and the effect of the discourse. It asks how deeply the values and principles promoted by the civil society movement have penetrated NU as an organization, and what its effects have been. NU’s discourse on civil society is deeply coloured by notions of autonomy and opposition. Hence this study explores what happens when the civil society organization itself becomes closely associated with the government — can its ‘civil society’ identity be maintained?

**OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK**

Chapter 2 examines the origins of NU in the context of the Khittah ‘26 claim to ‘return to the original spirit’ of NU. It explores the political and religious motivations that were instrumental in NU’s formation, and during
its early years. It also discusses the relationship between modernists and traditionalists at the time of NU’s birth, and examines the history of NU’s relationship with Masyumi.

Chapter 3 begins with a historical look at the internal developments and the external political relations between NU and the state that led to the formulation of the Kembali ke Khittah 1926 movement. The first half of the chapter uncovers the multiple interpretations and motivations behind the Khittah ’26 movement. The second half looks at the civil society movement and discourse that emerged from the Khittah ’26 decision, with special attention to the grassroots-level activism thus spawned.

Chapter 4 reviews the tumultuous events of 1998–2000. It provides empirical data on NU’s role in the downfall of Soeharto and describes its activities during the brief presidency of Habibie and the presidency of Abdurrahman Wahid.

Using the historical narrative provided in Chapter 4 as a framework, Chapter 5 takes a more analytical look at the responses and reactions of four sections of NU to the presidency of Wahid: (1) the ulama and elite politicians, as represented at NU’s 30th National Congress (Muktamar); (2) the organization’s leaders; (3) Wahid himself; and (4) NU’s civil society activists.

Chapter 6 seeks to draw together lessons learned from the observations in preceding chapters, and elaborates more deeply the arguments presented in this introduction. It also looks at the state of the civil society discourse and movement within NU in 2008, ten years after the collapse of the New Order regime.

Notes

1. The terms ‘modernist’ and ‘traditionalist’ will be discussed in more depth in Chapter 2, but for the purposes of this chapter, the former refers to those Muslims who adhere solely to the Qur’an and Hadith as divine text, while the latter refers to those Muslims who follow the guidance of the four schools (mazhab) of the ulama from the classical era.

2. See, for example, Reichley (1985) and Thieman (1996). It is important to remember that the much acclaimed ‘separation of church and state’ in Europe took place only after the Reformation, and was not a construct inherent to European culture.

3. Casanova (1992: 17–58) documents four developments that heralded a renewed public role for religion: (1) the Islamic revolution in Iran; (2) the rise of Solidarity
in Poland; (3) the importance of Protestant fundamentalism in American politics; and (4) the role of Catholicism in the Nicaraguan revolution.

4. This conclusion may be more wishful thinking than empirical fact. It must be heavily qualified by an immediate admission that ‘democracy’ as a term is less than useful, because it has such a wide range of possible interpretations and uses. It can be ‘all things to all people’, and its normative value is such that it is invoked by all manner of political actors to lend legitimacy to their agendas. A vast range of criteria for ‘democracy’ have been put forward by scholars over the years, most often reflecting whatever political ideology was in vogue in academic departments at the time. For the purposes of this study, I find Abootalebi’s formulation useful:

By democracy is meant a political system where (1) different groups, regardless of their ideological persuasions, have the right to compete for political power within the boundaries of the law; (2) the elected representatives are chosen in fair and competitive elections and are responsive, through elections, to the wishes of a majority of the people; and (3) an elaborate and meaningful set of civil liberties, especially those liberties that are most directly related to the expression of political rights, is provided to the public and respected by the ruling officials (Abootalebi 2000: 37).

5. Lerner (1958) provides an early example of modernization theory applied to the ‘Muslim world’. Based on empirical work done in the Middle East, he concludes that the spread of ‘modern’ educational institutions, the process of urbanization, the development of mass media and increasing political participation would inevitably lead to the emergence of ‘modern’ societies in this region — a development that would preclude the role of religion in the public sphere.

6. For a more thorough discussion of both Maududi and Qutb, see Bubalo and Fealy (2005: 15–22) and Hefner (2005: 22–3).

7. This is not a new argument; it has been proposed by Muslim reformists since the beginning of the reform movement in the early twentieth century, in an attempt to seek authenticity and legitimacy for these concepts by rooting them in Islamic language and tradition. In fact, Norton (1996: 11) argues that contemporary Arab thinking has advanced far beyond this stage, in that thinkers are now dealing with questions of ‘civility (madani), minority rights (huquq al-aqalliya) and confidence or security (ta’min)’. Meanwhile, Browers (2001: 129) asserts that while many contemporary Islamists reject the use of the term dimuqratiyya (the direct Arabic translation of ‘democracy’) because of its foreign origins and tradition, they do articulate a notion of Islamic democratic values based on the concept of shura.
8. See, for example, Qur’an, Liberation, and Pluralism (Esack 1997), in which Esack makes an elaborate argument for a Qur’anic hermeneutic of pluralism as part of a broader struggle for justice and religious pluralism.

9. Perhaps the most accessible presentation of Arkoun’s thought is found in Rethinking Islam (Arkoun 1994). In it he expounds the need for a battle against ‘the mythologization and ideologization of Islam proclaimed by militants of all sorts’ (Arkoun 1994: 2) — that is, against Islamist ulama as well as Western orientalists, both of whom, he asserts, portray a static and fragmented picture of Islam.

10. Hanafi’s agenda of liberation of and support for Islam’s oppressed masses and his attention to class issues within the Islamic reform movement have made him one of the best-known representatives of the ‘Islamic left’. For a more detailed look at Hanafi, see the chapter on him in Esposito and Voll (2001).

11. Chapter 3 examines Madjid’s thought more closely. His contributions to an articulation of a progressive, democratic Islam are far too numerous to list here, but two examples available in English are Woodward (1996) and Madjid (2001).

12. Sachedina (2001: 11) makes an important contribution by attempting to ‘map some of the most important political concepts in Islam that advance better human relationships’.

13. While modern European and North American scholarship has successfully portrayed ‘Western’ society as restricting religion to the private domain, it should be remembered that the early eras of Christianity, Catholicism and Judaism were all characterized by deep involvement of religion in the political system.

14. Iran and Sudan are examples of the first category, and Algeria and Egypt of the third category.

15. Similar arguments have been made by other observers of Indonesian politics, both Indonesian and non-Indonesian. See Nagata (2000: 225–39) for what she calls a half-century tradition of civil society in Indonesia, including contributions by Muslim organizations. The foremost Indonesian thinkers claiming that Muslim organizations are potential agents of civil society are Nurchofis Madjid, Abdurrahman Wahid and A.S. Hikam. They will be discussed in Chapter 3.

16. See, for example, Geertz (1957, 1959, 1960, 1963) and Jay (1963). While Geertz presented aliran as a uniquely Indonesian phenomenon, it was actually modelled on the Dutch ‘pillar’ (verzuiling) system, in which ideological pulls drew various affiliated organizations to cluster around a corresponding political party, giving it a strong social base. To some degree this system still exists in the Netherlands and other European nations, largely centred on the capitalist–socialist divide. My thanks to Dan Lev for pointing this out to me.
17. Woodward (1996: 29) claims that *The Religion of Java* (Geertz 1960), where Geertz most fully articulates these categories, is the ‘standard reference on Indonesian Islam — the work against which all others must be judged’. While very few scholars invoke these categories uncritically any more, it is true that they are still seen extremely frequently in both Indonesian and non-Indonesian scholarship.

18. This division corresponds to the contemporary categories of ‘modernist’ and ‘traditionalist’ as I use them in this chapter.

19. Indeed, in describing the characteristics of *santri* Muslims, Geertz reveals that he is indeed talking about modernist Islam:

   ... among the *santri* concern with doctrine almost entirely overshadows the ... ritualistic aspects of Islam. ... It is not the knowledge of ritual detail or spiritual discipline which is important, but the application of Islamic doctrine to life. ... In the countryside the doctrinal aspect is less marked; there the *santri* ethic remains somewhat closer to the *abangan* ... [I]n any case the rural *santri* follows an urban leadership (Geertz 1960: 127).

20. Sears (1996: 216) describes the colonial project of distancing Islam from Javanese culture, and Geertz’s reiterations of that project, as ‘the most important myth, [that] Islam was something foreign to Java, a shallow overlay on a deeply ingrained Hindu–Buddhist Javanese past’. See also Hefner (1985), Woodward (1989) and Florida (1995).

21. These events are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

22. Thus, Barton (1994: 143) writes that: ‘In the fifties and sixties Indonesian Islamic thought could crudely, but reasonably accurately, be described in terms of the two major *aliran*, or streams, of Traditionalism and Modernism’.

23. Barton (1995) claimed that Wahid, Madjid and Djojan Effendy (another prominent neo-modernist) themselves used the term ‘neo-modernism’ to describe their thinking. However, Barton was the first to locate their writing and thought in a broader stream of Islamic thinking in Indonesia.

24. Effendy originally used this term in his dissertation, for which he received a PhD in political science from Ohio State University in 1994.

25. Effendy characterizes Dawam Rahardjo, Djojan Effendi, Adi Sasono, A. Syafii Maarif, Kuntowijoyo and Amien Rais — all notably modernist thinkers — as substantialist, in addition to Wahid and Madjid.

26. For example, in 1996 Liddle had written that:

   ... the success of the substantialists ... has been too dependent on the support of authoritarian politicians whose needs happen to have coincided with theirs. In a more open or democratic political climate ... it is probable that the scripturalists would have many more political resources, in mass acceptance of their ideas ... than they have now (Liddle 1996: 284).
27. Mujani is currently the executive director of Lembaga Survei Indonesia, a respected survey institute.
28. A definition and discussion of *ahlussunah waljama’ah* is provided in Chapters 2 and 3 of this book.