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## **Understanding PKB – PBNU Conflict: Power Struggle and Identity Crisis**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*The conflict between Indonesia's National Awakening Party and the executive board of its mother organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama, has intensified recently. **ALEXANDER R. ARIFANTO** and **VIRDIKA RIZKY UTAMA** argue that the ongoing tussle is caused by a disagreement between leaders of the two entities on whether the party is an integral part of Nahdlatul Ulama or an independent and inclusive party.*

### **COMMENTARY**

In late August 2024, just as Indonesia's National Awakening Party (PKB) began holding its two-day national congress (*muktamar*) in Bali, the executive board of the country's largest Islamic organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), sought to deploy thousands of members from its youth militia, Banser, to the congress site. This act was intended as [a form of pressure](#) by NU, the mother organisation of PKB, against the party's leadership.

While the PKB leadership under Muhaimin Iskandar was undeterred by the arrival of some Banser youths, NU's executive board (PBNU) faced [a backlash from local community leaders](#), who were concerned about the potential security fallout. In the event, PBNU's attempt to take over PKB was thwarted and Muhaimin was re-elected as party chair.

Nonetheless, Lukman Edy, a former PKB secretary general, sought to challenge in court the decisions of the congress. There were even rumours that PBNU might

organise an alternative national congress (*muktamar tandingan*) to elect an alternative PKB leadership board.

However, on 1 September, PBNU decided to postpone the event after Indonesia's vice-president Ma'ruf Amin, a senior NU cleric, held a meeting with Muhaimin, apparently [giving his endorsement](#) for the latter to continue his tenure as PKB chair. Eventually, on 4 September, the Ministry of Law and Human Rights [issued a decree](#) recognising Muhaimin and the other members of the PKB board as duly elected. With the government's intervention, PBNU is highly unlikely to hold a *muktamar tandingan*.

The tussle between PKB and PBNU illustrates the long-standing conflict among factions within Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation. This feud is a power struggle that reflects differing visions regarding PKB's identity and future position within the NU – specifically, whether a political party rooted in a large religious organisation like NU should position itself as an independent and inclusive party or an entity closely integrated with the Islamic organisation.



The long-standing conflict between Indonesia's National Awakening Party (PKB) and the executive board of its mother organisation, Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU), illustrates the complex dynamics between political parties and religious organisations in Indonesia. *Image from Unsplash.*

## Turbulent History

PBNU and PKB have had a turbulent history between them for more than two decades. PKB was founded in 1998 by then NU chairman Abdurrahman Wahid with several senior clerics (*kya*). Many NU clerics had urged Wahid to designate PKB as the official party of NU, harking back to the period before 1984 when NU was not only an Islamic organisation but also a political party. However, PKB was created as a political party affiliated with, but not officially part of, NU. It was projected [as an ideologically nationalist party](#) with a plural and inclusive outlook.

Tensions between PKB and NU grew after Muhaimin became party chair in 2005. He [removed Wahid and his daughter Yenny](#) from PKB's advisory board in 2008, sparking off a long-standing feud between Muhaimin, the Wahid family and PBNU.

PKB and PBNU's relationship improved during Said Aqil Siradj's chairmanship of NU (2010–2021). During this time, PKB gradually increased its representation in the House of Representatives (DPR), from 27 seats in 2009 to 58 seats in 2019.

However, the relationship between the two entities again deteriorated once Said Aqil was replaced as NU chair by Yahya Cholil Staquf. A former senior aide to Wahid, Yahya immediately developed plans to wrest control of PKB from Muhaimin and bring the party officially under NU's wing. His effort started soon after he had assumed the NU chairmanship in December 2021.

## Heightening of Tensions

The recent tensions between PKB and PBNU can be traced back to the run-up to the 2024 presidential election, when [PKB took the strategic step](#) of clearly endorsing Anies Baswedan as its preferred presidential candidate and party chair Muhaimin as Anies' running mate. PBNU, on the other hand, did not endorse any candidate officially, but Yahya and other PBNU figures provided de facto support for the candidacy of Prabowo Subianto and his running mate, Gibran Rakabuming Raka.

Tensions intensified after the 2024 national legislative election, in which PKB managed to win a record 68 DPR seats, 10 more seats than the number it held during its previous parliamentary term. This achievement is evidence of the [party's strength and appeal](#) among voters amid a highly competitive political environment. Not only has PKB retained support from its traditional base among NU's grassroots followers (*Nahdliyin*), but it has also managed [to attract support from a wider cross-section of Indonesians](#), showing that the party's more inclusive stance and ability to adapt to changing times have yielded significant results.

Tensions were exacerbated further in the wake of the Hajj season in mid-June, when the DPR [formed a special committee \(Pansus\)](#) to evaluate the management of the pilgrimage by the Religious Affairs Ministry. The Pansus found the ministry's handling of the Hajj to be financially problematic.

Analysts see this move as an attempt by PKB to put pressure on the PBNU by investigating potential wrongdoing by Yaquf Cholil Qoumas, the religious affairs minister and younger brother of the PBNU chair. Muhaimin, who led the Pansus initiative, considers the investigation necessary [to ensure transparency and accountability](#) in the administration of the Hajj. Needless to say, PBNU interprets the move [as a manoeuvre](#) to weaken its position and create political infighting between itself and PKB.

## Implications of the Conflict

The differences in political stance have created significant friction between the two entities. PBNU, which feels that PKB should be under its direct control due to the latter's historical and cultural roots, sees PKB's moves, such as its open endorsement of Anies–Muhaimin for the presidency and the convening of the Pansus, as constituting a betrayal of their shared values. Meanwhile, PKB, under Muhaimin's leadership, is trying to assert its independence as a political party capable of making its own decisions without having to bow to the will of the PBNU. Muhaimin even declared that [PKB does not belong to PBNU](#) but to the entire Indonesian people.

PKB sees itself at a crossroads. On the one hand, the party wants to show that it is an independent political entity and is no longer entirely dependent on the NU. On the other hand, PKB must manage a complicated relationship with the PBNU, especially given that most of its support base still comes from among the *Nahdliyin*, who have strong emotional ties to NU. This perceived strong emotional connection was the factor that Yahya utilised as a rationale for his dramatic attempt to take over PKB by force during the latter's national congress in August.

## Concluding Thoughts

The conflict between PKB and PBNU illustrates the complex dynamics in the relationship between political parties and religious organisations in Indonesia. From PKB's perspective, the party has demonstrated significant political independence from PBNU, especially in facing the challenges of the 2024 elections and increasing its electability at the national level.

From PBNU's perspective, PKB is an integral part of Indonesia's largest Islamic organisation, given that its primary voting constituency comprises *Nahdliyin* voters, and should therefore be reincorporated as part of NU.

Going forward, PKB must strategically manage its internal and external dynamics. While political independence is important for the party's survival, PKB must also maintain a constructive relationship with NU and its leaders, given the cultural and historical roots that bind the two entities. Maintaining positive relations with NU is not just about winning momentary political battles but also about ensuring that PKB remains relevant and empowered in the long run. By maintaining harmonious relations with NU, PKB can continue to play a key role in Indonesian politics while remaining true to the values on which it was founded. PBNU, for its part, needs to respect PKB's independence as a political party recognised by law. This balance is key to ensuring that PKB and NU can continue to contribute positively to the development of Indonesian democracy.

Ultimately, the success of these two entities will largely depend on their ability to work together while respecting each other's role and autonomy.

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