

P-ISSN: 2338-8617

E-ISSN: 2443-2067

Jurnal Ilmiah

PEURADEUN

Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2025



JIP
The Indonesian Journal of the Social Sciences
www.journal.scadIndependent.org
DOI Prefix Number: 10.26811

INDEX COPERNICUS
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**Kiai's Leadership Strategies in Strengthening Religious Moderation
in Islamic Boarding Schools**

**Muhammad Anas Ma'arif¹; Mauhibur Rokhman²; M. Alfin Fatikh³;
Ari Kartiko⁴; Ahmadi⁵; Moch. Sya'roni Hasan⁶**

^{1,2,3,4}Universitas KH Abdul Chalim Mojokerto, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

⁵Institut Agama Islam Negeri Palangkaraya, Kalimantan Tengah, Indonesia

⁶Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

Article in Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun

Available at : <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/1168>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i1.1168>

How to Cite this Article

APA : Ma'arif, M.A., Rokhman, M., Fatikh, M.A., Kartiko, A., Ahmadi, A., & Hasan, M.S. (2025). Kiai's Leadership Strategies in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(1), 23-48. <https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i1.1168>

Others Visit : <https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun>

Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun (JIP), *the Indonesian Journal of the Social Sciences*, is a leading peer-reviewed and open-access journal, which publishes scholarly works, and specializes in the Social Sciences that emphasize contemporary Asian issues with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. JIP is published by SCAD Independent and published 3 times a year (January, May, and September) with p-ISSN: 2338-8617 and e-ISSN: 2443-2067. JIP has become a CrossRef member. Therefore, all articles published will have a unique DOI number. JIP has been accredited Rank 1 (Sinta 1) by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology, the Republic of Indonesia, through the Decree of the Director-General of Higher Education, Research, and Technology No. 72/E/KPT/2024, dated April 1, 2024. This accreditation is valid until the May 2027 edition.

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JIP indexed/included in Web of Science, Scopus, Sinta, MAS, Index Copernicus International, Erih Plus, Garuda, Moraref, Scilit, Sherpa/Romeo, Google Scholar, OAJI, PKP, Index, Crossref, BASE, ROAD, GIF, Advanced Science Index, JournalTOCs, ISI, SIS, ESJI, SSRN, ResearchGate, Mendeley and **others**.





KIAI'S LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES IN STRENGTHENING RELIGIOUS MODERATION IN ISLAMIC BOARDING SCHOOLS

Muhammad Anas Ma'arif¹; Mauhibur Rokhman²; M. Alfin Fatikh³;
Ari Kartiko⁴; Ahmadi⁵; Moch. Sya'roni Hasan⁶

^{1,2,3,4}Universitas KH Abdul Chalim Mojokerto, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

⁵Institut Agama Islam Negeri Palangkaraya, Kalimantan Tengah, Indonesia

⁶Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Tarbiyah Al-Urwatul Wutsqo Jombang, Jawa Timur, Indonesia

¹Correspondence Email: anasmaarif@uac.ac.id

Received: November 9, 2023	Accepted: August 12, 2024	Published: January 30, 2025
Article Url: https://journal.scadindependent.org/index.php/jipeuradeun/article/view/1168		

Abstract

The spread of radicalism in educational institutions, particularly in Islamic boarding schools, is often attributed to institutional leaders who promote a rigid interpretation of religion. The pivotal role of Kiai (Islamic scholars or leaders) and teachers in these schools is central to developing students' attitudes toward Rahmatan lil alamin (mercy for all creation) and fostering a moderate perspective. As a role model, Kiai plays a significant role in cultivating a sense of moderation among Santri (students). This article aims to describe and analyze the leadership strategies employed by Kiai in this context. The research adopts a qualitative design with a case study approach and was conducted at the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School in Pacet, Mojokerto, East Java. The findings highlight several key strategies Kiai Asep Saifuddin Chalim implemented, including strengthening Nahdatul Ulama traditions, implementing a rigorous selection process for teachers and Staff, adhering to fundamental principles of success, and integrating moderate values into the school curriculum. Furthermore, the Kiai's exemplary leadership supports the development of a wise and balanced attitude among Santri.

Keywords: Religious Moderation; Kiai Leadership; Islamic Boarding School (Pesantren).



A. Introduction

Radicalism in Indonesia is a compelling issue, especially given the findings from the 2011 Institute for Islamic and Peace Studies, which revealed that that 48% of students are willing to engage in radical actions (Ali et al., 2021; Hefner, 2011; Ilyas & Athwal, 2021; Riyanto, 2024). The characteristics of radicalism include: 1) an orientation toward enforcing Islamic law, 2) anti-pluralism, and 3) textual interpretation of the Koran and Hadith (Rahmat, 2018). Radicalism is not only spread through formal institutions such as madrasas and schools, but it can also infiltrate Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) (Kader et al., 2024; Schmidt, 2021). According to Indonesia's National Counter-Terrorism Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Terorisme, BNPT), 198 Islamic boarding schools are affiliated with terrorism (Farida, 2015; Mursalin & Katsir, 2010).

The most effective way to prevent radicalism is by strengthening the ideology of Islamic Boarding Schools (*Lembaga*) (Suharto, 2019). Islamic boarding schools under the auspices of *Nahdatul Ulama* (NU) serve as key pillars in preventing radicalism and promoting religious moderation (Firmansyah et al., 2024; Heriyono et al., 2021; Rohmah et al., 2023; Widjaja et al., 2022). These Pesantren, particularly those affiliated with NU, consistently internalize the ideologies of *tawassuth* (moderation), *i'tidal* (justice), *tawazzun* (balance), and *tasamuh* (tolerance) (Ma'arif et al., 2022). Therefore, there is no doubt that Islamic boarding schools under NU do not promote radicalism, as they implement Islamic education based on the principle of *Rahmatan Lil Alamin* (Annisa et al., 2020; Pribadi, 2022). Since their establishment, these pesantren have consistently represented a peaceful and tolerant face of Islam.

Prevent radicalism from an early age is crucial, particularly by incorporating values of moderation into the education curriculum. Previous research by Suharto emphasized that the curriculum in educational institutions must integrate moderate values to encourage students to adopt a moderate outlook from a young age (Suharto, 2014, 2017). Research findings (Hafidz, 2021; Imron & Syukur, 2021; Sechandini et al., 2023) highlight the importance of structured management and control in Islamic boarding

schools to foster and shape students' moderate attitudes. Specifically, Aziz (2020) found that the moderation of students' attitudes can be developed through the Islamic boarding schools curriculum, particularly in *fiqh* (jurisprudence), and *ushul fiqh* subjects. These lessons teach students to understand differences among *madhab* (school of thought), accept them, and address contemporary issues within the frameworks of *ushul fiqh* and *fiqh*.

The management of Islamic boarding schools plays a significant role in shaping moderate attitudes among students (Sumarto & Harahap, 2019). Additionally, the role of *Kiai* is critical, as they serve as figures for *Santri* (students) to emulate (Rozaq et al., 2022). Research findings (Aisyah et al., 2022; Muali et al., 2021; Wajdi et al., 2022) show that *Kiai* fosters moderation through educational, consultative, and administrative approaches.

Previous research has emphasized the role of pesantren curricula and management in shaping moderate attitudes among students (Hafidz, 2021; Imron & Syukur, 2021; Sechandini et al., 2023; Suharto, 2014, 2017). The inclusion of subjects such as *fiqh* (jurisprudence) and *usul fiqh* (principles of Islamic jurisprudence) has been shown to be effective in fostering moderation by teaching students about different schools of thought (*madhab*) and encouraging critical thinking (Aziz, 2020; Jati et al., 2022). Furthermore, the leadership and guidance of *Kiai* have been identified as key factors in shaping the moderate attitudes of *Santri* through educational, consultative, and administrative approaches (Aisyah et al., 2022; Muali et al., 2021; Rozaq et al., 2022; Wajdi et al., 2022).

Building on these studies, this article aims to address research gaps by explicitly examining *Kiai's* strategies in fostering moderate attitudes among *Santri*. Specifically, it analyzes how *Kiai* leadership styles and strategies shape moderation while ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds adhere to the Islamic boarding school traditions rooted in the moderate *Aswaja NU (Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah Nahdlatul Ulama)* framework.

Understanding the internal dynamics and mechanisms employed by *Aswaja NU* pesantren in shaping the moderate attitudes of *Santri* is crucial, not only for supporting the deradicalization agenda and



strengthening ideological resilience among Indonesian youth but also for enriching the body of knowledge on religious moderation, the management of Islamic educational institutions, and academic leadership rooted in tolerant and inclusive religious values.

In the context of a pluralistic Indonesia that is vulnerable to social conflicts with religious overtones, this research aims to provide valuable insights into how traditional Islamic educational institutions, such as pesantren, can play a strategic role in fostering a more moderate, harmonious, and inclusive society through the implementation of effective strategies, curricula, and leadership models.

B. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design with a case study approach. The research was conducted at Pondok Pesantren Amanatul Ummah, located on Jl. Tirtowening Kembang Belor, Pacet, Mojokerto, East Java, Indonesia. This case was selected because the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School has a multicultural character and is based on NU's Aswaja principles, providing students the freedom to pursue careers worldwide while equipping them with moderate values.

Data were collected using in-depth interviews with informants, participant observation, and documentation. Researchers actively participated in pesantren activities such as dawn prayers, Kiai Asep's recitation, internal lecturer meetings, and *Lailatul Ijtima* (regular gatherings). Informal, in-depth interviews were conducted with informants using a snowball sampling technique. The informants included alumni of Amanatul Ummah, teachers, pesantren administrators, students, and close family members of the caregiver (*Prof. Dr. KH. Asep Saifuddin Chalim*). Additional data sources included Kiai Asep's lectures and documentation of Santri activities. Documentation involved collecting books authored by Kiai Asep, pesantren policies, curriculum documents, and other supporting materials.

Data analysis followed the Huberman model, beginning with data collection. The process included data reduction, where information from

interviews, observations, and documentation was sorted using coding techniques. The reduced data were then organized into descriptions and coding tables for further analysis. The final data were presented and re-verified to ensure validity.

C. Result and Discussion

This study aims to analyze the leadership strategies of Kiai in strengthening religious moderation within the pesantren environment. By focusing on the implementation of teacher selection, the reinforcement of key principles of success, the development of pesantren culture, and the integration of moderate values into the curriculum, this study illustrates how these approaches effectively shape moderate attitudes among students.

1. Result

The implementation of the educational process at Pesantren Amanatul Ummah is deeply influenced by the background of its caregiver, KH. Asep Saifuddin Chalim, who adheres closely to *Nahdtahul Ulama* (NU) traditions. His lineage reflects a strong connection to NU, as Kiai Asep is a direct descendant of Kiai Abdul Chalim Majalengka, a prominent figure and second preacher of NU during its formative period.

The Kiai in this study, Professor KH. Asep Saifudin Chalim, is the founder, mentor, and caretaker of the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School in Surabaya, Mojokerto and Majalengka. In his leadership at the Pesantren, Kiai Asep has established the following general goals for Amanatul Ummah graduates: 1) To become leading *ulama* (Islamic scholars) globally and in a progressive Indonesia, 2) To become generous billionaires who make significant contributions to Indonesia's prosperity, 3) To become world leaders and national figures dedicated to promoting welfare, 4) To be qualified and responsible professionals.

Based on observations and documentation, Kiai Asep Saifuddin Chalim's leadership strategies for promoting moderate Islam are summarized in the following table.



Table 1. Leadership Strategies for Shaping the Attitudes of Moderate Santri

Kiai's Leadership Strategy	Activities at Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School
Strict teacher selection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rigorous recruitment process for teachers and staff 2. Affiliation with Aswaja NU 3. Ability to read the classical Arab texts (for <i>diniyah</i> teachers) 4. Proficiency in reciting <i>Qunut</i>
Strengthening key principles of success	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Jiddu wal Muadhobah</i> (Seriousness in learning) 2. Practising moderation in eating (<i>Taqlilul Ghida'</i>) 3. Night prayers (<i>Qiyam Al Lail</i>) 4. Maintaining ablution (<i>Mudhawamatul Wudhu'</i>) 5. <i>Wara'</i> (Avoiding food from outside the boarding school) 6. Avoiding disobedience to God's command (<i>Tarku Al Ma'ashi</i>) 7. Reading the Qur'an while looking at the text (<i>Qiraa Al Quran Nadran</i>)
Strengthening Islamic Boarding School Culture	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Morning and evening <i>Istighasah</i> 2. <i>Tahlil</i> and <i>Yasinan</i> recitations 3. <i>Bahsul masail</i> (discussion of classical texts)
Inserting moderate values in the education curriculum	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aswaja teachings at every level of education 2. Inclusion of private Aswaja courses at the undergraduate level (up to four semesters) 3. Certification in Aswaja as an absolute requirement for graduation

a. Teacher's strict selection

Teachers are the benchmark for the success of the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School, as they help students gain admission to various well-know universities and secure scholarships in different countries. The teacher serves as a mentor figure, imparting Islamic values and knowledge to students to address the challenges of the times.

Teacher selection is a key factor in preventing radicalism ideology within an institution. Pesantren Amanatul implements a strict selection process to ensure that students who study there are not influenced by radical Islam. The competence of teachers determines the institution's success in delivering quality education. Therefore, students are more likely to practice moderate Islam if the teacher provides a clear understanding of moderate Islam.

Finding a reliable teacher is not easy; therefore, the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School conducts a rigorous selection process. Teachers are required not only to demonstrate pedagogical competence but also to possess a deep understanding of Aswaja. Pesantrens are vigilant in ensuring that no ideological deviations occur due to teachers who do not align with the Aswaja background. This approach aligns with the results of interviews with teachers, as illustrated by the following statement.

Every year, several institutions open the recruitment of formal and muadalah teachers. Teachers must meet the requirements of adhering to the Aswaja ideology. After that, they are tested on the competencies required by the pesantren. This process reflects the leadership's caution in preventing the infiltration of beliefs contrary to Aswaja within the pesantren environment (Hamzah, personal communication, 2022).

Observational data further supports the strict selection process. During a recent teacher recruitment event at Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School, researchers observed a multi-stage selection process that included: 1) Initial screening of applicants' educational backgrounds and religious affiliations. 2) Written examinations assessing both subject knowledge and understanding of Aswaja principles. 3) In-depth interviews with senior staff members and religious scholars. 4) Teaching demonstrations to evaluate pedagogical skills and the ability to convey moderate Islamic values. Throughout the process, evaluators were observed taking detailed notes and engaging in thorough discussions about each candidate's suitability, with particular emphasis on their alignment with the school's moderate Islamic stance.

Documentary evidence from the school's official recruitment guidelines further reinforces this approach. The guidelines, obtained during the research, outline specific criteria for teacher selection, including: 1) Minimum educational qualifications from recognized institutions; 2) A verifiable background in Aswaja teachings; 3) A clean record, free from associations with radical or extremist groups; 4) Demonstrated ability to integrate moderate Islamic values into subject teaching; 5) Commitment to ongoing professional development in both academic and religious areas.



The guidelines also specify a probationary period for new teachers, during which they are closely monitored and mentored to ensure their teaching aligns with the school's values and educational objectives. This comprehensive approach to teacher selection—supported by interview data, direct observation, and official documentation—demonstrates Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School's commitment to fostering a moderate Islamic environment and preventing the infiltration of radical ideologies through carefully vetting its teaching staff.

b. Strengthening the key principles of Amanatul Ummah's success

Every Islamic boarding school has a slogan or principle that all students, teachers, and alumni must uphold. At every opportunity, Kiai Asep emphasizes and exemplifies the principles of success that guide the Pesantren. During a meeting focused on accelerating undergraduate and postgraduate studies, Kiai Asep shared the following.

All my children of Amanatul Ummah, we aim to continue the Islamic mission by building the glory of Islam, starting with education at this boarding school. We are committed to achieving great aspirations. In the Islamic tradition of education, people remember institutions like Al-Azhar, Cambridge, and others. We are initiating a commitment to make the Islamic world shine from Mojokerto. Amanatul Ummah and its other institutions will soon reach the level of Al-Azhar. Please take your place anywhere in the world, but do not forget to pray 50 rak'ahs daily—this includes obligatory prayers, sunnah muakad prayers, tahajjud prayers, and dhuha prayers. We will provide scholarships globally. The key to Amanatul Ummah's success must be upheld not only while you are a student but throughout your life (Chalim, personal communication. 2022).

The seven keys to the success of Amanatul Ummah are: (1) Being serious; (2) *Taqililu ghida`* (eating moderately); (3) *Qiyamul lail* (performing night prayers); (4) *Mudawamatul wudhu`* (maintaining ablution consistently); (5) *Qiraatul qur'ani nadhran* (reading the Qur'an by looking at the text); (6) Abstaining from immorality; (7) Avoiding food that is considered impure or unclean. These principles serve as a strong foundation for students,

particularly those who continue their studies abroad. They also play a critical role in shaping students' moderate attitudes by fostering perseverance and tenacity in learning.

During a two-week observation period at Amanatul Ummah, researchers noted the following: 1) Daily routines: Students consistently adhered to the seven principles. They maintained a disciplined schedule that included early morning prayers, regular Qur'an recitation sessions, and communal meals where moderation in eating was emphasized; 2) Visual reminders: The seven principles were prominently displayed on posters throughout the campus, serving as constant reminders for both students and staff; 3) Mentoring sessions: Senior students guided younger ones in practicing the principles, demonstrating how these values are effectively passed down through generations; 4) Prayer practices: Students were observed maintaining wudhu throughout the day and participating in both obligatory and voluntary prayers, including *tahajjud* and *dhuha*; 4) Academic rigor: The principle of "being serious" was evident in the intense study sessions and academic discussions observed in classrooms and study areas.

This additional observational and documentary evidence underscores the central role of the seven principles in shaping the educational and spiritual environment at Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School. It highlights how these values are deeply embedded in the institution's culture, fostering a moderate, disciplined, and spiritually grounded among students in their studies and life beyond the pesantren.

c. Strengthening Islamic Boarding School Culture

As a platform for educating the Muslim generation, Pesantren plays a vital role in promoting peace. Pesantren embody the concept of Islam *Rahmatan Lil 'Alamin* (Islam as a mercy to all creation) for both fellow Muslims and the wider community. Consequently, pesantren should not be associated with conflicts or divisions. A comprehensive understanding of Islam ensures that the pesantren community consistently spreads values of humanity and peace.



The Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School fosters Aswaja tradition as a means of internalizing moderate values in its students. A strong pesantren culture becomes an integral part of every Santri's character. Teachers lead by example, practicing Islamic boarding school traditions such as reading classic texts (*kitab kuning*), reciting the *Maulid Nabi* (the Prophet's history), visiting graves as a reminder of mortality, and participating in *istigasah* (supplicatory prayers). When positive cultural practices are performed consistently, they help shape good character. Thus, the pesantren traditions at Amanatul Ummah play a significant role in building the moderate attitudes of its Santri.

A fascinating scientific tradition practiced at the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School is the study of classic texts (*kutub at-turats or kitab kuning*). These texts serve as daily guides for activities and are analyzed and discussed to cultivate a thoughtful approach to everyday life. For example, the *fiqh* (jurisprudence) tradition of *Nahdatul Ulama* (NU), which refers to the four schools of thought, provides comprehensive classical perspectives on Islamic law. This tradition, known as *bahsul masail* (discussing community issues), is an integral part of the school's scholarly culture.

The Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School adheres firmly to NU's principles, which include: 1) Being centered in religion, maintaining a balanced stance that is neither rigid nor overly lenient (moderately *Sunni*); 2) Preserving unity and integrity in religion, state, and society; 3) Obeying state leadership unless the ruler is unjust; 4) Establishing standards for religious, social, and state-related *fiqh*.

d. Inserting Moderate Values in the Education Curriculum

The Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School implements an integrated curriculum that combines religious education with formal education. As part of this curriculum, every student is required to participate in NU Aswaja learning. Through this learning, students are expected to understand NU's religious principles of balance, tolerance, and mutual respect. These principles serve as the foundation for Santri to adopt a moderate stance, avoiding radicalism and rigidity in religion.

Moderate values can be incorporated into various lessons and are also embedded in the pesantren culture, as mentioned in study number three. Recognizing the importance of cultivating a moderate attitude, Kiai Asep mandates that students at the tertiary level attend non-credit lectures for four semesters. These lectures explore pesantren traditions, NU principles, and the development of moderate attitudes. This approach is reflected in Kiai Asep's remarks during regular meetings with lecturers and staff at the Amanatul Ummah Campus: "For students with a background that does not practice the Aswaja tradition, we will instill these habits using NU materials and traditions. Students must pass Aswaja courses. They must understand the concept in theory and apply them in practice", (Chalil, personal communication, 2022).

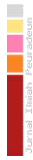
The curriculum at the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School is designed based on NU Aswaja. This curriculum equips students with the knowledge and values needed to counteract radical attitudes. In implementing the curriculum, particularly in early education subjects, the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School adheres to the Shafi'i school of thought, emphasizing a moderate approach and avoiding extremes.

This research explored the leadership strategy of Kiai Asep Saifuddin Chalim in strengthening religious moderation at Pesantren Amanatul Ummah. The key findings are as follows:

Teacher Selection: Pesantren Amanatul Ummah employs a rigorous process for selecting teachers to prevent the infiltration of radical ideologies. Teachers are required to adhere to the Aswaja NU ideology and possess the competencies mandated by the pesantren. This careful vetting process ensures that students are taught moderate Islamic values.

Strengthening Key Principles: The seven fundamental principles instilled in students include diligence in studying, eating in moderation, performing night prayers, maintaining *wudhu*, reading the Quran directly, avoiding immorality, and abstaining from unclean foods. These principles foster perseverance and help shape moderate attitudes even among students who study abroad on scholarships.

Strengthening Pesantren Culture: Immersing students in traditional pesantren cultural practices— such as reading classical texts, celebrating the



Prophet's birthday, visiting graves, and participating in *istighotsah* (supplications) reinforces the moderate values of Nahdlatul Ulama. Discussing classical texts (*bahtsul masail*) further promotes a nuanced understanding of Islamic jurisprudence across different schools of thought.

Integrating Moderation in Curriculum: The curriculum integrates religious and formal education, requiring all students to take courses on NU's Aswaja principles of balance, tolerance, and mutual respect for at least four semesters at the undergraduate level. This ensures a solid grounding in the moderate tradition as a bulwark against radicalism.

In summary, Kiai Asep's multipronged leadership strategy—encompassing teacher vetting, values inculcation, cultural strengthening, and curriculum integration—has proven effective in fostering religious moderation and preventing radical ideologies from taking root among the students of Pesantren Amanatul Ummah.

2. Discussion

A leadership strategy refers to how a leader manages tasks and activities set by the administration to create rules, organize and run an institution (Ahmad & Ogunsola, 2011; Aisyah et al., 2022; Estiani & Hasanah, 2022; Fitriyana et al., 2023). In the context of pesantren, the Kiai's leadership strategy describes how the Kiai organizes and operates the Islamic boarding school. Within pesantren culture, a Kiai holds multiple roles, including cleric, educator, caregiver, community liaison, leader, and administrator (Hanafi et al., 2021; Ma'arif et al., 2022).

The stages of the leadership strategy are as follows: 1) Strategic idea planning: A capable leader makes informed decisions and develops well-planned, structured approaches; 2) Strategic determination: This involves making decision on the planned ideas. Strategic determination ensures maximum results when guided by careful analysis and expert input. However, poorly considered decisions can lead to setbacks. Proper determination requires adhering to the correct problem formulation and consulting experts. Tasks entrusted to experts yield optimal results, while neglecting this principle can hinder progress; 3) Evaluation of the leader's

performance: A leader must evaluate every action taken. Generating ideas and making decisions should always be followed by thorough evaluations to assess outcomes and make improvements as necessary (Gott et al., 2022; Lambrecht et al., 2022; Terry, 1977).

The Kiai serves as the central manager of knowledge and a role model for students. The Kiai is responsible for overseeing the implementation of education in the pesantren (Gott et al., 2022; Kardi et al., 2023). Consequently, the vision, mission, and objectives of the pesantren largely depend on the Kiai's leadership model. The vision and mission of the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School are as follows.

The realization of superior, complete, and moral human beings for the glory of Islam and Muslims, the prosperity and dignity of the entire Indonesian nation, and the achievement of the ideals of independence – namely the establishment of welfare and justice for all Indonesian people, without exception (Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School, 2020).

According to Strickland's strategy (Thompson & Strickland, 2001), efforts to carry out activities should be accompanied by methods and approaches designed to achieve desired goals. Similarly, Terry (1993) defines a leadership strategy as how a leader voluntarily performs activities to achieve shared objectives. However, the way a leader implement strategies is not always well-structured. In many pesantren, an authoritarian leadership model is commonly followed, with absolute authority vested in the caretaker or Kiai (Arifin et al., 2023; Maarif et al., 2024; Yani et al., 2022). Although Kiai leadership can sometimes lack structured management, their ability to develop institutional strategies is rarely questioned.

According to Zarkasyi (Dhofier, 1990), pesantren is an Islamic educational institution with a dormitory or cottage system, where the Kiai serves as the central figure, the mosque is the center of activities, and the teaching of Islam under the Kiai's guidance is the primary activity for Santri. Pesantren consists of five main elements: Kiai, Santri, mosque, cottage, and the teaching of classical Islamic texts (*kitab kuning*). These five elements are distinctive characteristics of pesantren, setting them apart from other Islamic educational institutions (Jubba et al., 2022; Majid, 1997). The characteristics of



pesantren are as follows: (1) Ancient Islamic boarding schools (*salaf*). These pesantren focus solely on religious education and do not provide formal education, such as elementary, junior high, or high school; (2) Developing pesantren. These institutions offer both religious education (*diniyah*) and formal education; and (3) Modern Islamic Boarding School. These institutions provide comprehensive Islamic education using a modern system.

The moderate Islamic values upheld at Amanatul Ummah are taught by the Kiai caregivers of the school and are rooted in the principles of *Manhajul Fikr* NU. Kiai Asep, the school caregiver, has close ties to NU, as he is a descendant of K.H. Abdul Chalim from Majalengka, NU's second preacher during its formative period. NU is a highly moderate community organization that consistently promotes religious moderation in Indonesia. By following the guidance of the Kiai and adhering to NU teachings, the education provided at Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School firmly upholds moderate Islamic values.

With the development of the era, the functions and roles of Islamic boarding schools have expanded beyond the realm of education to include politics, social activities, and economic development for the community (Syafuruddin et al., 2022). Because of these diverse functions, pesantren have unique characteristics that allow individuals the freedom to pursue knowledge according to their aspirations.

The four strategies implemented under Kiai Asep's leadership at the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School are further solidified by the exemplary leadership of the Kiai and his stakeholders. Exemplary behavior is a critical factor in successfully implementing these strategies. This is evident in Kiai Asep's leadership moderl during his tenure as chairman of the Nahdatul Ulama Teacher Association (*Pergunu*). Kiai Asep provided scholarships to children from every province in Indonesia to study at the K.H. Abdul Chalim Islamic Boarding School in Pacet, Mojokerto, at the undergraduate (S1), master's (S2), and doctoral (S3) levels. He hopes that alumni who receive scholarships from *Pergunu* will embody NU's (moderate) religious attitude in their daily lives.

In addition to the exemplary leadership of the Kiai as the supervisor of the Islamic boarding school, the success of pesantren is supported by strong management in developing both the institution and its human resources. The role of teachers, as substitutes for the Kiai, is equally important. This is evident in the discipline displayed by teachers during learning activities. Teachers have always been a primary focus of the Amanatul Ummah Foundation. This focus is encapsulated in Kiai Asep's slogan for the pesantren: "Be a good teacher or not at all". This slogan underscores the importance of teachers as the key factor in the success of Islamic education. Amanatul Ummah Pesantren carefully selects incoming teachers to ensure quality and alignment with its values. Research by Suharto further supports the approach, emphasizing that the fastest way to spread moderate ideology in educational institutions is by strengthening institutional management and embedding these principles in every activity.

Religious moderation represents a balanced approach that avoids extremes and rigidity in practicing Islamic teachings (Abidin, 2024; Davids, 2017; Purwanto et al., 2019). Another term for religious moderation is 'wasatiyah' (balance), which reflects the interplay between paired concepts, such as reason and revelation, rights and obligations, individualism and socialism, necessity and volunteerism, ideals and reality, as well as continuity and change (Hassan, 2021; Husin, 2013; Mujani et al., 2015). Meanwhile, according to the Ministry of Religion of the Republic of Indonesia, religious moderation involves moderating the experience and understanding of religion rather than moderating religion itself.

This research expands our understanding of the Kiai's role in shaping moderate character in pesantren, particularly through leadership strategies and exemplary behavior. The study demonstrates that Kiai serve not only as religious leaders but also as strategic managers who integrate moderate Islamic values into the pesantren education system. This aligns with Azra (2020) research, which emphasizes the crucial role of pesantren in promoting moderate Islam in Indonesia. However, the study also challenges conventional views of pesantren leadership as often authoritarian and unstructured (Lukens-Bull, 2005). Instead, it presents a more adaptive and strategic Kiai



leadership model, employing modern management approaches while maintaining traditional values. These findings provide a new perspective on how pesantren can shape students' moderate character by integrating Aswaja values into the curriculum and daily activities, as proposed by Woodward (2017) in their study on moderate Islamic education in Indonesia.

The characteristics of moderate Islamic values according to NU are rooted in four key principles: 1) *Tasamuh*, mutual respect or tolerance; 2) *Tawazzun*, (balance); 3) *I'tidal* (fairness or being in the middle); and, 4) *Tawassuth* (moderation) (Baidhawiy, 2015; Latifa et al., 2022). Indonesia has implemented various strategies to promote religious moderation, including: 1) Educational institutions under NU and Muhammadiyah internalizing moderate Islamic values into learning and extracurricular activities. This includes strengthening Aswaja character in pesantren to shape moderate Muslims (Ebrahimi et al., 2021; Umar et al., 2024); 2) Strengthening moderate values from an early age in Islamic boarding schools; 3) Emphasizing the substance of religious practices rather than their symbolic aspects. Local traditions that align with Islamic teachings and foster social harmony are also considered part of practicing moderation (Zakariyah et al., 2022).

The personality of the Kiai significantly influence their role as a leader and educator. Exemplary behavior is the most effective way to shape the moderate character of Santri. Kiai Asep serves as a model of commendable attitudes and behavior, including *istikamah* (steadfastness) in worship, simplicity, independence, and the ethics of respecting guests. This exemplary approach to leadership begins with the Kiai's personality and dedication to worshiping Allah SWT, guiding both students and the broader community to strengthen their faith and reverence for Him.

The social and cultural context of the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School greatly impacts the implementation and effectiveness of its leadership strategies. This Islamic boarding school adheres to moderate Islamic values rooted in NU, the largest Islamic organization in Indonesia, known for its moderate approach. These values are reflected in the leadership of Kiai Asep, a descendant of prominent NU figures, who applies NU

principles such as *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazzun* (balance), *I'tidal* (justice), and *tawassuth* (moderation) in his leadership. The leadership strategies implemented Amanatul Ummah, including strategic planning, decision-making, and performance evaluation, are shaped by these values and the traditional role of the Kiai as a central figure in pesantren structures.

The effectiveness of this strategy is reinforced by the exemplary method (*uswah hasanah*) demonstrated by the Kiai and teachers, which holds a central place in Islamic boarding school culture. This approach enables students to internalize moderate values effectively, aligning with the findings of Ibrahim et al., (2024), who highlight the importance of strengthening moderate character in Islamic education to develop moderate Muslims. Additionally, a leadership approach that blends traditional values with modern management practices—such as teacher selection and human resource development in Islamic boarding schools—reflects an adaptation to contemporary demands while preserving the essence of pesantren culture. This aligns with the research of Hasan and Juhannis (2024), which emphasizes the importance of balancing tradition and modernity in promoting religious moderation within Islamic educational institutions.

The success of the pesantren largely stems from the leadership of the Kiai, who implements strategies that are both effective and efficient in achieving institutional goals. The Kiai not only leads but also shapes Santri as human resources with strong character (Dian et al., 2022). At Pesantren Amanatul Ummah, the leadership of a visionary Kiai has brought significant progress. His achievements extend beyond managing the boarding school to successfully instilling the moderate character (*Aswaja*) in the students of Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School.

The practical implications of this research extend to other Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) aiming to strengthen religious moderation in their educational approach. Other pesantren can adopt or adapt the leadership strategies implemented at Amanatul Ummah, particularly the four-pronged approach emphasizing strategic planning, decision-making, performance evaluation, and exemplary leadership. The success of Amanatul



Ummah in fostering moderate Islamic values suggests that other institutions could benefit from integrating the principles of *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazzun* (balance), *i'tidal* (justice), and *tawassuth* (moderation) into their curricula and daily practices. Pesantren leaders should consider implementing a rigorous teacher selection process and professional development program that emphasizes these moderate values, as reflected in Amanatul Ummah's "be a good teacher or not at all" philosophy.

Additionally, the research highlights the importance of balancing traditional pesantren culture with modern management techniques, suggesting that other institutions could enhance their effectiveness by adopting this hybrid approach. Policymakers and educational administrators could leverage these findings to develop best practices for promoting religious moderation in Islamic education. This might include creating guidelines for leadership training, curriculum development, and community engagement that reflect the successful strategies employed at Amanatul Ummah. Furthermore, this research underscores the potential of pesantren as agents of moderate Islam, advocating for government policies to support and incentivize pesantren that actively promote religious moderation and national unity.

From a global perspective, the leadership strategies of Kiai in strengthening religious moderation within *pesantren* have significant implications for the discourse on moderate Islamic education at the international level. Emphasizing values such as *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazzun* (balance), *i'tidal* (justice), and *tawassuth* (moderation), as implemented at Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School, not only serves as a deradicalization effort in Indonesia but also offers an educational model that can be adopted by Islamic educational institutions in other countries facing similar challenges in countering radicalism. Woodward (2017) emphasizes the importance of moderate Islamic approaches in preserving diversity and social harmony amid globalization, while Baidhawiy (2015) underlines that such moderation can serve as an effective tool for cultural diplomacy, introducing Islam Nusantara as an inclusive and tolerant representation of Islam. In the international context, pesantren based on

Nahdlatul Ulama can serve as a reference for developing educational strategies that integrate local values with a global approach, as proposed by Azra (2020), who highlights the importance of mainstreaming moderate Islam in global education policies. Thus, this study is not only relevant in the local context but also makes a significant contribution to global efforts to promote interfaith tolerance and foster world peace.

D. Conclusion

The leadership strategy employed by Kiai Asep at Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School plays a pivotal role in shaping the moderate attitudes of students. Kiai Asep's personality serves as an exemplary model for students, staff, and teachers. His leadership aims to prevent student radicalism, particularly as students engage with society or study beyond the NU tradition. The research findings underscore the importance of fostering a balanced religious outlook among students and instilling pride in their moderate religious practices. Kiai Asep's strategies include carefully selecting human resources, strengthening NU's Aswaja tradition, implementing the principles of success of the Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School, and embedding moderate values in every lesson.

This study contributes to a broader understanding of how religious leaders can effectively promote moderation within Islamic boarding school environments. By employing a comprehensive leadership model that integrates personal example, reinforcement of tradition, and the incorporation of moderate values into the curriculum, Kiai Asep has successfully cultivated a balanced religious perspective among his students. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. As the study was conducted within a specific time frame and focused on a modern-based Islamic boarding school, the generalizability of the findings to other Islamic boarding schools may be constrained. Different leadership styles and institutional contexts could produce varying out.

Future research could examine how Kiai leaders in diverse Islamic boarding school settings effectively moderate religious teachings and practices. Investigating the efficacy of different leadership models and their



impact on promoting moderation would provide a deeper understanding of this critical issue. In conclusion, this study offers valuable insights into the strategies employed by Kiai Asep at Amanatul Ummah Islamic Boarding School to shape moderate attitudes among students. The findings contribute to the growing body of knowledge on religious moderation within Islamic educational institutions. Nonetheless, further research is needed to explore effective leadership models for fostering moderation in various Islamic boarding school contexts.

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