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# The Role of Kiai Leadership in Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic Boarding Schools: A Utilitarian Ethical Perspective

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#### Abstract

The Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Lampung plays a vital role in religious education and character building within the community. The leadership of the kiai in the pesantren is not limited to the spiritual aspect, but also affects the social welfare of the surrounding community. Therefore, it is important to explore the application of utilitarianism principles in the kiai's leadership to improve the well-being of the community. This study aims to analyze the role of kiai leadership in NU pesantren in Lampung and how the principles of utilitarianism are applied in their leadership. The research method used is a qualitative approach with a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with kiais, pesantren administrators, and santri, as well as observations of the kiai's leadership practices in the pesantren. The results show that the application of utilitarianism principles in kiai leadership has proven to provide greater social benefits, both in education, economic empowerment, and social policies that prioritize the common welfare. This study concludes that kiai leadership based on utilitarianism principles can create a positive impact on the pesantren community and its surroundings. Furthermore, these findings contribute to the development of a leadership model based on social values and the well-being of the community, which can be applied in other pesantren across Indonesia.

#### INTRODUCTION

Pesantren are traditional Islamic educational institutions that play a vital role in shaping the character and morality of the younger generation in Indonesia (; Azizah et al., 2023;) (Ardiansyah, 2023; Azizah et al., 2023; Mujahid, 2021). Amid rapid social dynamics and global changes, pesantren continue to serve as centers for learning and the reinforcement of Islamic teachings relevant to daily life (Husen & Husni, 2025). One of the crucial elements of pesantren's success is its leadership. The kiai, as both the spiritual and administrative leader, plays a key role in guiding, directing, and ensuring the continuity and success of the pesantren in achieving its goals (Lubis & Wijaya, 2023).

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The leadership of kiai in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) is characterized by a focus on religious and social values rooted in Islamic teachings (Dian et al., 2024; Muhammad, 2024). In Lampung, a province with a large Muslim population, NU pesantren are significant not only in religious education but also in shaping moral and social attitudes (Fatkhurrohim et al., 2021). This makes the leadership of kiai in NU pesantren in Lampung particularly relevant to study, especially from the perspective of utilitarian ethics. Kiai in Lampung not only act as religious teachers but also as leaders responsible for managing the pesantren. Their leadership is both spiritual and social. Spiritually, the kiai serves as a role model for santri and the surrounding community. Socially, the kiai maintains harmony between pesantren and society and helps address community issues (Zhenjing et al., 2022). Leadership in NU pesantren emphasizes moral and social values over mere administrative control, aiming to positively impact broader society. Therefore, kiai leadership should be viewed not only as authority but also as an effort to promote greater public welfare, this can be examined through ethical theories (Aisyah et al., 2021; Aman et al., 2023).

Utilitarianism, developed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, emphasizes the principle of "the greatest good for the greatest number" (Bentham, 1789; Mill, 1863; Muji Kaliya Januar, Muhlas, Maman Lukmanul Hakim, 2016). In the context of NU kiai leadership, utilitarianism helps explain how decisions can aim for broader social benefit (Hasibuan et al., 2024; Huda, 2023; Isfaroh, 2022). A utilitarian kiai leader will prioritize community welfare, education, and morality while preserving pesantren traditions (Imaduddin, 2024). This is highly relevant in places like Lampung, where pesantren are trusted institutions for religious, moral, and character education (Aslan & Wijaya, 2020; Maulana et al., 2025). This study offers new insights into how NU pesantren leadership in Lampung can be interpreted through utilitarianism, relevant to Indonesia's evolving ethical-political landscape. It addresses how kiai leadership applying utilitarian principles can improve pesantren performance and benefit society at large (Garcia, 2025; Gideon & others, 2021).

This study aims to analyze the role of kiai leadership in NU pesantren in Lampung and the application of utilitarian principles. It also seeks to assess how this leadership improves community quality of life and contributes to leadership models rooted in social and communal welfare. The topic was chosen to explore how NU pesantren leadership values in Lampung align with utilitarian ethics. Given Lampung's diversity, this study seeks to uncover leadership patterns that integrate religious and ethical values to promote public welfare (Alderwick & others, 2021).

#### **METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to explore the role of kiai leadership in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Lampung and how the principles of utilitarianism were applied in their leadership. The qualitative approach was selected as it was deemed the most appropriate to gain in-depth insights into the perceptions, experiences, and practices of kiai in the pesantren context, as well as to explore how utilitarian values contributed to social welfare (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A case study design was utilized to examine the phenomenon of kiai leadership in NU pesantren in a detailed and contextual manner. This approach enabled the researcher to gather rich and comprehensive data on leadership practices and to investigate how the application of utilitarian principles influenced the enhancement of communal welfare (Yin, 2018).

The sources of data in this study consisted of kiai leading NU pesantren in Lampung, pesantren administrators, and several students (santri) within the pesantren community. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the kiai, administrators, and students to understand the leadership dynamics and the practical application of utilitarian principles in everyday pesantren activities. Data were also

obtained through direct observation of leadership activities, particularly in social decision-making and policy implementation aimed at collective well-being (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Koderi et al., 2023; Sugiyono, 2021). The primary research instrument used was a semi-structured interview guide, which allowed for flexibility in probing deeper into the experiences and perspectives of the kiai and administrators regarding the implementation of utilitarianism in their leadership. These interviews also sought to understand the social relationship between the pesantren and the surrounding communities. In addition to interviews, observations were conducted to examine the leadership dynamics in pesantren management and the social interactions between the kiai and the wider community (Erlina et al., 2025; Patton, 2015).

The data collection process began with the selection of pesantren that had strong reputations and were well-recognized by the local community. The sample was determined based on specific criteria such as the pesantren's years of operation, its active role in community engagement, and the kiai's involvement in pesantren governance. Once the sample was established, interviews and observations were carried out to gather data on daily activities and leadership practices. All collected data were then analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns relevant to the utilitarianism framework in kiai leadership (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Gustiani, 2019). Data analysis was conducted thematically, where data from interviews and observations were coded and categorized according to emerging themes related to the application of utilitarian principles in kiai leadership. This analytical approach enabled the researcher to identify behavioral patterns, policy directions, and leadership decisions that emphasized community well-being (Mamik, 2015). These findings were then interpreted in relation to the utilitarian framework to assess the extent to which kiai leadership contributed to the social and moral welfare of the community. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the study employed data triangulation techniques, comparing findings from interviews, observations, and relevant documents. This process aimed to minimize bias and enhance the credibility of the research outcomes (Sugiyono, 2021). Furthermore, instrument reliability was ensured through a pilot test of the interview questions to confirm that the items effectively captured information relevant to the research topic

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This study aims to analyze the role of kiai leadership in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) pesantren in Lampung and how the principles of utilitarianism are applied in their leadership. In addition, the study also seeks to determine the impact of kiai leadership on improving the quality of life for pesantren communities and their surroundings, as well as to contribute to the development of a leadership model based on social values and community welfare.

# The Role of Kiai Leadership in NU Pesantren in Lampung

The leadership of kiai in NU pesantren in Lampung plays a crucial role not only in the aspect of religious education but also in shaping the social character of the surrounding community. The main findings of this research indicate that kiai in NU pesantren act not only as religious teachers but also as spiritual and social leaders who hold a significant role in creating a harmonious social climate that supports the welfare of the ummah (Fajri & Munir, 2022; Nurhasanah et al., 2024). In general, kiai in NU pesantren in Lampung lead with an approach oriented toward community welfare and social morality (Rahmatullah & Sunaryanto, 2024). In decision-making, the kiai prioritize positive impacts for the broader community. They strive to apply the principle of utilitarianism in their leadership, focusing on "the greatest good for the greatest number" (Bentham, 1789; Mikraj et al., 2025; Serenko, 2023). This is reflected

in policies such as empowering the communities around pesantren through social and educational programs.

This leadership also incorporates essential aspects of Islamic values, integrating religious teachings with the application of social values that affect the welfare of the ummah. These findings align with previous studies showing that leadership based on Islamic values can strengthen social relationships and improve the quality of life in society (Maulana et al., 2025; L. Zhenjing et al., 2022).

# Utilitarianism Principles in Kiai Leadership at NU Pesantren

Utilitarianism principles in the leadership context of NU pesantren in Lampung are evident in the social policies adopted by the kiai. Utilitarianism teaches that the right action is the one that yields the greatest benefit for the most people. In this study, such principles are applied in various policies, such as zakat fund management, social education for the surrounding community, and economic empowerment programs for the families of santri. One example is the decision to construct educational and social facilities at pesantren, which benefit not only the internal community but also the surrounding residents. This creates a broader and more sustainable social impact. As (Mill, 1863) suggested, the greatest happiness for the greatest number is reflected in the kiai's efforts to improve the quality of life not only for santri but also for the wider community.

This study also finds that kiai employ utilitarian principles in managing pesantren resources, especially in providing aid to those in need. This is consistent with the findings of (Aisyah et al., 2021), who emphasized the importance of resource management in achieving greater social welfare.

# Impact of Kiai Leadership on the Quality of Life in Pesantren Communities and Surrounding Areas

One of the most significant findings of this study is the substantial impact of kiai leadership on the quality of life in the pesantren and nearby communities. Kiai leadership grounded in utilitarian principles has proven effective in improving the quality of life not only for santri but also for the surrounding residents. Programs led by the kiai, such as free education for the community, skills training, and zakat distribution, offer considerable social benefits. Well-educated santri tend to play a more active role in society, both socially and economically. This indicates that socially-oriented kiai leadership can generate widespread positive effects, not limited to the pesantren but also influencing the broader community. Moreover, these findings are in line with previous research that demonstrated the positive impact of health and welfare programs implemented at NU pesantren in Lampung on poverty reduction and social welfare enhancement (Alderwick & others, 2021). These programs highlight the importance of applying utilitarian principles to generate broader societal benefits.

The Role of Kiai Leadership in Developing a Social Value-Based Leadership Model, this study also contributes to the development of a leadership model grounded in social values and community welfare (Karim et al., 2025; Sarkowi, 2024). This leadership model focuses on improving the quality of life for the ummah, consistent with the principles of utilitarianism, which emphasize the greatest benefit for the greatest number. The leadership of kiai in NU pesantren in Lampung demonstrates that applying utilitarianism principles in pesantren management can produce a more inclusive leadership model oriented toward social welfare. For example, economic empowerment programs run by pesantren have helped santri families acquire skills that increase their income. This contributes to poverty reduction and improves the quality of life for communities around pesantren. This aligns with the views of G. Zhenjing et al., (2022), who stated that leadership focusing on social benefits can create broader impacts for society.

The leadership of *kiai* in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) pesantren in Lampung demonstrated a significant influence on the welfare of both pesantren communities and their surrounding populations. As central figures in the pesantren system, *kiai* were responsible not only for religious instruction but also for guiding *santri* and the broader community in various socio-economic aspects (Mahfuzhi & Ningsih, 2022). This role was especially crucial given the strong societal influence NU pesantren hold within Indonesia's Islamic context (Qosim & Khoiri, 2022). *Kiai* who led through a utilitarian lens sought to generate broader societal benefit by prioritizing policies that promoted collective welfare rather than catering to narrow group interests.

The implementation of utilitarian principles by *kiai* was strongly evident in the social policies enacted within the pesantren (Fauzi et al., 2019). Policies related to zakat distribution, vocational training for nearby residents, and educational aid for underprivileged *santri* families were illustrative of a commitment to social welfare (Aini Tsalsa Maulidhinah et al., 2023; Ajustina & Nisa, 2024). These actions aligned with the core utilitarian tenet of "the greatest good for the greatest number" (Mill, 2020). Each decision made by the *kiai* aimed to deliver the greatest benefit possible to the broader community, through education, training, or social assistance. This indicated that *kiai* leadership extended far beyond the internal realm of the pesantren and had broadreaching impacts on local society (Anwar, 2010). These findings were consistent with previous studies highlighting that leadership based on social values strengthened pesantren-community relations and created wider social impact (Maulana et al., 2025; G. Zhenjing et al., 2022).

The study further revealed that *kiai* leadership had a substantial effect on the quality of life of the surrounding community. Social programs led by the pesantren—such as economic empowerment initiatives and education support—had a direct positive impact on community welfare (Faoziyah, 2023). Programs like vocational training and scholarships for economically disadvantaged children not only improved their living standards but also opened opportunities for self-reliance. These efforts contributed meaningfully to poverty reduction and the enhancement of communal well-being. As Mill, (1863) asserted, morally right actions are those that bring about the greatest benefit to the most people, which aligns with how *kiai* leadership was observed to function in NU pesantren.

Moreover, the study found that utilitarian-based *kiai* leadership also had a profound impact on the quality of education provided to *santri*. Pesantren led by such *kiai* tended to focus on developing educational quality that was relevant to societal needs and contemporary developments (Khofi & Furqon, 2005). With social welfare as a guiding principle, education within these pesantren became more inclusive and socially beneficial (Faoziyah, 2023). Their programs combined deep religious instruction with practical skill development, preparing *santri* not only with religious understanding but also with life skills. These findings echoed those of Aisyah et al., (2021), who emphasized that socially grounded leadership can foster more sustainable and wide-ranging societal impacts.

Through these policies, NU pesantren in Lampung managed to generate tangible positive social outcomes, particularly in improving the economic and social welfare of their surrounding communities. The *kiai*'s leadership—centered on communal wellbeing and framed within utilitarian principles—demonstrated that pesantren governance could go beyond religious instruction to embrace broader social development. This model of leadership holds the potential to be adopted by other pesantren as a strategy for achieving wider social benefit. Therefore, this study offers a significant contribution to the development of a leadership model based on social values and collective welfare. *Kiai* who led with utilitarian principles proved capable of producing larger social benefits, aligning with Mill's (1863) theoretical foundation of utilitarianism as a guide for decision-making in service of the majority.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the results of this study, it can be concluded that the leadership of kiai in NU pesantren in Lampung plays a significant role in enhancing social welfare and the quality of life of both the pesantren community and the surrounding society. The application of utilitarian principles in kiai leadership has been proven to yield greater social benefits for the broader community, focusing on policies that promote collective well-being. Kiai who lead with this approach prioritize the greatest good for the greatest number, particularly in the areas of education, economic empowerment, and various social programs. Accordingly, this research has successfully identified how the principle of utilitarianism can be implemented in pesantren leadership to generate broader positive impacts and contribute to the development of a leadership model grounded in social values and communal welfare. For future research, it is recommended that this study be expanded by comparing the application of utilitarian principles in the leadership practices of kiai across NU pesantren in other regions of Indonesia. Further investigations may also explore additional factors that influence kiai leadership, such as the impact of local cultural norms, socio-economic challenges, and the role of technology in enhancing the effectiveness of pesantren leadership. Such research would provide more comprehensive insights into the development of a more adaptive and contextually relevant leadership model applicable across diverse pesantren settings in Indonesia.

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