

Muslim Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Intellectuals and the Environment: Ulil Abshar Abdalla's Critique of the 'Wahabi Lingkungan' Thought

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Abstract

*This study analyzes Ulil Abshar Abdalla's ideas on environmental moderation and critiques the less contextual "Wahabi Lingkungan" approach. Employing a qualitative method with netnography design, the research draws on digital data to explore social, cultural, and ideological phenomena. Results reveal that Ulil's critique, as an NU thinker, targets "Wahabi Lingkungan," denoting radical activism that rejects all resource extraction—particularly mining—without weighing the social and economic gains. He dismisses dogmatic, alarmist environmental rhetoric, advocating *wasathiyah* (moderation) to harmonize conservation with sustainable resource utilization via rational, context-sensitive *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). His stance provokes debate among activists, who view the label as derogatory and dismissive of ecosystem harm. Ulil's perspective embodies the pursuit of balance between environmental protection and economic growth among NU intellectuals in Indonesia.*

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis pemikiran Ulil Abshar Abdalla tentang moderasi dalam isu lingkungan serta mengkritik pendekatan "Wahabisme Lingkungan" yang dianggap kurang kontekstual. Metode penelitian bersifat kualitatif dengan desain etnografi digital (netnografi), yang memanfaatkan data ruang digital untuk memahami fenomena sosial, budaya, dan ideologis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa pemikiran Ulil sebagai intelektual NU mengkritik "Wahabisme Lingkungan," istilah untuk aktivisme lingkungan radikal yang menolak segala eksloitasi sumber daya, terutama menentang pertambangan tanpa mempertimbangkan manfaat sosial-ekonomi. Ulil menolak narasi lingkungan dogmatis, lalu mengusulkan konsep *wasathiyah* (moderasi) dengan menyeimbangkan konservasi dan pemanfaatan sumber daya berkelanjutan melalui fikih rasional-kontekstual. Kritiknya memicu perdebatan dengan aktivis lingkungan yang menganggap istilah itu menghina dan menyangkal kerusakan ekosistem. Pemikirannya mencerminkan posisi intelektual NU yang mencari jalan tengah antara pelestarian lingkungan dan pembangunan ekonomi di Indonesia.

Keywords:

Muslim NU intellectuals,
Ulil Abshar Abdalla,
Environmental Wahhabism.

INTRODUCTION

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) is one of the largest and oldest religious organizations in Indonesia. The name NU itself means 'Revival of the Ulama,' reflecting the central role of the ulama as key figures and driving forces of the organization both within and beyond NU's environment. The organization was founded as a platform for ulama to articulate religious concerns and address emerging social and national issues. One of the main challenges when NU was established was the rise of Wahhabi influence or Islamic puritanism, which potentially restricted the freedom of religious schools of thought through a strict and singular religious approach. Additionally, the social situation under Dutch colonial rule motivated the ulama to establish NU as a form of resistance against colonialism and an effort to maintain religious freedom.¹

From this concern, NU carried the mission of Islamic *Wasathiyah dakwah*—deliberation and moderation in Islam—as a response to counter puritanism and as an affirmation against colonialism, which sought to control the religious practices of the Indonesian people.² After Indonesia's independence, this moderate approach developed into Islam Nusantara, the practice of religious teachings while still respecting and preserving local culture. Indonesia's pluralistic and diverse society successfully embraced this approach. In addition to its spiritual role, NU also engaged in politics, serving as a political party from 1952 to 1955 before returning to its roots as a socio-religious organization.³

Although it no longer functions as a political party, NU continues to exert significant influence in the political sphere, including during the New Order era, when it supported the reform movement through the *United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan/PPP)*. K.H. Sahal Mahfudz's idea of *siyasah aliyah samiyah*, or "high-level politics," served as a guideline for the NU to remain independent as a religious organization without becoming entangled in practical politics. This concept also allowed NU members to engage in politics individually rather than on behalf of the organization. *Siyasah aliyah samiyah* aims

¹ Nindi Alfizahrin et al., "Feminisme Dalam Islam Menurut Pandangan Tokoh Muhammadiyah Dan Nahdlatul Ulama Di Kota Ambon," *AL-MUQARANAH* 1, no. 1 (n.d.): 2022; Didi Suheri, "Politik Patronase Dalam Pemberian Izin Tambang Kepada Ormas Nahdlatul Ulama," *Arus Jurnal Sosial Dan Humaniora* 5, no. 2 (2025): 1822–28, <https://doi.org/10.57250/ajsh.v5i2.1393>.

² Mhd. Abror, "Moderasi Beragama Dalam Bingkai Toleransi," *Rusydiah: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 1, No. 2 (2020): 137–48, <Https://Doi.Org/10.35961/Rsd.V1i2.174>; Nurhidayah Nurhidayah Et Al., "Moderasi Beragama Perspektif Pluralisme Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur)," *Jurnal Penelitian Ilmu Ushuluddin* 2, No. 2 (2022), <Https://Doi.Org/10.15575/Jpiu.15577>.

³ Akhmad Syaekhu Rakhman, "Dinamika Perkembangan Politik Nahdatul Ulama Pasca Khittah Tahun 1984-1999," *Heuristik: Jurnal Pendidikan Sejarah* 1, no. 1 (2021): 8–17.

to ensure that NU remains a religious organization focused on social dakwah and the safeguarding of the public interest, without direct involvement in practical politics. This concept further affirms NU as an active organization that fights for social justice and protects society from arbitrary actions.⁴

However, recent developments indicate that this principle is increasingly neglected. Recently, PBNU Chairman Ulil Abshar Abdalla labeled those who are very conservative about environmental conservation—who reject mining absolutely—as “*Wahabi Lingkungan*.” This label became controversial, especially considering NU itself was founded as an organization opposing Wahhabi thought. Given NU’s strong history against Wahhabism, using the term “*Wahabi Lingkungan*” risks being used as a legitimizing tool to cast critical groups of environmental exploitation as threats that must be opposed. Calls for moderation, including in ecological matters, could be used to justify natural resource exploitation.

This research discusses Ulil Abshar Abdalla’s thoughts on “*Wahabi Lingkungan*” opening new discourse on moderation in addressing Indonesia’s complex environmental crisis. In situations where natural resource exploitation often clashes with environmental conservation demands, discourse critiquing extremism in environmental activism becomes relevant. Ulil, as a Muslim intellectual and PBNU Chairman, presents a perspective that combines Islamic values with social-economic pragmatism, which requires academic examination to provide alternative thinking in environmental management.

Regarding previous studies to highlight differences in the upcoming research on the environment, particularly among Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), they include: *First*, research by M. Khoirul Huda, which discusses mobilizing pesantren ulama to generate environmental sustainability discourse from an Islamic tradition perspective. NU’s characteristic Bahsul Masail study forums are filled with environmental issues. Both kiai leaders and santri embrace environmental sustainability issues. The peak is the emergence of the call for environmental jihad (*jihad al-bi’iyah*).⁵ *Second*, research by Zzatul Mardhiah, Rihlah Nur Aulia, and Sari Narulita, which examines the role of major religious organizations in Indonesia—NU and Muhammadiyah—in providing understanding of environmental management based on religious studies to Indonesian Muslims, which is significant. By giving proper guidance, the role of

⁴ Ismail Fajrie Alatas et al., “Sejarah Hubungan Habaib Dan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU),” *Tebuireng: Journal of Islamic Studies and Society* 2, no. 2 (2022): 86–101.

⁵ M. Khoirul Huda, “Kontribusi Komunitas Nu Dalam Isu Kelestarian Lingkungan Hidup di Indonesia”, *Jurnal Dialektika Politik* 7, no. 2 (2023); 170. DOI : doi.org/10.37949/jdp.v7i2.70

Muslims in environmental management becomes more directed and better.⁶ Third, research by Adi Fauzanto, which focuses on Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama organizations in addressing environmental pollution and damage problems in Indonesia. Its findings and discussion indicate that both have roles and methods in tackling pollution and environmental damage through law, education, advocacy, and literacy.⁷

Previous research has not addressed Ulil Abshar Abdalla's thoughts on "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," and to date, no journals or theses have discussed "*Wahabi Lingkungan*." Therefore, this upcoming research will represent an innovation. The novelty of this research lies in the first critical analysis that integrates Ulil Abshar Abdalla's "*Wahabi Lingkungan*" concept with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) ecotheology paradigm, which has not been explored in depth previously. The research aims to critique Ulil Abshar Abdalla's thoughts on the "*Wahabi Lingkungan*" concept from an NU intellectual perspective, exploring its implications for Islamic environmental ethics. Additionally, this research proposes an inclusive paradigm that embraces dialogue between technocratic rationality and NU's ecological conscience.

METHOD

The research method employed in this study is a qualitative approach with a netnography design, which is a research technique that utilizes data from digital spaces to understand social, cultural, and ideological phenomena. Netnography was selected because it enables the researcher to access and analyze various relevant online sources related to Ulil Abshar Abdalla's thought, particularly in the context of moderation and critique of "*Wahabi Lingkungan*." Primary data are gathered from digital platforms such as websites, personal blogs, social media, discussion forums, and online articles featuring Ulil Abshar Abdalla's writings or comments on environmental issues and moderation. In addition, the researcher observes public discussions on social media, online discussion groups, and public comments responding to Ulil's ideas, especially those related to his critique of "*Wahabi Lingkungan*"⁸

⁶ Zzatul Mardhiah, Rihlah Nur Aulia, and Sari Narulita, "Konsep Gerakan Ekoteologi Islam Studi Atas Ormas NU dan Muhammadiyah", *Jurnal Studi Al-Qur'an: Membangun Tradisi Berpikir Qur'ani* 10, no. 1, (2014); 83.

⁷ Adi Fauzanto, "Peran Muhammadiyah dan Nahdlatul Ulama dalam Problematika Kerusakan Lingkungan Hidup di Indonesia", *MOMENTUM: Jurnal Sosial dan Keagamaan* 9, no. 1, (2020); 1-10

⁸ Ade Noviani and Sri Wijayanti, "Instagram Sebagai Medium Pesan Komunitas Ibu Tunggal Di Indonesia (Studi Netnografi Di Akun Instagram @singlemomsindonesia)," *Jurnal Netnografi Komunikasi* 1, no. 1 (2022): 1-13, <https://doi.org/10.59408/netnografi.v1i1.1>.

Primary data are obtained through non-reactive participant observation on digital platforms like X (Twitter), Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, using purposive sampling of selected content related to "*Wahabi Lingkungan*" from NU intellectuals' accounts (for example, branch ulama, NU environmental activists, and respondents to Ulil's tweets from June to December 2025). Secondary data include Ulil's primary documents such as interviews on Kumparan and Instagram reels, as well as critiques from PKB legislators and young NU figures highlighting mining impacts. Other collected data encompass relevant texts, images, and videos, along with user interactions that demonstrate diverse perspectives on moderation ideas and critiques of "*Wahabi Lingkungan*." Digital documentation techniques are also used to store and organize the data, ensuring the integrity and authenticity of the sources used in the analysis.

Thematic analysis combined with hermeneutics is applied to identify main themes such as "NU moderation vs. environmental puritanism," "the benefits of mining," and "critique of Ulil's labeling." Data analysis follows a thematic and hermeneutic approach. Thematic analysis identifies patterns, themes, and key issues emerging from the digital data, while hermeneutics captures the deep and contextual meanings in Ulil Abshar Abdalla's ideas and public responses to them. The analysis process begins with data reduction, which involves sorting and grouping data based on relevant themes, such as the concept of moderation, critique of "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," and public responses to these ideas.⁹

This study also considers the social and cultural context of the digital spaces serving as data sources. The researcher recognizes that discourse in digital spaces is often influenced by social, political, and religious dynamics, so the analysis is conducted contextually and sensitively to users' backgrounds. The researcher also addresses potential biases in digital data, such as dominance of certain voices or information manipulation, through critical analysis of the sources and content collected.¹⁰

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Principles of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Environmental Protection

Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) does not only focus on religious activities but is also active in social fields, including environmental conservation efforts. According to Muhamad Khoirul Huda, a student at UIN Jakarta Graduate School, NU has

⁹ Luky Patricia Widianingsih and Cliff Kohardinata, "Literasi Keuangan Dari Drama Korea: Studi Netnografi Atas Konstruksi Nilai," *Journal of Education Researc* 5, no. 1 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.37985/jer.v5i1.844>.

¹⁰ Gatut Priyowidodo, *Monograf Netnografi Komunikasi: Aplikasi Pada Tiga Riset Lapangan* (PT. RajaGrafindo Persada-Rajawali Pers, 2022).

three main roles in supporting environmental sustainability, as outlined in research on NU's contributions to Indonesia's environmental issues between 1988-2017. First, since the 1980s, NU began formulating social fiqh concepts related to the environment. Figures such as KH Ali Yafie and KH Sahal Mahfudh pioneered these developments. NU's commitment in developing environmental fiqh emerged as a response to the context at that time, when the state invited communities to participate in protecting an environment increasingly damaged by national development. KH Ali, for instance, emphasized that humans have three potentials: as destroyers, builders, and protectors. As protectors, humans should maintain the universe's sustainability.¹¹

Second, since the 1990s, NU has actively raised various environmental crisis issues in its bahtsul masail (problem discussion) forums. NU has discussed the responsibilities of both the state and society in protecting the environment. This spirit is also reflected in the promotion of *jihad bi'iyyah*, a jihad to care for the environment. In 2007, NU's bahtsul masail reaffirmed the state's obligation to preserve forests. On July 23, 2007, PBNNU reiterated this commitment through the National Movement for Forestry and Environment (GNHLN), calling on the government and society to jointly oppose all efforts to destroy forests and the environment, in order to maintain the integrity of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI). NU also initiated *jihad bi'iyyah* (environmental jihad) based on the principles of *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil) as manifestations of love for the homeland and preservation of national identity.¹²

NU's commitment is reflected in several important decisions dating back to the NU Congress in Cipasung in 1994. This congress, held in the pesantren led by KH Ilyas Ruhiyat, affirmed NU's courage in advocating environmental jihad based on fiqh and positive law. With this decision, environmentally destructive acts are not only deemed religiously sinful but can also be subject to state legal sanctions. During this forum, PBNNU responded firmly to the negative impacts of industrialization during the New Order era, particularly environmental pollution caused by factory waste. The legal foundation employed is Islamic fiqh, which classifies environmental pollution that causes harm (*dharar*) as haram and a criminal act (*jinayat*).

¹¹ Hijoatul Maghfiroh, *Sejarah Panjang NU Dan 4 Prinsip Relevan Membaca Masalah Krisis Ekologi*, 2025, <https://islami.co/sejarah-panjang-nu-dan-4-prinsip-relevan-membaca-masalah-krisis-ekologi/>.

¹² Maghfiroh, *Sejarah Panjang NU Dan 4 Prinsip Relevan Membaca Masalah Krisis Ekologi*.

Polluters are obliged to compensate for damages and may face disciplinary (ta'zir) sanctions within the framework of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar. The main basis of this decision refers to QS Al-A'raf: 56, which forbids corruption on earth after it has been set in order, and the principle of la dharara wa la dhirara, prohibiting all forms of harm such as pollution (*al-Mawahib al-Saniyah*). Although this stance demonstrates environmental sensitivity, the 1994 decision did not explicitly address extractive industries like mining that cause massive environmental damage.

Third, NU established a special institution dealing with environmental issues called the Nahdlatul Ulama Disaster Management and Climate Change Institute (LPBINU). This institution was officially formed at the 32nd NU Congress in Makassar in 2010 and became part of PNU's formal structure. LPBINU functions as an institution handling natural disasters, climate change, and environmental conservation, serving as NU's extension in these fields.

At the 2012 NU National Conference (Munas) in Cirebon, discussions began focusing on managing natural resource exploitation, especially mineral and energy extraction activities. The Bahtsul Masail Diniyyah Qanuniyyah Commission reviewed laws related to oil, gas, minerals, and water resources, criticizing weak government control, low national revenue, unfair regional profit sharing, water commercialization, and minimal ecological protection. NU recommended strengthening state authority, imposing a minimum revenue ratio of 10% plus tax (usyur), fair profit-sharing for regions, abolishing water commercialization, and canceling articles inconsistent with the 1945 Constitution and decentralization principles.¹³

However, in this decision, NU did not yet view extractive industries as always harmful. The focus was on strengthening state sovereignty to prevent foreign domination. Sheikh Wahbah Az-Zuhaili's opinion in *Al-Fiqh al-Islami wa Adillatuhu* supports this view by stating that resources like mines belong to the state to prevent chaos. Subsequently, at the Great Conference and Alim Ulama National Congress in Jombang (2015), NU shifted focus to criticize excessive natural resource exploitation by large corporations resulting in serious environmental damage, such as bauxite mining pits in Riau and coal mining in Kalimantan. The decision declared that exploitation causing clear environmental harm and permits causing intentional permanent damage are forbidden (haram). NU also emphasized the community's duty of amar ma'ruf nahi munkar

¹³ Amien Nurhakim, *Sejumlah Keputusan NU Untuk Melindungi Alam*, 2025, <https://banten.nu.or.id/keislaman/sejumlah-keputusan-nu-untuk-melindungi-alam-Tt1qD>.

according to their capacity and regarded resource management benefiting investors but harming the people as a haram act.

The 2015 Munas decision underscores NU's support for natural resource management oriented toward public welfare consistent with Article 33 of the 1945 Constitution and Environmental Protection Law No. 32/2009. NU condemned monopolies, oligopolies, and cartels in resource management that violate Islamic law and constitutional spirit. To address inequalities, NU recommended moratoriums on large company operation permits, halting violence in agrarian conflicts, establishing independent mediation bodies, and restoring land rights to affected communities.¹⁴

The legal basis of this decision refers to Ar-Razi's exegesis on QS Al-A'raf: 56, which forbids all forms of corruption (fasad) that threaten life, property, lineage, religion, and intellect. Resource exploitation that destroys ecosystems and displaces local communities falls under this strict prohibition. Sheikh Wahbah Az-Zuhaili also emphasizes the principle *la dharara wa la dhirara* to allow state intervention against activities detrimental to the broader society. Additionally, Imam An-Nawawi's criticism of deceitful practices (tadlis), including hiding negative impacts of economic activities, is relevant for assessing mining corporations lacking transparency and accountability.¹⁵

Analytically, the 2015 decision reflects a more critical and progressive NU ecological thinking compared to previous decisions. However, challenges remain in tackling structural root causes such as resource market liberalization and weak environmental law enforcement. Lastly, in 2017, NU reinforced its ecological commitment by publishing the Renewable Energy Fiqh book through a Lakpesdam-PBNU collaboration. This book condemns fossil energy exploitation causing deforestation and pollution as haram due to harm (*dharar*). NU affirms environmental preservation as *jihad bi'iyyah* and promotes renewable energy like solar and wind as environmentally friendly solutions with much lower carbon emissions than coal. Based on NU's intellectual journey from the 1994 Cipasung Congress to the 2017 Renewable Energy Fiqh, NU's strong commitment to integrating Islamic values for environmental protection and sustainable future through policy and action is clear.

¹⁴ andi Rezal Juhari Et Al., "Fiqh Dan Politik Ekologi: Studi Komparatif Pendekatan Muhammadiyah Dan Nahdhatul Ulama Terhadap Krisis Lingkungan," *Jurnal Tahqiqa: Jurnal Pemikiran Hukum Islam*, 19, no. 2 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.61393/tahqiqa.v19i2.343>.

¹⁵ Adi Fauzanto, "Peran Muhammadiyah Dan Nahdlatul Ulama Dalam Problematika Kerusakan Lingkungan Hidup Di Indonesia," *MOMENTUM: Jurnal Sosial Dan Keagamaan*, 9, no. 1 (2020), <https://ejournal.stiblambangan.ac.id/index.php/momentum/article/view/22>.

Ulil Abshar Abdalla's "Wahabi Lingkungan" Thought

Throughout history, prophets and ulama rarely championed the status quo—except for Wahhabi ulama in Saudi Arabia. Typically, they stood with the vulnerable: the poor, the damaged environment, or norms trampled by the greed of power. Prophet Moses confronted Pharaoh, Isaiah challenged the unjust rulers of Israel, and Prophet Muhammad delivered revelation amid the social injustice of Mecca. Historically, the term "Wahhabi" refers to the movement led by Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1792), a Najdi scholar who called for the purification of tawhid and the elimination of practices considered bid'ah (innovation). This movement partnered with the Saud dynasty, forming the ideological foundation of the Saudi Kingdom. Interestingly, Muḥammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhāb himself never called his followers "Wahhabis," explicitly rejecting the label as a form of ghuluw (excessive fanaticism), as seen in his book *Risālah ilā Ahl al-Qasīm*.¹⁶

The term "Wahhabi" was popularized first by colonial powers. For instance, during British colonialism in India, "Wahhabi" was a label assigned by the British government to radical Islamic freedom movements like *Tehrīk-i Mujāhidīn*, led by Sayyid Ahmad Shahid, which had significant theological and genealogical differences with Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's teachings.¹⁷

Hamid Algar, a professor of Islamic studies at UC Berkeley, in his 2002 essay *Wahhabism: A Critical Essay*, argues the term more reflects how ideological enemies create imaginary foes than objective historical reality. Certainly, some extremist groups tend toward takfiri views, just as some groups lean toward extreme liberalism. However, casually labeling opponents as "Wahhabi" equates to no more than superficial labeling—both extremes, just different garments. If the term continues to be used without a clear scientific framework, it amounts to character assassination. Debates that should unfold in realms of knowledge, ethics, and argumentation are reduced to label wars.¹⁸

Religious leaders and intellectuals should pursue *maslahat* (benefit), not *mafsadat* (harm). When a religious figure affirms environmental destruction citing economic stability, they betray the prophetic and scholarly tradition that is the spirit of faith itself. From intellectual oversimplification to ethical crisis within

¹⁶ Rizal Yaakop and Asmady Idris, "Belief System of Wahabi Doctrine in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," *INSANCITA: Journal of Islamic Studies in Indonesia and Southeast Asia*, 2, no. 2 (2017): 123–36.

¹⁷ Kerwanto Kerwanto and Muhammd Furqan Alfaruqiy, "Sejarah Dan Transformasi Pemikiran Wahabi: Pengaruh Dan Relevansinya Dalam Dunia Islam Kontemporer," *Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Sosial* 8, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.61941/iklila.v8i1.322>.

¹⁸ Muqoffi Muqoffi et al., "Menelisik Faham Wahabi Dalam Buku Ajar Pendidikan Agama Islam," *Jurnal Studi Pendidikan Islam* 1, no. 1 (2025).

PBNU, Gus Ulil forgets one thing: as PBNU Chairman, the U in NU stands for ulama, not uang (money). For Gus Ulil, rejecting mining equals rejecting ijihad—a form of conservatism opposing contemporary dynamics. This is his fundamental error. The term “*Wahabi Lingkungan*,” intended as a critique of puritanical, rigid, uncompromising ecological attitudes opposing natural resource exploitation, has no meaningful connection with *Wahhabism*, though *Wahhabi* ideology itself must be opposed.¹⁹

The Chairman of PBNU, Ulil Abshar Abdalla, or Gus Ulil, has drawn attention for labeling opponents of extractive industries such as mining as “*Wahabi Lingkungan*,” a term implying extreme conservative attitudes. According to Ulil, mining is a resource that must be managed for the welfare of the community. He believes that well-managed mining, especially under NU’s supervision, can bring substantial benefits. However, PBNU recently accepted the management of a former coal mining concession of PT Kaltim Prima Coal Tbk covering 26,000 hectares in East Kalimantan. This stance triggered criticism from the public and within NU itself, especially among younger groups who feel PBNU does not represent the aspirations of nahdliyin (NU members).

Lately, the term “*Wahabi Lingkungan*,” has gained popularity and is directed at environmental activists perceived as too rigid in rejecting mining projects. Yet, this labeling is not merely wordplay but potentially dangerous because it oversimplifies complex issues, distracts from the real discussion, and conceals the root of widespread ecological anger in Indonesia. Categorizing activists as “*Wahabi Lingkungan*,” not only reduces but intellectually misleads, replacing substantive dialogue with identity-based sentiment. As a result, debates concerning mining impacts—from ecological, social, economic, to legal aspects—are marginalized, lowering the quality of public discourse and allowing bias rather than data and justice principles to dominate.

Ulil calls his viewpoint “reasonable environmentalism,” a rational environmental approach. He criticizes most environmental activists as “alarmists” for using scare narratives about climate change, global warming, and coal mining issues. PBNU’s stance shifted significantly after the government promised coal mine handover last year. Previously, PBNU issued a fatwa prohibiting resource exploitation that damages the environment and

¹⁹ Hendrik Yaputra, *Kata Ketum PBNU Soal Wahabi Lingkungan Dan Izin Tambang NU*, 2025, <https://www.tempo.co/politik/kata-ketum-pbnu-soal-wahabi-lingkungan-dan-izin-tambang-nu-1804425>.

recommended stopping coal-fired power plants and reducing coal production since 2022.²⁰

In his argument, Gus Ulil views properly managed mining by PBNU as a source of community welfare. Hence, he considers total rejection of mining for environmental conservation as a form of Wahhabism. He argues that coal use as energy currently brings more benefits than harms, asserting that under present conditions, there appears to be no alternative but to utilize extractive resources. Ulil Abshar Abdalla clarified the meaning behind the term "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," he once used, which stirred controversy publicly. He stated that the term is not aimed at specific issues like the mining polemic in Raja Ampat but is a critique of extreme views in environmental activism. Speaking at the Indonesian Conference on Religion and Peace (ICRP) press conference at Graha Oikumene building, he said, "Actually, my stance relates to controversy about Raja Ampat, but it's not specifically about Raja Ampat. I want to emphasize the need for a clear vision on natural resource issues."

He argued that some environmental activists promote the absolute view that all mining must be stopped. He said this perspective, originating from the West, is unsuitable for resource-rich countries like Indonesia. "Actually, this view comes from the West. There is an opinion that mining, in any form, any extractive industry, must be stopped." Ulil sees both extremes—the brutal corporate exploitation and the total ban by activists—as equally dangerous. He proposes a middle path called "good mining" or reasonable environmentalism.²¹

He explains that "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," is a metaphor for puritanical attitudes in environmental protection, rejecting any human involvement in management altogether. "*That is what I call "Wahabi Lingkungan,"*" So, "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," are those who want to keep nature purely untouched by human interference. It is a kind of puritanism. Just as Wahhabism has textual puritanism, here is environmental puritanism. Both are dangerous." Ulil acknowledges that pollution caused by dirty mining practices—especially by corporations or illegal operations—is a serious problem.

However, he argues that the solution is not to forbid mining altogether but to promote sustainable and responsible management. He notes that illegal mining in Raja Ampat is real and must be addressed. Yet, this should not hinder discourse on healthy and publicly beneficial natural resource management. Ulil compared activists opposing nickel mining in Raja Ampat with Wahhabi puritanism, a movement emphasizing religious textual purity. This analogy

²⁰ Wahyu Chandra, *Sesat Pikir "Wahabi Lingkungan"* Ulil, 2025, <https://matakita.co/2025/06/24/sesat-pikir-wahabi-lingkungan-ulil/>.

²¹ Mutaali, *Wahabi Lingkungan*.

immediately drew criticism for applying a theological term to ecological issues without adequate conceptual basis. Logically, the statement is a false equivalence. Wahhabism stems from 18th-century literalist Quranic interpretation, while environmental movements are based on scientific data, positive law, and sustainability principles. Equating the two is a category mistake, as coined by Gilbert Ryle, mixing two different realms.²²

The statement also contains ad hominem labeling. By branding opponents as “Wahhabis,” the focus shifts from the dangers of mining to the opponent’s character. Irving M. Copi calls this a circumstantial ad hominem, where claims are dismissed by unwarranted labeling. Ulil defends it by saying activists are seen as extreme because they totally reject mining, similar to Wahhabis refusing textual compromise. Yet, this is a straw-man fallacy—misrepresenting the opponent’s position into the most hardened version. For instance, Greenpeace does not absolutely reject mining but proposes moratoriums until impact analyses, reclamation, and indigenous rights are fulfilled.

According to George Lakoff’s framing theory, the “*Wahabi Lingkungan*,” term functions as a frame depicting mining opponents as fanatics, shifting rational debate into an emotional “us versus them” arena. This frame fractures public dialogue and obscures core problems: namely, failures in nickel reclamation. The purification logic Ulil associates with Wahhabism is also inconsistent. Wahhabism rejects innovation as *bid’ah* (innovation in religion); environmental conservation aims to maintain ecosystem status quo to prevent damage. This is an inverse analogy—Wahhabi purification rejects new practices, while the green movement prevents additional environmental harm.

First, equating *Wahhabism* with ecological activism is a serious false analogy (*qiyyas ma’ a al-fariq*). *Wahhabism* is rooted in rejection of Islamic local traditions and is a reactionary movement cloaked in a spirit of purification. Meanwhile, environmental activism concerns the earth increasingly threatened by extractive economic greed, not fear of sacred texts being contaminated. Protecting forests, seas, and lands does not “close the door to *ijtihad*,” but rather enlivens humans’ amanah as *khalifah fil ardh*—guardians, not destroyers—a role Gus Ulil understands well.

Second, Gus Ulil’s statements emerged amid economically and politically non-neutral moments: the state granting mining concessions to social organizations, including NU. Thus, religious discourse legitimizing mining—even silencing ecological opposition with the label “Wahhabi”—is clearly

²² Fatimatuz Zaha, *Wahabi Lingkungan: Ketika Wajah Wasathiyah NU Menjelma Jadi Alat Kolonialisasi Baru*, 2025, <https://gusdurian.net/2025/07/08/wahabi-lingkungan-ketika-wajah-wasathiyah-nu-menjelma-jadi-alat-kolonialisasi-baru/>.

dangerous. Ulil moralizes exploitative practices that may violate the scholarly amanah. How dark that is. The ethical crisis deepens when another PBNU chairman, Fahrur Rozi, serves as Commissioner of PT GAG Nikel. The public quickly pieces together the puzzle: Ulil's defense of mining reflects institutional stance justified by conflict of interest. Under their watch, NU risks becoming not a defender of the people and maslahat but a self-serving entity engaged in destructive economic competition.²³

Therefore, when NU intellectuals stigmatize ecological concern as "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," one must ask: is this grounded in maqasid shariah (objectives of Islamic law), or merely conflict of interest dressed in religious narrative? This ethical crisis touches the very heart of NU as Indonesia's largest religious organization. If mining is truly desired, there is no need to hide behind NU or invoke Wahhabi terminology. Epistemically, this is also fatal. If Ulil truly adopts "reasonable environmentalism," he should acknowledge that mining practices in Indonesia have mostly caused environmental damage, social inequality, and empowered oligarchies. The long-term mining harms far outweigh short-term gains.²⁴

Stephen Toulmin notes the need for a warrant as a logical bridge between data and claim. Ulil uses the premise "extractive industries are always harmful" but leaps directly to "mining opponents are Wahhabis" without warrant, leaving his argument unsupported. According to Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics, public dialogue must be free from symbolic coercion. The "*Wahhabi*" label brings Nusantara's historical religious tensions into play; such symbolic pressure belittles participants and damages ideal communication. Semantically, Wahhabism relates to takfiri ideology—accusing others of heresy if they deviate from Quran and Sunnah. Ironically, Ulil here performs an "environmental takfir" by accusing mining opponents of ecological heresy, a psychological defense mechanism called projection—shifting negative attributes onto opponents.²⁵

Herman and Chomsky's Manufacturing Consent model helps explain the pattern: emotional labels replace data-driven discourse with stigmatization as "anti-progress." From John Rawls's Justice as Fairness perspective, policies

²³ Krisnana Krisnana, *Wahabi Lingkungan – Membedah Kekeliruan Logika Cuitan Ulil Abshar Abdalla*, 2025, <https://goresanilmu.com/2025/06/18/wahabi-lingkungan-membedah-kekeliruan-logika-cuitan-ulil-abshar-abdalla/>.

²⁴ Ibnu Fikri, *Ulil Abshar Dan Wahabi Lingkungan: Rasionalisasi Atau Pemberan tambang?*, 2025, <https://theconversation.com/ulil-abshar-dan-wahabi-lingkungan-rasionalisasi-atau-pemberan-tambang-259000>.

²⁵ Thomas Bosco Pandapotan, *Gus Ulil Beri Penjelasan Soal Wahabi Lingkungan Yang Jadi Perbincangan*, 2025, <https://kumparan.com/kumparannews/gus-ulil-beri-penjelasan-soal-wahabi-lingkungan-yang-jadi-perbincangan-25K8Nw96lIT/full>.

should favor the most vulnerable groups—such as reef-dependent Maya fishermen—not just mining investors. In healthy discourse, claims must be supported by quarterly reclamation reports, economic analyses of ecotourism versus mining royalties, and blue carbon evaluations of mangroves. The “Wahhabi” label merely adds emotional noise, not rational clarity. Illich warned of institutions that “make us believe things as they are.” The “Wahhabi” tag risks controlling the industry narrative—shaping public perception of mining opponents as fanatics rather than evidence-based defenders.²⁶

Critique of Ulil Abshar Abdalla’s Thought on “Wahabi Lingkungan”

Ulil Abshar Abdalla’s thought on “Wahabi Lingkungan” opens a new and controversial discourse in Indonesia’s environmental debates, particularly within the context of the role of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) Muslim intellectuals. As Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Executive Board (PBNU), Ulil attempts to create the concept of “Wahabi Lingkungan” to critique environmental activist groups that he views as overly extreme, rigid, and puritanical in rejecting natural resource exploitation, especially mining. He regards the total rejection of mining as a stance that could potentially harm society economically and socially, which contradicts the principle of moderation (*wasathiyah*) that has long characterized NU teachings and Indonesian Islam in general.

However, the critiques accompanying this thought are sharply pointed from environmental activists, young NU intellectuals, and several social observers. They consider the term “Wahabi Lingkungan” as oversimplifying complex issues and obscuring the root of public ecological anger toward environmental damage, while potentially silencing critical voices striving for social and ecological justice. Such labeling attacks resemble political strategies that divert substantive debates from data and justice principles into the realm of identity politics and negative stigma, thereby weakening the quality of public discourse. From an argumentative methodology perspective, the sarcasm of “Wahabi Lingkungan” constitutes a misguided false analogy, even risking straw man and ad hominem fallacies, as it compares a science- and conservation-based social movement with a 18th-century religious puritan movement rooted in literal texts.

For example, on Obi Island, South Halmahera, nickel mining pollutes waters and toxic waste damages the sea. Many land conflicts, criminalization of residents, and fatalities from unreclaimed mining pits have occurred. By

²⁶ CNN Indonesia, *Cak Imin Sindir Istilah Wahabi Lingkungan: Krisis Iklim Menggerikan*, 2025, <https://www.cnnindonesia.com/nasional/20250712195812-32-1249982/cak-imin-sindir-istilah-wahabi-lingkungan-krisis-iklim-mengerikan>.

accepting this concession, PBNNU seems to reinforce nature's exploitation under the guise of umat's welfare. This contradicts earlier fatwas and scholar decisions forbidding mining. Instead of upholding mining bans, PBNNU elites appear to justify them with religious pretexts.

As a religious organization, PBNNU lacks professional mining management experience. Thus, claims of good management capability are difficult to justify. NU community concerns grow if NU partners with large corporations and entangles itself in oligarchic power. The debate around Ulil's statements and PBNNU's mining involvement is not merely political but concerns moral legitimacy. What actually occurs is a values struggle within NU itself; on one hand, elites attempt to cleanse the organization's image with rational narratives, while youth cadres demand NU maintain its moral and ecological integrity.

As expressed in the traditional PBNNU discourse—as noted by Hengki in the referenced writing—some ulama have emphasized the need to limit natural resource exploitation. Figures like KH Alie Yafie have even explicitly stated that environmental preservation is part of implementing sharia. NU's congress decisions have consistently promoted efforts to conserve the earth, which starkly contrast PBNNU's current stance favoring extractive industries. If the anti-puritanism spirit is now reused to attack groups labeled as "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," it should be met with skepticism, as NU might leverage its image as a moderate organization to promote a singular truth it once rejected, serving particular practical interests.

PBNNU's current defense and support of mining exploitation seem to repeat colonial patterns that entrenched structural dependency to exploit natural resources and labor for the benefit of elites. Walter Rodney emphasized that colonialism sacrificed communities and the environment for the gain of a few, a pattern reappearing in the unabashed defense of mining without sufficient attention to socio-ecological impacts. True development should be grounded in an analysis of local needs, justice, and sustainability principles rather than cultivating exploitative dependencies that lack fairness.²⁷

PBNNU's permissive attitude toward natural resource exploitation and the emergence of the "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," label reflect a colonial mindset that regards dissenting views as threats or "foreign"—a term often used by state officials to criminalize opposition. Within PBNNU, this labeling functions to preserve power by constructing a negative image of dissenters, reinforcing

²⁷ Miranti Miranti, *Ironi: Aktivis Lingkungan Dicap Wahabi Lingkungan Sementara Kerusakan Lingkungan Merajalela*, 2025, <https://mubadalah.id/ironi-aktivis-lingkungan-dicap-wahabi-lingkungan-sementara-kerusakan-lingkungan-merajalela/>.

exclusion and marginalization. This indicates that colonial thinking considering “the other” as inferior still survives and is employed within religious organizational dynamics to protect certain interests. This condition is far removed from NU’s original spirit, which was historically born as an anti-colonial movement driven by ulama advocating religious moderation or Islam Wasathiyah, aiming to bridge extreme poles in religion. Ironically, in this era, some organizational elites appear as pawns acting to legitimize practical interests, abandoning those initial principles.

In every social movement, including environmental activism, there are indeed a spectrum of attitudes, including idealistic or utopian tendencies. However, it is important to remember that extremism is not exclusive to activists. There is also developmental extremism, where the environment is exploited without limits, even by the state, through imbalanced policies prioritizing economic growth for the benefit of a select elite. Mining projects touted as symbols of progress often fail to bring welfare to surrounding communities. Instead of blessings, mining frequently results in disasters such as landslides, water crises, marine pollution, and degraded land. Developmental extremism also manifests when communities defending their land are accused of being anti-investment, and forests—habitats to thousands of species—are reduced to mere hectares or GDP percentages.

Roy Murtadho is a young figure representing a consistent wave of NU activists rejecting mining activities in ecologically vulnerable areas. He is not a stranger within NU circles, having been raised in pesantren traditions and active in NU’s young cadre networks, grounding his ecological struggle on Islamic values. However, when such critical stances are linked to the label “Wahhabism,” it actually reflects an ideological reprimand occurring internally and can be seen as a covert attempt to delegitimize NU’s younger generation willing to critique authority.²⁸

Roy Murtadho reminds that Greenpeace and WALHI have conducted extensive research on forest damage due to deforestation and National Strategic Projects (PSN). However, these studies apparently receive little attention from Ulil and those who label activists as “too extreme.” During Jokowi’s administration (2014–2024), the government promoted various PSNs such as trans-island roads, food estates, dams, industrial zones, and the relocation of the national capital. All projects claim to serve national development and welfare objectives. However, their ecological impact accelerates deforestation and

²⁸ Yusra R Nugroho, *Wahabi Lingkungan: Ketika Gus Ulil Menumpulkan Kontra-Wahabisme*, 2025, <https://www.harakatuna.com/wahabi-lingkungan-ketika-gus-ulil-menumpulkan-kontra-wahabisme.html>.

environmental degradation. WALHI assesses that PSNs accelerate damage and push Indonesia toward ecological bankruptcy amid the climate crisis. For example, the construction of the Nusantara Capital City (IKN), promised as a “forest city,” in reality entails large-scale land clearing. The “green” promise remains only on paper, while in the field many forest areas are cleared to develop palaces and new facilities.²⁹

The critique presented by Ulil potentially functions as a tool to redefine NU’s ideological identity. From a movement that historically stood with the marginalized and preserved local wisdom, it seems to have become an organization suspicious of its own youth when they speak out strongly against environmental destruction. This is not merely a matter of terminology, but relates to who holds the authority to voice truth and claim the label of “moderation” within NU today. There is an implicit message saying, “You are NU members but too rigid in rejecting mining and too strict in protecting nature. You might begin to resemble Wahhabis.” Herein lies the symbolic danger of the term “*Wahabi Lingkungan*,” as it not only attacks the ecological movement’s ideas but also repositions the ideological map within NU. The label implies that mining opponents among santri and environmental activists have shifted from moderate to extreme, as if there is a ‘pure’ ecological version associated with religious puritanism.

In fact, what is emerging among NU’s youth is a new ecological awareness, resulting from a broader and deeper interpretation of spirituality. Love for the earth is not a betrayal of tradition but a continuation of the doctrine of tawhid—caring for creation as devotion to God. This ecological consciousness represents an evolution in religious thought that transcends old dichotomies between religion and environment, between faith and nature. Santri opposing mining do not betray development projects but rather build a religious narrative that sides with life. They understand spirituality without care for the earth as incomplete—losing essence, becoming an empty ritual.

Ferry Irawandi gave a firm response amid the heated debate between Ulil and Greenpeace Indonesia Forest Campaigner, Iqbal Damanik, regarding the mining permit controversy in Raja Ampat, Southwest West Papua. In a podcast uploaded to his personal YouTube channel, Ferry revealed that the Wahhabi accusation used by Ulil against anti-mining environmental activists is not new but a recurring issue raised by mining supporters on social media. Ferry strongly criticized this argument, calling it a serious logical fallacy. According to Ferry,

²⁹ Saprillah Saprillah, *Wahabisme Lingkungan: Retorika, Kekuasaan, Dan Krisis Ekologi*, 2025, <https://blamakassar.web.id/artikel/wahabisme-lingkungan-retorika-kekuasaan-dan-krisis-ekologi>.

Ulil's argument is repetitive, as all nickel mining proponents in Raja Ampat use the same pattern. These views can be found on platforms like Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram and are actually easy to refute. This is a classic example of the straw man fallacy embodied in the "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," term.

Ferry emphasized that the '*Wahabi Lingkungan*' label is a mistaken oversimplification of activists' position who oppose mining. Their rejection is based on careful analysis considering economic and social aspects, not mere narrow idealism. He stressed that opposition to nickel mining in Raja Ampat involves not only environmental concern but also a rational calculation of long-term economic impacts. Some regard this rejection as simply environmental activists' antipathy toward industry and progress. This is clearly wrong, as resistance to nickel mining includes economic, social, and ecological loss calculations in the long term.³⁰

Ferry also criticized Ulil for downplaying the issues raised by environmental activists. This is flawed thinking because it simplifies the opponents' position as weak and easily attacked, as if rejection is only an environmental issue, whereas the reality is that mining harms the environment and is economically disadvantageous. Ferry revealed a striking fact: Raja Ampat—the target of mining exploitation—is among the ten poorest provinces in Indonesia and Papua. He highlighted the irony that mining-rich regions in Indonesia remain trapped in poverty. This data strongly critiques claims that mining automatically brings prosperity to local communities. Ferry clarified his personal stance, emphasizing that he is not an anti-industry environmental activist.

This statement shows Ferry's data- and logic-based perspective rather than mere emotion or narrow ideology. The debate between Ferry and Ulil reflects broader narrative tension surrounding development and environmental issues in Indonesia. On one hand, there is pressure to promote economic growth through natural resource use; on the other, concerns about environmental damage and economic injustice. Ferry's criticism of the '*Wahabi Lingkungan*' term touches on a fundamental question: how do we define sustainable development and who truly benefits from natural resource exploitation.³¹

³⁰ Durotul Hikmah, *Perihal 'Wahabi Lingkungan'*, Ferry Irwandi: Gus Ulil Ini Terjebak Dikotomi Palsu, 2025, <https://www.bisnisbandung.com/nasional/39815392507/perihal-wahabi-lingkungan-ferry-irwandi-gus-ulil-ini-terjebak-dikotomi-palsu?page=2>.

³¹ Agung Sandy Lesmana, *Aktivis Penolak Tambang Raja Ampat Dicap Wahabi*, Ferry Irwandi Skakmat Gus Ulil: Sesat Pikir, 2025, <https://www.suara.com/news/2025/06/21/092833/aktivis-penolak-tambang-raja-ampat-dicap-wahabi-ferry-irwandi-skakmat-gus-ulil-sesat-pikir>.

Meanwhile, the Chairman of the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board (PNU), Mohamad Syafi' Alielha, popularly known as Savic Ali, highlighted the potential threat posed by Wahhabi conservatism. He stressed that the impact of such conservatism goes beyond groups like NU and threatens Indonesia's pluralism as a whole. Savic cited the rejection of Christmas celebrations as one manifestation of social conflict affecting the entire Indonesian society, not merely the NU community. In the discussion titled "Celebrating Tolerance in the Digital Jungle," held in Ciputat, South Tangerang on December 11, 2024, Savic stated that Wahhabi conservatism contradicts Indonesia's national values, which value plurality and differences in faith.³²

CONCLUSION

Ulil Abshar Abdalla's critique of NU Muslim intellectuals on environmental issues is reflected in the term "*Wahabi Lingkungan*," which labels anti-mining activists as irrational extremists who hinder the community's maslahah (public interest) through PNU's resource management. This approach, termed "reasonable environmentalism," prioritizes economic benefits such as coal mining concessions for welfare, contrasting with NU's longstanding fatwas that prohibit environmentally destructive exploitation. However, counter-critiques highlight that such labeling silences grassroots voices directly affected by pollution and social injustice, transforming NU's *wasathiyah* (moderation) into a justification for neocolonialism. Ulil distinguishes between small-scale habitat conservation (*fiqh* of the environment) and large-scale habitats (ideology), accusing anti-mining groups like Greenpeace of being "*Wahabi Lingkungan*" for their blanket rejections without considering maslahah. He argues that mining can be beneficial if well-managed by PNU, aligning with rationality that balances development and ecology.

This reflects Ulil's liberal thinking as a young NU intellectual emphasizing rational independence. Environmental activists reject the label as a reductionist fanaticism, citing real evidence of damage like water pollution in Halmahera and deadly open-pit mines in Kalimantan. Internal NU critiques, including from PKB legislators, view Ulil's statements as contradicting the tradition of scholars like KH Alie Yafie, who regard environmental preservation as a religious obligation. Young NU cadres call for inclusive dialogue rather than technocratic approaches that ignore democratic participation. Additionally, Ferry Irawandi asserts that the "*Wahabi Lingkungan*" label is a misguided simplification

³² Achmad Risky Arwani Maulidi, *Savic Ali Ungkap Bahaya Gagasan Konservatisme Wahabi Dan Ajak Pegiat Medsos Sajikan Konten Moderat*, 2025, <https://nu.or.id/nasional/savic-ali-ungkap-bahaya-wahabi-dan-ajak-pegawai-medios-sajikan-konten-moderat-EtxDD>.

of activists' positions against mining. According to him, their opposition is grounded in thorough analysis accounting for economic and social aspects, not mere narrow idealism. He emphasizes that resistance to nickel mining in Raja Ampat is not just environmentally driven but based on rational calculations of long-term economic impacts.

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