



**Bulletin of Islamic Research**

ISSN (Online): 3031-4526

Received: 27-03-2025, Revised: 05-04-2025

Accepted: 23-04-2025, Published: 24-04-2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69526/bir.v3i3.346>

## **The Role of Lajnah Bahtsul Masail Nahdlatul Ulama in Bridging Classical Jurisprudence and Contemporary Legal Challenges**

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the role of Lajnah Bahtsul Masail Nahdlatul Ulama (LBM NU), which has significantly contributed to the issuance of legal decisions and the resolution of societal issues in both ritual jurisprudence (fiqh ibadah) and social jurisprudence (fiqh ijtima'i). The primary objective of this study is to analyze Nahdlatul Ulama's approach to Islamic legal thought, with a specific focus on madhhab-based ijtihad and institutional decision-making processes. Using a qualitative library research method, this study draws upon classical Islamic jurisprudential texts and contemporary scholarly works to assess how LBM NU addresses legal issues across both ritual and social domains. The findings reveal that NU employs a structured hierarchy of legal reasoning within its collective deliberations, including qauliy (textual referencing), ilhaqiy (analogical reasoning), and manhajiy (methodological reasoning). These methods enable LBM NU to maintain both flexibility and relevance, while remaining faithful to the traditions of the classical schools of Islamic law. In conclusion, LBM NU serves as a vital intellectual institution within Nahdlatul Ulama, effectively bridging the legacy of classical Islamic jurisprudence with the evolving needs of modern Muslim communities.*

**Keywords:** *Bahtsul Masail; Nahdlatul Ulama; Islamic Law.*

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## Introduction

The main characteristics of Nahdlatul Ulama – hereinafter abbreviated as NU – as the largest Islamic religious organization in Indonesia are its moderate intellectual tradition, appreciation of the legacy of *the past* and local culture, and its ability to absorb new traditions of thought that come from anywhere across state, religious and ideological borders.

Formally, NU adheres to four madhhabs (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali). In practice, legal decision-making turns out not only to use four madzhabs, but also other madhhabs and follow the opinions of contemporary scholars who are not included in the framework of madzhab . Outside of legal decision-making, NU has even exceeded -without abandoning- madzhab four. NU deliberately does not base its tradition of thought on the Qur'an and Hadith directly. This makes him avoid textual thinking and a single interpretation of the text. His thinking is more able to adapt to changes, because the interpretation built is a reconstruction of the socio-ethical message of Islam through the reinterpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith in the perspective of madhhab thought and history itself. The potential for the emergence of rigid and harsh thoughts and attitudes is also prevented. In the tradition of pesantren education, a balance is always created between fiqh and Sufism lessons. Studying too much fiqh will make a person rigid, harsh and formalistic. Therefore, Sufism books are also taught so that the attitude and thoughts of students become soft.

In the tradition of taking laws as a response or answer and problems that occur in society, NU is also very flexible. There is never a final legal decision, there is always a choice or alternative in every decision, whether it is halal, permissible, haram or subhat like the case of bank interest. Decisions that are final can also be revised because there is a change in context (*'illat*).

NU is a *jam'iyah diniyyah Islamiyyah* (Islamic religious organization) which was established in Surabaya on 16 Rajab 1344H / January 31, 1926 A.D., with Islamic faith according to the Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah understanding and adhering to one of the four madhhabs; Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii and Hanbali [1]. Before this *jam'iyah* was formed, there were several things that were directly or indirectly believed to be the background for the establishment of NU. For example, the reform movement in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East with the emergence of the Pan-Islamic movement spearheaded by Jamaluddin al-Afghani to unite the entire Islamic world. Meanwhile, in Turkey, a nationalist movement arose which later overthrew the *Ottoman Caliphate* [2].

If in Egypt and Turkey the reform movement emerged as a result of socio-political awareness of their backwardness from the West, in Saudi Arabia there appeared a Wahhabi movement that struggled with the internal problems

of Muslims themselves, namely the reform of monotheism and conservation in the field of law which according to them had been damaged by *the superstition* and polytheism that plagued Muslims [3]. Meanwhile, in Indonesia itself, social, national and religious organizations have grown that aim to advance the lives of the people, such as Budi Utomo (May 20, 1908), Syarekat Islam (November 11, 1912) which was previously called Syarekat Dagang Islam (SDI) and then Muhammadiyah (November 18, 1912) [4].

It was this rejection that prompted the traditionalists to go their own way to fight for their interests before King Ibn Sa'ud in order to preserve the religious traditions that developed in Mecca. To facilitate this task, *the Hijaz Committee* was formed which on January 31, 1926 held a meeting and decided to form an Islamic community organization Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah, namely Nahdlotoel 'Oelama (Awakening of the Ulama) [5]. Some of the figures who were present at the meeting behind the establishment of NU included KH. M. Hasyim Asyari (Jombang, elected as Rais Akbar), KH. A. Wahab Hasbullah (Jombang), KH. Bisri Syamsuri (Jombang), KH. R. Asnawi (Kudus), KH. Ma'shum (Lasem), KH. Ridwan (Surabaya), KH. Abdullah Ubaid (Surabaya), KH. Alwi Abdul Aziz (Malang), KH. Abdul Halim (Cirebon), KH. Muntaha (Madura), KH. Dahlan Abdul Qohar (Kertosono), and KH. Abdullah Faqih (Gresik). Meanwhile, the representative who was sent as an NU envoy to meet King Ibn Sa'ud was KH. Khalid Masyhudi (Lasem) and KH. A. Wahab Hasbullah (Jombang).

In understanding and interpreting Islamic teachings from its sources, NU follows the understanding of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah and uses the madzhabiy (madzhab) approach:

- a. In the field of faith, NU follows the understanding of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah which was pioneered by Abul Hasan al-Ash'ari (d. 324 AH / 935 AD) and Abu Mansur al-Maturidi (d. 333 AH / 944 AD)
- b. In the field of jurisprudence, NU follows one of the four madhhabs, namely Abu Hanifa an-Nu'man (d. 179 AH / 767 AD), Malik ibn Anas (179 AH / 795 AD), Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafii (d. 204 AH / 820 AD), and Ahmad ibn Hanbal (241 AH / 855 AD).
- c. In the field of Sufism, NU follows Imam al-Junaid al-Baghdadi (d. 297 H), and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 505 H/ 1111 AD).

The religious understanding of NU is knotted in a "rule" that is quite popular, namely:

المَحَافِظَةُ عَلَى الْقَدِيمِ الصَّالِحِ وَالْأَخْذُ بِالْجَدِيدِ الْأَصْلَحِ

*Maintain good previous values and take new and better ones.*

This rule is actually not NU's sole claim, and NU has never claimed to be its only rule, it's just that it is very popular among *nahdliyin* wargans. The foundation of these rules is universal, in the sense that many things, events and teachings are oriented to "maintain what is good and take what is better". The teachings of Islam itself are in essence the same. The good values of the past are maintained, by introducing new and better *shari'a* (teachings), even about two-thirds of the content of the Qur'an contains the history of the past *ummah* so that the present *ummah* can learn from it.

Departing from the above rules, NU persistently tries to maintain the previous values that are believed to be good, in the field of *fiqh* manifested in the loyalty of *lajnah bahtsul masail* to the manuscripts of the yellow book as the main mainstay to deal with various religious problems raised by the *nahdliyin* community even though these problems can be categorized as contemporary *fiqh* problems such as organ transplantation, gene cloning, demonstrations and so on.

Another form of NU's solidity in maintaining its previous values that are believed to be good is its tolerant and cooperative attitude towards religious traditions that have developed in society, such as reading *barzanji* and *diba'an* (history and praises to the Prophet PBUH), collective *wiridan* after congregational prayers, praises between the *adhan* and *iqamat*, *tahlilan* (reciting *the sentence la ilaha illallah*, combined with certain readings) and so on, which according to modernists do not need to be preserved and some even consider them to be *heresy* that must be eradicated [6].

However, the study of the *ijtihad* process in the body of *lajnah bahtsul masail* is still minimally studied in depth in the context of the response of Islamic law to contemporary social issues in Indonesia. This research gap is important and needs serious attention, because NU's *ijtihad* approach is not only normative, but also responsive to social dynamics such as *sharia* fintech, reproductive rights, climate change, and digital ethics. The absence of a study that traces systemically how LBM NU navigates this complexity has the potential to weaken the public's understanding of Islamic law as an adaptive and solution-oriented system.

## Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with the library research method. The main sources consist of classical *fiqh* books from the four schools (Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali), the official decisions of LBM NU (Muktamar, Munas, and Konbes). This research also utilizes secondary literature in the form of academic works such as dissertations, scientific journals, and classical and contemporary reference books. The data collection

process was carried out by examining historical documents and compilations of LBM fatwas, as well as analyzing literature from relevant scientific journals. The data analysis technique was carried out in a descriptive-qualitative manner with a thematic approach to identify the pattern of legal istinbat, as well as the classification of issues between the ritual and social dimensions in each fatwa issued. Validation is carried out through triangulation of data from various sources.

## Result and Discussion

Studies on *ijtihad* in Indonesia have been widely studied by researchers such as Zamaksyari Dhofier (1984), and A. Aziz Masyhuri (1997), Ahmad Zahro (2004), who generally describe the role of Islamic boarding schools and scholars in transmitting Islamic law. However, these studies are still limited to historical and descriptive aspects.

Recent researches, such as those conducted by Rumadi Ahmad (2020) [7], M. Cholil Nafis (2021) [8], and Muhammad Al-Fayyadl (2023) [9] have made important contributions to seeing contemporary *ijtihad* of NU in the context of democracy, human rights, and pluralism. A study by Syafiq Hasyim (2022) [10] also highlights the transformation of religious authority in the digital era, including the role of institutions such as LBM NU in establishing laws. This research seeks to complement the literature by exploring in more detail the methodological structure in the LBM forum and its relevance to the latest Islamic social challenges. Studies by Siti Musdah Mulia (2023) [11], and Kurniawati (2023) [12] also show the urgency of developing social fiqh that is responsive to changing times.

## The Origins of the Lajnah Bahtsul Masail of Nahdlatul Ulama

There are still very few documents that inform the birth and development of *lajnah bahtsul masail*, both background, methods, objects and historical actors. KH. A. Aziz Masyhuri - the leader of the Al-Aziziyah Mambaul Ulum Denanyar Islamic Boarding School in Jombang - one of the perpetrators and who recorded some of the results of the decision of *lajnah bahtsul masail*, admitted that there is still a lack of *nahdliyin* residents who document matters related to NU activities.

However, when viewed from the background of NU's establishment and articles of association, it can at least be reconstructed the background of the emergence of *bahtsul mahiel*, namely the community's need for practical Islamic law (*amaliy*) for daily life which encourages NU scholars and intellectuals to find solutions by conducting *bahtsul masail* (discussion of problems). Prof. Ahmad Zahro in his work - *NU Intellectual Tradition: Lajnah*

*Bahtsul Masail* 1926 – 1999 – has conducted a search and the results are known that *bahstul masail* was first carried out in 1926, a few months after the establishment of NU [13].

The decisions of the *lajnah bahtsul masail* whether through congresses or congresses, major conferences, party council meetings or national deliberations can be classified into two groups. *First*, it is a non-fiqh decision, that is, a decision that is not related to practical legal issues. *Second*, it is the decision of jurisprudence, which is related to practical laws ('*amaliyah*'). The issue of fiqh itself is divided into two parts, namely ritual fiqh and social fiqh. Ritual jurisprudence is a transcendental practical law, namely all deeds performed by humans based on the provisions that come from Allah SWT, and are intended as devotion to Allah SWT alone. While social jurisprudence is a practical law related to society or other people, namely human deeds based on the provisions of Allah SWT which have a social dimension and a direct functional relationship with other humans. Thus, social jurisprudence is a practical law about human actions that are addressed to others, has a socio-economic aspect or dimension.

The division of fiqh into two is mainly intended to determine the frequency of fiqh problems between the ritual and the social as a product of the legal decision of fiqh *lajnah bahtsul masail*. In addition, it is also hoped that it can be considered in tracing the possibility of methodological differences applied by *Lajnah Bahtsul Masail* in providing answers and legal decisions between ritual fiqh and social fiqh.

### **Method of Legal Istinbat Lajnah Bahtsul Masail**

*Lajnah Bahtsul Masail* (an institution for the study of religious issues) is one of the *lajnah* (institutions) in *the jam'iyah* of NU that functions as a forum for study that discusses various religious (Islamic) issues. This *lajnah* gathers, discusses, and decides on issues that require legal certainty in the field of jurisprudence which refers to the four *madhhabs*; Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i and Hanbali.

In understanding Islam, NU seems to be very careful and does not want to solve the religious problems faced by referring directly to *the nash* of the Qur'an and al-Sunnah. This is inseparable from the view that the chain of transfer of Islamic religious knowledge should not be broken from one generation to the next. What can be done is to trace a good and legitimate chain to each generation [14].

The understanding of *madzhab taqlid* according to Prof. Dr. Said Aqil Husein al-Munawwar is very closely related to the intellectual tradition of Islamic boarding schools. The transmission of knowledge in Islamic boarding schools takes place through the recitation of the yellow book. The books of jurisprudence that were studied inherited fatwas from previous generations of scholars with uninterrupted sanad. Such transmission of knowledge is believed to provide a guarantee to obtain the purity of teachings from the first source. Therefore, the door of *ijtihad* according to NU is only open within the framework of *madhhab* thinking [15].

According to Prof. Dr. Ahmad Zahro, *lajnah bahtsul masail* uses 3 (three) types of legal *istinbat* methods that are applied in stages, namely.

#### a. Qauliy Method

This method is a method of legal *istinbat* used by scholars or intellectuals of NU in the *lajnah bahtsul masail* by studying the problems faced, then looking for answers in the *fiqh* books from *madzhab* four, by referring and referring directly to the sound of the text. Or in other words, following the opinions that have been "finished" within the scope of a particular *madhhab* [15].

The procedure for implementing *the qauliy method* is as explained in the decision of the Bandar Lampung National Congress, that the selection of *qaul / face* when in a problem several *qaul/faces* are found is carried out by choosing one of the opinions with the following provisions:

1. Taking a more beneficial and or stronger opinion
2. As far as possible by implementing the provisions of the 1st Congress (1926), that differences of opinion be resolved by voting;
  - a. The opinion agreed upon by Ash-Shaykheen (Imam an-Nawawi and Imam ar-Rafii)
  - b. The opinion held by an-Nawawi only
  - c. The opinion held by ar-Rafii alone
  - d. Opinion supported by the majority of scholars
  - e. The opinion of the smartest scholars
  - f. The opinion of the most sane scholars'

An example of the application of *the qauliy method* is the decision of the 1st Congress (Surabaya, September 21-23, 1926):

*Q (question)*: Is it permissible to use the proceeds of zakat for the establishment of mosques, madrasas, or huts because they are all included in 'sabilillah' as quoted by Imam al-Qaffal?

A (*Answer*): No, no, because what is meant by 'sabilillah' is those who fight in sabilillah. The quote from Imam al-Qaffal is *dhaif* (weak).

The information from the book Rahmatul Ummah and Tafsir al-Munir, reads;

*And they agreed that it is not permissible to spend (zakat) to build a mosque or to bury a dead body (Rahmatul Ummah).*

*And al-Qaffal quotes from some of the fuqaha, that they allow the spending of zakat for all good purposes, such as nourishing corpses, building fortifications and prospering mosques, because His word is that fi sabilillah (in the way of Allah) is common to all. (Tafsir al-Munir).*

So it can be summed up that the method used by the lajnah bahtsul masail is by referring to the sound of the text (*qaul*) of the books of madhhab four and hence it is called *the qauliy method* which in the level of ijtiḥad can be equated with the *bayaniy method*. Therefore, the process of bahtsul masail is similar to what happens in a warehouse where various people's necessities are stored.

Likewise, the scholars and residents of NU are of the opinion that the bahtsul masail method by referring to the books of madzhab four is still representative to answer all the needs of the community in all ages and its challenges. In practice, this method is most predominantly used lajnah bahtsul masail with at least 362 decisions taken based on this method [16].

## **b. The Ilhaqiy Method**

If the *qauliy method* cannot be implemented because no textual answer from a book of *mu'tabar* is found, then it is done to equalize the law of a case or problem that has not been answered by the book (there is no legal stipulation yet) with a similar case or problem that has been answered by the book (there is already a legal stipulation), or to equate it with an opinion that has been "finished" The *ilhaqiy method* operationally it has also been applied for a long time by NU scholars in answering religious problems raised by the ummah, especially nahdliyin residents, although only implicitly and anonymously as an *ilhaqiy method*. This is evident from the tracking carried out by Prof. Ahmad Zahro on all legal decisions of fiqh lajnah bahtsul masail (1926-1999). It was found that at least 33 decisions were made using *the ilhaqiy method*, 29 decisions were taken before the Bandar Lampung National Congress and 4 decisions occurred afterwards.

Officially and explicitly, *the new ilhaqiy method* was revealed and formulated in the Bandar Lampung National Congress which stated that to

solve problems where there is no *qaul / face* at all, *ilhaqiy* is carried out in a *jama'i* (collective) manner by experts. Meanwhile, *the ilhaqiy procedure* is to pay attention to the following elements (requirements): *mulhaq bih* (something that has no legal certainty), *mulhaq 'alaih* (something that already has legal certainty) and *the face of al-ilhaq* (the similarity factor between *mulhaq bih* and *mulhaq 'alaih*) who are experts.

The *ilhaqiy* method in practice uses procedures and requirements similar to *qiyas*, therefore it can also be called the NU version of *the qiyasiy* method. There is a difference between *qiyas* and *ilhaq*, that is, *qiyas* is equating the law of something that has no stipulation with something that already has legal certainty based on *the nash* of the Qur'an and al-Sunnah, while *ilhaq* is the equalization of the law of something that has not yet been determined by something that already has legal certainty based on the text of a book (*mu'tabar*). Whether this is allowed or not, because there is a possibility of *ilhaq* happening to *qiyas* when the text of a book turns out to be the result of *qiyas*, is indeed still a dispute. However, the NU scholars stipulate this, of course, with consideration as far as possible to avoid *ilhaq* against the text of a book that is the result of *qiyas*.

An example of the application of *the ilhaqiy method* is what was decided in the Second Congress (Surabaya, October 9-11, 1927) regarding the buying and selling of firecrackers.

Q (*question*) : Is it legal to buy and sell firecrackers (firecrackers) to celebrate Hari Raya or brides and so on?

A (*answer*): Buying and selling is legal! Because there is a good intention, namely the feeling of joy that makes the heart happy with the sound of the firecrackers.

The information in the book *I'alah al-Talibin* juz III/121-122, reads;

*As for spending wealth on almsgiving, aspects of goodness, food, clothing and gifts that are not in accordance with it, then it does not include useless actions (his opinion: it does not include useless) meaning according to the strongest opinion, because it contains the right purpose, namely to get rewards or have fun. Therefore, it is said that in terms of goodness, there is no such thing as israf and there is no goodness in israf (I'alah Talibin).*

In terms of his arguments referring to reference books, no one clearly mentions the law of buying and selling and using firecrackers. What exists is a brief description of the law of the prohibition of property for good and pleasure (*I'alah*), the legality of selling objects that can be presented of holy and useful origin (*al-Bajuriy*), and the permissibility of buying and smoking cigarettes

because there is no evidence that prohibits it (al-Jamal). So this decision is based on *qiyas* with holy *illat* and the usefulness of firecrackers like cigarettes and others.

### c. Manhajiy Method

The *manhajiy* method is a way of solving religious problems taken by lajnah bahtsul masail by following the way of thought and rules of law determination that have been prepared by the madzhab imam. Like the *qauliy* and *ilhaqiy* methods, in fact, the *manhajiy* method has also been applied by previous NU scholars, although not with the term *manhajiy* and not inaugurated through a decision. This is based on the findings of Prof. Ahmad Zahro in his dissertation research, that based on his criteria and identity, it is believed that there has been a practice of applying the *manhajiy* method for at least six decisions of lajnah bahtsul masail held before the Alim Ulama National Congress in Bandar Lampung [18].

An example of the application of the *manhajiy* method is the decision of the 1st Congress (1926):

Q (*question*) : Can there be a reward for shodaqoh to the corpse?

A (*answer*) : Absolutely!

Description in the book *al-Bukhari* chapter on Jazanah and the book of *al-Muhadzdzab* chapter on will:

*Ibn 'Abbas narrated that someone asked the Prophet PBUH, indeed my mother has died, will she be able to benefit if I give alms to her? So he replied: Yes, you can. He said: "Surely I have a basket of fruit, so I testify to you that I have given it to him.*

The above decision is categorized as a decision based on the *manhajiy* method because it directly refers to the hadith which is the postulate used by the four imams of the madhhab after the Qur'an.

Martin van Bruinessen illustrates that the fatwa of NU scholars is usually in the form of a very short answer (sometimes as concise as a 'yes' or 'no' answer), accompanied by a reference or quotation from a book of *mu'tabar* that is no longer interpreted as if *its literal meaning is not problematic*.

Another example of the application of the *manhajiy* method is what was decided at the X Congress / Congress on April 13-18, 1935 in Surakarta:

*Q (question):* What is the law to provide for orphans, the poor and so on using property from playing football, night markets, tonels (shows/plays) and the like?

*A (Answer):* The Congress decided that if playing football, night markets, and opening the tonel are haram, then the act is haram. This takes the principle of "*avoiding damage takes precedence over efforts to obtain benefits*".

That is the answer to the lajnah bahtsul masail which does not include the postulates of a book or provide detailed arguments. Thus, it can be believed that the prohibition of the above is through a process after it cannot be referred to the text of a book of *mu'tabar*, nor can it be inspired by the law of a similar issue and there has been a reference in a book of *mu'tabar*, so the *manhajiy* method is used by basing the first answer in the Qur'an, after not finding it in the hadith, and so on which finally arrives at the answer from *qaidah fihiyyah* "*avoiding harm takes precedence over seeking benefits*". This is possible because the legal *istinbat* procedure for the *manhajiy* method is to practice *qawaid ushuliyyah* (the rules of *ushul fiqh*) and *qawaid fihiyyah* (the rules of *fiqh*) [19].

Officially, this method has just been popularized for its use in the National Conference of Alim Ulama NU in Bandar Lampung. Therefore, it can be said that the Bandar Lampung National Congress is an era of awareness of the need to redefine and reform the meaning of *madzhab*. This era can be said to be the starting point to be more inclusive in terms of religious understanding, especially in the lajnah bahtsul masail towards the universality of Islam and the era of awareness of the need for a "factory" of thought.

## Conclusion

Lajnah Bahtsul Masail (LBM) is one of the institutions in the *jam'iyah* of Nahdlatul Ulama that gathers, discusses, and decides on issues that require legal certainty, with reference to *madhhab* four; Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii and Hanbali. In the *madzhabi* approach, the orientation of lajnah bahtsul masail in *madhhab* Shafii is very dominant compared to other *madhhabs*.

The use of methods by LBM NU in *legal istinbat* is the *qauliy* method (directly referring to the text of a book or reference), the *ilhaqiyy* method (*qiyas*, a new problem that has not yet been determined by law with an old problem that is already clear in a book or reference) and the *manhajiy* method (tracing and following the method used by *madhhab* four). These methods are used in stages by prioritizing the *qauliy* method, if it is not possible then using the *ilhaqiyy* method, and if it is not possible, the *manhajiy method* and implemented with a *madzhabi* approach (oriented towards *madzhab* four) in the *ijtihad jama'i*

(collective) forum, as well as using the question and answer technique and discussion.

LBM NU not only plays the role of a fatwa institution, but also as a laboratory of dynamic Islamic legal thought. In facing the future, the role of *ijtihad* in the NU body is very important to respond to the accelerating social, economic, and technological transformation. Efforts to develop *ijtihad* methodologies that integrate sharia *maqashid*, textualization, and multidisciplinary approaches need to be strengthened. Therefore, further research is highly recommended to delve deeper into specific issues such as environmental law, artificial intelligence (AI) in Islamic law, and public perception of the LBM fatwa. Thus, NU will remain the main axis in maintaining inclusive and contextual Islamic legal authority.

### Author Contributions

**Suma Wijaya:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation.

### Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to STAI Al-Hamidiyah Jakarta for their support and to the anonymous reviewer for providing valuable input and constructive feedback on these papers.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Funding

This research did not receive any financial support.

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