

# *Kiai* and Politician: K.H. As'ad Umbar's Efforts and Thoughts in Developing Pondok *Pesantren* Darul Ulum Jombang, 1985-2001

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the life background and thoughts of K.H. As'ad Umar, how was his role in politics, and how his efforts and policies were in developing the *Pesantren* Darul Ulum in Jombang, East Java in 1985-2010. Thematically, this research is historical research of thought, and it is based on the historical methods that include heuristics, criticism, interpretation, and historiography. From this research, the findings are, first, the character and thoughts of K.H. As'ad Umar cannot be separated from his background as the *santri* family and his thorough life experiences in the Nahdlatul Ulama environment. Secondly, K.H. As'ad Umar was an influential political *Kiai* and lobbyist from Jombang. For him, politics became the tool of struggle while lobbying was the main vanguard for achieving his goals. In his political journey, clearly illustrated how politics became a tool for him to approach the authorities to get benefits for Muslims and the *pesantren*. Third, K.H. As'ad Umar was the father of *Pesantren* Development. He was becoming the main initiator behind the development of Darul Ulum. He managed to break the *pesantren's* image, which was previously known as a traditional and backward educational institution to be a modern and advanced one.

**Keywords:** *Pesantren*, Darul Ulum Jombang, K.H. As'ad Umar, *Kiai*, Politician, Golkar

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) cannot be separated from the history of Indonesia. It had existed for a long time, even before the Indonesian nation was founded. As the oldest Islamic education institution in the archipelago, *pesantren* plays significant roles in the nation's intellectual life and make important contributions in the implementation of education in Indonesia. *Pesantren* is traditional Islamic educational institutions that aim to study, understand, deepen, appreciate and practice Islamic teachings, emphasizing the importance of religious morals as guidelines for daily behavior [1].

As an Islamic education institution, *pesantren* has its characteristics and uniqueness that distinguishes it from other educational institutions. This difference is seen from the history of its growth, the components contained in it, the life pattern of its citizens, and the pattern of adoption of the various kinds of innovations it has carried out in order to develop its education system both at the concept and practice level [2]. The main components in *pesantren*, which are their uniqueness, have been put forward by Dhofier, which in general consists of *kiai*, *santri*, mosque, dormitory, and teachings of classical books [3]. The most important component in a *pesantren* is the presence of the *kiai*. *Kiai* is a title that is considered sacred, a title which has the meaning of glorification and respect [2]. The *kiai* is also the main figure in the

leadership of the *pesantren*. All forms of *pesantren* policies fall under the absolute authority of the *kiai*, and all regulations that are applied follow the instructions of a *kiai* [4].

## 2. METHODS

This study uses historical methods, namely the process of critically examining and analyzing recordings from past relics. This method consists of four stages, namely: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography. Data search was carried out by tracing various sources, both primary and secondary. Researchers collected library data in the form of archives and documents at the Darul Ulum Secretariat Office, books and journals in the library, and several sources from print and online media. Apart from written sources, data tracing was also carried out through the oral history method, namely through interviews. The author conducted interviews with several sources, including family members, *kiai* who cared for the *pesantren*, politicians, and alumni students.

Thematically, this research is historical research of thought and is structured through a biographical historical approach. The author started a biographical study by looking for a series of objective life experiences from the main character and digging up relevant data regarding the complete biography, contextualizing these figures such as life notes, documentary records, and

information obtained from interviews. Furthermore, the author began to select data and explore the meaning of the data that had been obtained. The final stage linked the meaning of the data obtained with a larger structure to be explained in a sustainable, exciting and clear manner [5].

### 3. RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

#### 3.1. K.H. As'ad Umar 's Life Journey

K.H. As'ad Umar was born in Rejoso, Peterongan, Jombang on August 18, 1933, with the real name Muhammad As'ad. He is the third son of the couple *Kiai* Umar Tamim and Nyai Muzamzamah. K.H. As'ad Umar was born from the family of a *pesantren*. His father was the fourth son of *Kiai* Tamim Irsyad, the founder of *Pesantren Darul Ulum Jombang*. *Kiai* Tamim Irsyad came from Bangkalan Madura and lived in Rejoso since the 1880s, and together with *Kiai* Cholil Juremi, he started the establishment of the *Darul Ulum Pesantren* [6].

As'ad Umar grew up and spent his childhood in *Pesantren Darul Ulum* in Jombang, a city known as the city of students. This *santri* family background and religious environment have shaped As'ad Umar's character to become a religious person. He is known as a devout person and his spirit of Islam is very high. The character and thoughts in K.H. As'ad Umar cannot be separated from his childhood experiences, parents' education, and social environment. His father, K.H. Umar Tamim, was a leader of the *Tariqah Qadariyah Wan Naqsabandiyah*. While his mother, Nyai Muzamzamah was a disciplined woman, persistent, and very active in pursuing her livelihood. In terms of character, As'ad Umar is more similar to his mother's nature, namely disciplined, assertive, firm and resilient in doing business [7].

As'ad Umar grew up in gloomy economic times when the Indonesian nation was under Dutch and Japanese colonial rule. His life was difficult and modest. His parents taught him a simple life and practiced his independence, so he did not depend on others. As the first boy, As'ad Umar grew up to be an independent child, had the initiative and enthusiasm in realizing his wishes. As'ad Umar kept thinking about how he should be better and how he could change things. This attitude could carry over until he grows up when he manages to make changes that have become phenomenal in his day [8].

Young As'ad Umar started his education at the *diniyah* school, then continued successively at *Madrasah Ibtidaiyah*, *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* and *Mualimin* at *Pesantren Darul Ulum* [9]. As'ad Umar was eager to study knowledge, this was driven by his desire to seek more experiences and find provisions for his future. After finishing *Mualimin*, he decided to leave and continue his education outside Jombang. He studied at several *pesantren*, including *Pondok Pesantren Jamsaren Solo*, led by K.H. Abu Amar, and *Pondok Pesantren Al*

*Munawir Krapyak Jogjakarta*, under K.H. Ali Ma'sum and K.H. Abdullah's tutelage. As'ad Umar had a strong desire to attend higher education, in 1958 he studied at the *Islamic Religious College (PTAIN) Jogjakarta*. However, he did not get a bachelor's degree, only one year of college he was forced to quit due to economic factors, besides that his parents asked him to return to Rejoso to help manage the *pesantren* and put his knowledge into practice [8].

As'ad Umar was a very sociable young man, he and his friends were active in organizations in Anshor. This association in the NU organization has strengthened his personality and encouraged him always to act and contribute positively to the nation and religion. In 1959 at the age of 26, As'ad Umar began to enter politics and became a member of the local parliament in Jombang from the NU Party. He has learned a lot about how to establish communication with many parties and to voice the opinions and aspirations of the community. He is known as an NU figure who is consistent and dares to voice NU's voice. From this, it appears that K.H. As'ad Umar was raised empirically by *Nahdlatul Ulama*. His thinking has grown with the ideology and NU party where he is involved [10].

In 1960, at the age of 27, As'ad Umar was the chairman of the parliament of *DPRDGR* in Jombang. He is accustomed to dealing with things that are conflicting or paradoxical. When a person becomes chairman of an institution such as the *DPRD*, he must be able to accommodate with different parties and interests. From this As'ad Umar has good management skills, since he was young, he was used to dealing with different people, how to manage conflicts, how could all parties accept him, how to be close to someone even with someone who was on opposite sides and hanged out with people of different religions, different races and so on. This experience of his youth has become a valuable investment, so when he has to face an interest that must be fought for, he uses the approaches and lobbies that he has prepared his strategy for [8].

K.H. As'ad Umar married Nyai Azzah binti Abdul Rohim from Malang in 1961. The couple has 8 children with six sons and two daughters. Throughout his life K.H. As'ad Umar dedicated his time, energy, and thoughts to keep moving in the struggle to raise the people's status through the world of *pesantren* education. He used of various means of struggle by being actively involved in various socio-religious organizations, members of the board of political figures, and caretakers of the *pesantren*.

K.H. As'ad Umar suffered a stroke in 2004, which left him in a wheelchair. However, his spirit of life has never faded. For 6 years in a wheelchair, he has continued to lead and develop *Pesantren Darul Ulum*. On December 5, 2010, K.H. As'ad Umar passed away, leaving many memories, hopes and inspiration.

K.H. As'ad has a principle that life must continue to move and dare to take risks. K.H. As'ad Umar wanted a change towards a better condition. All risks are ready to

be faced with responsibility and grace. According to him there are only two kinds in this world: those who like us and those who do not like us. Whatever we do, there are always these two things, it is the risk. K.H. As'ad continued to move as long as what he did was believed to be good and did not violate Islamic law.

K.H. As'ad Umar has a spirit of struggle; he is continually moving and can never stay still, his soul is always called to help others. He was energetic and full of enthusiasm, helpful and always wanted to be of benefit to others. K.H. As'ad Umar was known as a generous person, both to his family, relatives, neighbors, students and the surrounding community [11]. This character is following his philosophy of life, which is summarized in a series of sentences that become his motto and teachings, namely: Strong Dhikr, Think Fast, Act Right, Grounded Benefits. This motto later became the slogan of the Darul Ulum Pesantren.

### **3.2. The Politician Kiai**

K.H. As'ad Umar cannot be separated from the world of politics. This world has raised his name, a world that has forged him from a young age, to become a reliable and experienced politician. Before becoming a *pesantren* leader and being called a *kiai*, he was already known as a politician. The public recognized him as a political figure from the NU party, who then went against the current Muslim community by choosing to join the Golkar carriage. Golkar was the ruling party in the new order era.

Before becoming a Golkar politician, K.H. As'ad Umar was an NU politician. His organizational experience began with Ansor NU, then became a member of the DPRD of Jombang from the NU Party in 1959-1960. As'ad Umar became chairman of the DPRDGR of Jombang from the NU Party in 1960 - 1966, and again became chairman of the DPRD of Jombang from 1968 to 1970. In addition, he also became chairman of the Jombang Regency National Front in 1960 - 1963, and became chairman of the Regency PERTANU Jombang [12].

As'ad Umar was an NU activist who was totality in struggling for NU. When Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) still had powerful political nuances and was still a political party, As'ad Umar was NU's confidant in politics in Jombang. As a fanatical NU activist, As'ad Umar was considered the tiger of NU from Jombang [10].

Around 1975, K.H. As'ad Umar followed K.H. Mustain Romly (the leader of Pesantren Darul Ulum at the time) to enter the Golkar carriage. The joining of the two Darul Ulum figures into Golkar was under the influence of K.H. Imam from Sarang [11]. K.H. Imam, known as Mbah Imam Sarang, was the leader of the Ma'had Ilmiah Syar'i Pesantren, an eldest *pesantren* in Sarang, Central Java, which became the forerunner of other *pesantren* in the Sarang region. According to Mbah Imam, Golkar would be strong and hold its power for a long time, NU people must be able to enter there, and

those who join Golkar are not just anyone, they must be smart, smart, shrewd. So Mbah Imam Sarang suggested K.H. Mustai'in and K.H. As'ad Umar join Golkar [13].

According to Nyai Azzah, K.H. Mustain saw the government to Golkar as a strong iron ship and NU as a rubber ship. This statement explained that the Golkar government had great strength, which, logically, could not be opposed by NU, which did not yet have the equal power to catch up with Golkar [11]. The best way is to follow Golkar and get into government's power, not fighting from outside, which means preparing for defeat. The decision to join Golkar was also part of the struggle for Islam and to save the ummah. If all Muslims are in the Islamic party, PPP, who do not yet have sufficient strength and are then crushed by a prominent force like Golkar, the Muslim struggle will be crushed and just end. Incidents like this are certainly not expected and must be avoided [8].

In 1977 K.H. As'ad Umar did not yet nominate himself as a parliament member, but he was already active in the Golkar da'wah organization. He became chairman of the East Java Province Islamic Da'wah Council (MDI) from 1975 - 1982. At the same time, K.H. Mustain on the board of the Central MDI as vice chairman. Besides, several Darul Ulum caretakers are also active in the GUPPI organization affiliated with Golkar. Therefore, at this time the government's contribution to Darul Ulum was very large because indeed K.H. Mustain and K.H. As'ad has shown his support for Golkar [13].

In the 1982 Election K.H. As'ad Umar began to be nominated and succeeded in becoming an East Java DPRD. Furthermore, in the 1987 Election K.H. As'ad Umar was again elected a member of the East Java DPRD and at the same time he was also the leader of the Darul Ulum Jombang Pesantren. K.H. As'ad Umar was appointed as the General Leader of the Pondok Leadership Council in 1985, replacing K.H. Mustain Romly who died on January 21, 1985. His strategic position as a board member and leader of a boarding school was run as well as possible. His closeness to the government was used to raise the Darul Ulum Pesantren he leads and the benefit of the ummah in general. The government also gets a commensurate value, namely the support of the Darul Ulum vote which is known to have a massive crowd with *santri* pondok and congregations of the *tariqat* spread throughout Indonesia. Countless political lobbies have been carried out, and many New Order figures have visited Darul Ulum.

The document's source proves the closeness and synergy between the Pesantren Darul Ulum and Golkar. This closeness cannot be separated from K.H. As'ad Umar's leading role as the *kiai* of Pesantren Darul Ulum and the politician of Golkar. He plays himself as a cultural broker who can bridge the interests of the communities and the authority. According to Geertz's in Hirokoshi, *kiai* serves as a cultural broker who empirically functions to pass instructions from outside to

the community and represent society with the national system [14].

K.H As'ad Umar's political career continued to increase since the 1992 elections he became a member of the DPR/MPR RI until 1999. During his leadership period at Darul Ulum various policies were issued, various strategies and innovations were carried out to develop Pesantren Darul Ulum and support the government through Golkar.

When he reached his sunset, K.H. As'ad is no longer involved in the realm of practical politics, he has opted out of Golkar membership. There are two reasons for this decision, first, since the multi-party K.H. As'ad Umar considered the party's paradigm had changed, the party had more interests. An open electoral mechanism in which legislative candidates seek votes against their expectations. Second, he wants to return to his habitat as *kiai* to more focus and intensively manage *pesantren*. He showed his enthusiasm to serve and take care of Pesantren Darul Ulum with extraordinary dedication, even in a physical condition that was no longer excellent.

### **3.3. The Father of Pesantren Development**

Under K.H. As'ad Umar's leadership, the Pesantren Darul Ulum developed rapidly and found its distinctive characteristics, which differentiated it from other *pesantren*. K.H. As'ad Umar succeeded in building and advancing Pesantren Darul Ulum Jombang to become one of the largest *pesantrens* in East Java.

Initially, the community saw *pesantren* as nothing more than an Islamic educational institution, merely educating students to understand Islamic teachings. K.H. As'ad Umar argues that *pesantrens* are strategic Islamic educational institutions where students study religious and general knowledge. K.H. As'ad Umar understood the meaning of science in two explanations. First, every knowledge is the knowledge of Allah, and Allah's knowledge is extensive, not only a matter of relationship to Allah, but also the knowledge of life and nature in it. Second, Allah's knowledge is single, the separation of religious knowledge and general knowledge is an attempt by the Western colonizers to make scientists do not understand their religion, and vice versa, so that those who are devout in religion become less knowledgeable [8].

According to K.H. As'ad Umar, students of *pesantren* are not only those who will become religious clerics in villages, but they are the persons who have strong Islamic base morally and faithfully, so they do not feel inferior to common people because they are equipped with common knowledge. He aspired to create a doctor who memorizes the Quran or an army commander who understands the religion, an expert who balances religion and science.

Those ideas were implemented during his dedication as the leader of Pesantren Darul Ulum by building various excellent schools that adopt the model of a very discipline school of Taruna Nusantara founded by the

Indonesian Army in Magelang. Central Java. This step was initiated in 1994 in collaboration with the Agency for The Assessment and Application of Technology (BPPT) under the leadership of Menristek (Ministry of Research and Technology), B.J. Habibie in which he founded SMA Darul Ulum 2 affiliated to BPPT.

In the beginning, the launching of the new school programs by K.H. As'ad Umar did not receive acceptance and support from internal and external *pesantren*. As the vision of K.H. As'ad Umar was only considered a dream and wishful thinking. Nevertheless, K.H. As'ad Umar kept going and never gave up, because he believed that with sincere intention and determination, he could answer many people's doubts and make significant changes for the best development of Pesantren Darul Ulum.

During his leadership at Darul Ulum, K.H. As'ad Umar implemented several policies, including, establishing a collective leadership in the Darul Ulum Board of Directors (MPP Darul Ulum), professionalism in *Pesantren* Management, both financial and education management and the excellent school as the new icon of Darul Ulum. KH. As'ad Umar was acknowledged as the pioneer establishing of excellent schools in *pesantren*, which are now being followed by other *pesantren*. He also created the Higher education in the *pesantren*. K.H. As'ad Umar pioneered the establishment of the Higher Education of Pesantren Darul Ulum (Unipdu), a combination of the colleges that had previously been established during his leadership, namely the college of the nurse, hearth and foreign languages. He facilitated the construction of *pesantren* facilities. At the end of his leadership there were 37 dormitories in Darul Ulum. Apart from that, as a form of community service and to support the health of students, Unipdu Media Hospital was established, as well as an Islamic center building and a Qur'an study center.

KH Asad Umar was a creative, innovative and adaptive person in responding to changes from outside. Darul Ulum under the leadership of K.H. As'ad Umar is at the forefront of responding to all changes and challenges that come from outside.

The role of K.H. As'ad Umar as the leader of *pesantren* is very much felt in *pesantren* education. K.H. As'ad Umar is an agent of change who, based on his knowledge, consciously supports the authorities, to be used for the development of the *pesantren*. He became the driving force for the development of Darul Ulum. He succeeded in breaking the *pesantren's* image, which was previously known as a traditional and backward educational institution into a modern and advanced one.

This excellent education has become a unique attraction for students from various regions in the country and abroad to study at Pesantren Darul Ulum. Religious and general education are integrated while maintaining the identity and traditions of *pesantren*. The students continue to study classical Islamic books, called the yellow book and at the same time study in formal

education in the religious and general fields, from basic education to higher education.

The international standard education, the Darul Ulum *Pesantren* University, Unipdu Medika Hospital, the Islamic Center with its Quran Study Center, are the outstanding achievements made by K.H. Asad Umar. His success in building and developing the *Pesantren* Darul Ulum later made him known as the Father of *Pesantren* Development.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The following essential findings successfully answer the research question and become the conclusions of this study. First, the thoughts possessed by K.H. As'ad Umar cannot be separated from his *santri* family background and his life experiences, both when he took formal education and the organizational activities in which he participated in. He was raised empirically by Nahdlatul Ulama, both as an organization and as a party. K.H. As'ad Umar has a strong character. His difficult childhood life made him tough, resilient, and he never gave up on circumstances. This personality greatly influenced his attitudes when entering politics and at the same time developing the *pesantren*. He also became a well-respected *kiai* in both politics and *pesantren*.

Second, K.H. As'ad Umar is a politician *kiai* and is known as a lobbyist from Jombang. Politics has become the main tool for K.H. As'ad Umar and lobbies as the spearhead to achieve his goals. Broadly speaking in his political journey, it is clear how politics has become a tool for K.H. As'ad Umar to get closer to the authorities to benefit Muslims in general and the world of *pesantren* in particular. His communication skills are the key to his success in running political lobbying, both when he was a politician from the NU Party and Golkar. On several occasions he also acts as a cultural broker who can bridge the community and the authorities' interest.

Third, K.H. As'ad Umar is the father of *Pesantren* Development. He can take advantage of his position as a *kiai* to be close to the authorities. Even though he received many rejections from people around him, he continued to build close ties with Golkar. The government's assistance can be put to good use by K.H. As'ad Umar to carry out the development and construction of *pesantrens*. His aspiration to change an ancient *pesantren*'s image into an advanced educational institution can be realized with financial support from the government. This is also supported by financial management capabilities that are transparent, open and on target, so that the Darul Ulum *Pesantren* in the era of K.H. As'ad Umar continued to multiply.

K.H. As'ad Umar was one of the influential figures in Golkar at the beginning of its development. So far, in several studies, the influential Darul Ulum figure in Golkar is K.H. Mustain Romly, and did not specifically mention K.H. As'ad Umar. From this research, K.H. As'ad was a politician who became the East Java *Kiai*

axis in supporting the government, while K.H. Mustain played the role as a symbol. The *pesantren*'s development was pioneered and carried out by K.H. As'ad Umar, with his lobbying skills. His efforts in policies succeeded in elevating *pesantren*'s dignity, as advanced and prestigious educational institutions. This research finds that *pesantren* is used politically by the authority, but it succeeded in utilizing its closeness to the government. As a leader, K.H. As'ad Umar played a significant role here so that the *pesantren* had an equal position with other public education in general.

#### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection and analysis were performed by Soraya Soraya, Abdurakhman Abdurakhman and Yon Machmudi. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Soraya Soraya and all authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to thank the Ministry of Education, Research and Technology Republic of Indonesia and Universitas Indonesia for funding this research through the grant scheme of the Penelitian Dasar Unggulan Perguruan Tinggi with contract number NKB-125/UN2.RST/HKP.05.00/2020.

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