

AHLUSSUNNAH WAL JAMA'AH LEADERSHIP IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract : Leadership in Islamic higher education faces increasingly complex challenges in maintaining Islamic identity while responding to the demands of educational transformation and institutional competitiveness. This study aims to explore Aswaja-based leadership and its contribution to the development of Islamic education. Employing a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, document analysis, and student questionnaires, and subsequently analyzed using the Miles and Huberman interactive analysis model. The findings reveal that the core values of Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah, namely tawassuth, tasamuh, tawazun, i'tidal, and uswah hasanah, which have been systematically institutionalized through participatory governance, transparent decision-making, academic management, organizational culture, student character development, and strategic collaboration with external stakeholders. These values function not only as theological principles but also as operational leadership mechanisms that strengthen institutional legitimacy, enhance educational quality, and ensure organizational sustainability. Accordingly, the findings confirm the existence of an integrated Aswaja-based leadership model that bridges the gap between the normative values of Islam and their practical implementation in higher education governance.

Keywords : Aswaja; Leadership Behaviour; Education Development.

Abstrak : Kepemimpinan di perguruan tinggi Islam menghadapi tantangan yang semakin kompleks dalam mempertahankan identitas keislaman sekaligus merespons tuntutan transformasi pendidikan dan daya saing kelembagaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami kepemimpinan berbasis Aswaja dan kontribusinya terhadap pengembangan pendidikan Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dokumentasi, dan angket. Data dianalisis menggunakan model analisis interaktif Miles dan Huberman. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa nilai-nilai Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah, yaitu tawassuth, tasamuh, tawazun, i'tidal, dan uswah hasanah, diinstitutionalisasi secara sistematis melalui tata kelola partisipatif, pengambilan keputusan yang transparan, manajemen akademik, budaya organisasi, pembentukan karakter mahasiswa, serta kolaborasi strategis dengan berbagai pemangku kepentingan eksternal. Nilai-nilai tersebut tidak hanya berfungsi sebagai prinsip-prinsip teologis, tetapi juga sebagai mekanisme operasional kepemimpinan yang memperkuat legitimasi kelembagaan, meningkatkan mutu pendidikan, serta menjamin keberlanjutan organisasi. Dengan demikian, hasil penelitian ini menegaskan adanya model kepemimpinan berbasis Aswaja yang terintegrasi, yang menjembatani kesenjangan antara nilai-nilai normatif Islam dengan implementasi praktisnya dalam tata kelola perguruan tinggi.

Kata Kunci : Aswaja; Perilaku Kepemimpinan; Pengembangan Pendidikan.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership has long been recognized as one of the most influential determinants of educational quality, institutional sustainability, and organizational transformation. Within Islamic higher education, leadership extends beyond managerial responsibility to encompass the preservation of institutional identity, religious values, and academic excellence amidst rapid social, technological, and educational changes (Sholeh et al., 2023; Uzorka & Kalabuki, 2024). The accelerating demands of globalization, digital transformation, and internationalization have compelled Islamic universities to strengthen governance systems while maintaining their theological foundations and cultural authenticity (Ansori et al., 2023; Moslimany et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). Consequently, effective leadership in Islamic higher education requires not only administrative competence but also the capacity to integrate religious values into institutional governance, strategic decision-making, and educational innovation.

Among Indonesian Islamic higher education institutions affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) constitutes the primary theological and ideological foundation that shapes educational philosophy and institutional identity. Aswaja promotes the principles of *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), and *i'tidal* (justice), which collectively provide ethical guidance for educational governance and social engagement (Shabbir et al., 2024; Tsauri et al., 2024; Fatimah, 2024). Rather than functioning solely as theological doctrines, these principles are expected to become operational values that influence institutional culture, curriculum development, leadership practices, and stakeholder interactions (Tessema et al., 2024; Firdausiyah, 2022; Yaqin, 2023). Accordingly, university leaders assume a pivotal role in transforming these normative values into organizational systems that embody the spirit of *rahmatan lil 'alamin* and respond effectively to contemporary educational challenges.

Despite the strategic importance of value-based leadership, its implementation within Islamic higher education remains challenging. Increasing institutional complexity, governance reforms, accreditation demands, digital learning ecosystems, and global competitiveness frequently encourage university leaders to prioritize managerial efficiency over ideological internalization. Therefore, religious values are often confined to ceremonial expressions or symbolic institutional identities rather than becoming integral components of leadership practices, policy formulation, and organizational culture (Jannah, Rodliyah & Usriyah, 2023; Masitah & Kartiko, 2024; Hasanah et al., 2024). This situation creates a substantial discrepancy between the normative ideals of Islamic educational leadership and their practical realization within university governance.

Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (UNISNU) Jepara represents an appropriate context for examining this issue because Aswaja serves as the official ideological foundation underpinning all academic and institutional activities. Nevertheless, preliminary

observations reveal that the operationalization of Aswaja values across governance systems, curriculum management, academic culture, and student development remains uneven. Leadership practices continue to rely predominantly on conventional administrative and managerial approaches, while explicit mechanisms for integrating Aswaja principles into institutional decision-making and educational transformation have yet to be systematically articulated. This condition raises important questions regarding how ideological values can be translated into sustainable leadership practices capable of strengthening Islamic higher education.

Previous studies have extensively discussed Islamic leadership, transformational leadership, servant leadership, and religious moderation within educational institutions. These studies generally conclude that religious values contribute positively to organizational commitment, ethical leadership, and educational quality. However, three important limitations remain. *First*, existing studies predominantly conceptualize Aswaja as a theological or ideological doctrine rather than as an operational leadership framework that systematically guides institutional governance. *Second*, empirical investigations explaining how Aswaja values are institutionalized through leadership practices across governance systems, academic management, curriculum implementation, and organizational culture remain limited. *Third*, previous research rarely develops an integrated model that demonstrates the dynamic relationship between Aswaja-based leadership, institutional governance, educational innovation, and student character formation. Consequently, the existing literature has yet to sufficiently explain the mechanisms through which ideological values are transformed into practical leadership strategies within Islamic universities.

Addressing these limitations, this study investigates how *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* values are operationalized as an integrated leadership framework for developing Islamic higher education at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (UNISNU) Jepara. Rather than viewing Aswaja merely as a normative religious identity, this research examines its translation into institutional governance, academic leadership, organizational culture, curriculum implementation, and student character development. By emphasizing the interaction between ideology and leadership practice, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of value-based leadership as a dynamic process of institutional transformation.

The novelty of this research lies in three significant contributions. *First*, it reconceptualizes *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* as an operational leadership paradigm rather than solely as a theological or cultural identity. *Second*, it develops an empirical explanation of how Aswaja values are institutionalized through leadership practices across governance, academic systems, organizational culture, and educational management within an Islamic university. *Third*, it proposes an integrated value-based leadership framework that bridges

the gap between Islamic ideological principles and contemporary higher education governance, thereby extending existing theories of Islamic educational leadership beyond normative discourse toward a practical institutional model.

Therefore, this study contributes both theoretically and practically to the field of Islamic educational leadership. Theoretically, it enriches the literature by expanding the conceptual understanding of value-based leadership through the lens of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah*. Practically, it offers an evidence-based framework that may guide Islamic higher education institutions in strengthening institutional governance while preserving their religious identity in response to contemporary educational transformation.

METHOD

This research integrates descriptive-analytical fieldwork with a qualitative approach. This study aims to comprehensively comprehend the role of leadership in establishing Islamic education grounded in the values of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (UNISNU) in Jepara, employing a qualitative methodology (Köhler, 2024). This method enables scholars to examine the concept, strategies, and applications of leadership in promoting Aswaja principles within an academic environment. The study was carried out in Jepara, Indonesia, at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University. University officials like the rector and vice rector, faculty deans, program chairs, lecturers teaching Aswaja courses, and students actively participating in academic and student activities founded on Aswaja values were among the research subjects. Purposive sampling was used to choose informants, which entailed selecting people that were thought to possess expertise, experience, and direct engagement in the creation of Aswaja-based Islamic leadership and education.

The study employed observation as the data gathering method to identify academic activities, religious activities, and campus organizational culture that exemplify the application of Aswaja values. The instruments utilized were data checklists and observations related to the rector, vice rector, deans, and study programs at UNISNU Jepara. The observation data was categorized for reference in the questionnaire, and the resulting patterns and trends were documented. Subsequently, through literature reviews on the principles of Islamic education and *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah*, along with discussions with experts in Islamic education management and Nahdlatul Ulama, research instruments will be developed to encompass various facets of Islamic education aimed at advancing Aswaja-based Islamic education. The study's findings and data collecting will be utilized to ascertain the parameters of leadership, the implementation metrics of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah*, and the tools that assess leadership in academic and student character development.

The three phases of the data analysis methodology are data reduction, data visualization, and conclusion formulation. The data is examined using interactive analytical tools. Data reduction is achieved by selecting and focusing on information relevant to the study question. To enhance comprehension, the information is subsequently conveyed as a systematic descriptive narrative. Drawing conclusions constitutes the final step, executed progressively while the field data undergoes verification. Data validity was ensured through triangulation techniques, including data triangulation (interviews, observations, and documentation) and source triangulation involving multiple informants such as university leaders, lecturers, and students. In addition, member checking was conducted to confirm the accuracy of the findings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Results

Analysis shows that *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah*-based leadership plays a crucial role in integrating spiritual values, morality, and modern governance for the advancement of sustainable Islamic education development, with the following explanations:

a) Institutionalizing *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* Values through Leadership Practices

The findings reveal that leadership at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (UNISNU) Jepara has systematically institutionalized *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) values within leadership practices and organizational governance. Rather than functioning merely as theological principles, the values of *tawassuth* (moderation), *tasamuh* (tolerance), *tawazun* (balance), *i'tidal* (justice), and *uswah hasanah* (exemplary leadership) have become practical references guiding leadership behavior, institutional decision-making, and administrative policies. The integration of these values creates a governance model in which religious identity and organizational management reinforce one another.

1) Participatory and Value-Based Institutional Governance

Leadership practices at UNISNU Jepara are characterized by participatory governance involving lecturers, students, and administrative staff in institutional decision-making. This collaborative approach reflects the principles of *tawazun* and *i'tidal*, ensuring that decisions accommodate diverse perspectives while maintaining institutional stability and fairness. Rather than relying solely on hierarchical authority, leaders encourage dialogue and collective responsibility, allowing Aswaja values to shape policy formulation and organizational governance.

Table 1: Mapping of Aswaja Values and Leadership Practices

Aswaja Values	Leadership Practices	Implementation in Institutional Context
<i>Tawassuth</i> (Moderation)	Inclusive decision-making	Policies reflect balanced perspectives and avoid extreme positions
<i>Tasamuh</i> (Tolerance)	Respect for diversity	Equal treatment regardless of background in academic interactions
<i>Tawazun</i> (Balance)	Participatory leadership	Involvement of stakeholders (lecturers, students, staff)
<i>I'tidal</i> (Justice)	Fair governance	Transparent and consistent policy implementation
<i>Uswah</i> (Exemplary)	Role modeling	Leaders demonstrate ethical and religious values in daily practices

Table 1 demonstrates that the operationalization of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) values extends beyond normative religious principles and has been systematically integrated into leadership practices at UNISNU Jepara. Each core Aswaja value is translated into a specific leadership behavior that directly influences institutional governance. The principle of *tawassuth* is reflected in inclusive decision-making processes that prioritize balanced perspectives and avoid extreme positions. Similarly, *tasamuh* is manifested through respect for diversity, ensuring equal treatment among members of the academic community regardless of their social or educational backgrounds.

Furthermore, the values of *tawazun* and *i'tidal* are institutionalized through participatory leadership and fair governance, as evidenced by stakeholder involvement in decision-making and the consistent implementation of transparent institutional policies. In addition, *uswah hasanah* strengthens leadership legitimacy by positioning university leaders as ethical role models whose daily conduct reinforces the internalization of Aswaja values throughout the academic community. Overall, the findings indicate that Aswaja functions not merely as an institutional identity but as an operational leadership framework that shapes governance practices, organizational culture, and strategic decision-making within the university.

2) Exemplary Leadership as the Internalization of Aswaja Values

Another important finding demonstrates that university leaders function as moral role models (*uswah hasanah*) in implementing Aswaja values. Student responses indicate that 97.7% perceive university leaders as consistently demonstrating exemplary ethical and religious conduct.

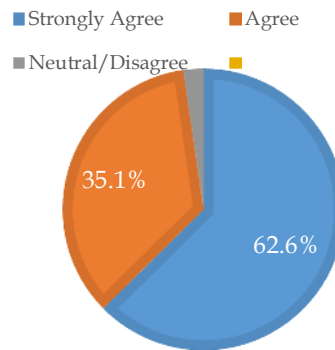


Figure 1: Student Perception of Leadership Role Model

Figure 1 shows that 97.7% of students perceive university leaders as demonstrating exemplary leadership (*uswah hasanah*) in carrying out their institutional responsibilities. This overwhelmingly positive response indicates that leadership at UNISNU Jepara is recognized not only for its administrative effectiveness but also for its ability to embody the ethical and religious principles of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) in everyday institutional practices. The small proportion of respondents expressing neutral or less favorable perceptions suggests that the implementation of exemplary leadership has been widely accepted across the academic community.

These findings further indicate that exemplary leadership serves as a fundamental mechanism for the internalization of Aswaja values within the university environment. By consistently demonstrating integrity, responsibility, and ethical conduct, university leaders reinforce organizational trust and strengthen the alignment between institutional values and daily academic practices. Consequently, leadership legitimacy is derived not only from formal authority but also from leaders' capacity to model behaviors that encourage members of the academic community to embrace and practice Aswaja principles in both academic and social interactions.

3) Moderation, Justice, and Tolerance as Foundations of Leadership

The operationalization of Aswaja values is further reflected in three interconnected leadership dimensions: moderation, justice, and tolerance.

First, 98.4% of respondents agreed that leadership decisions consistently reflect the principle of *tawassuth* (*wasathiyyah*), indicating that institutional policies are formulated through balanced and inclusive considerations rather than extreme positions.

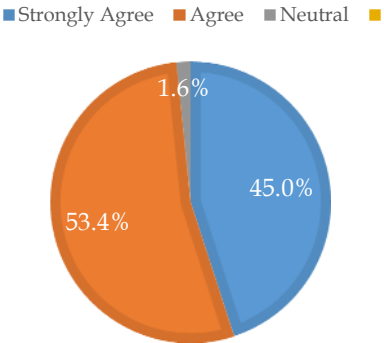


Figure 2: Student Perception of Moderation in Leadership Decisions

Figure 2 shows that the implementation of the *tawassuth* (*wasathiyyah*) principle in leadership decision-making is perceived very positively by students, with 53.4% of respondents indicating *agree* and 45.0% indicating *strongly agree*, resulting in a combined positive response of 98.4%. Only 1.6% of respondents expressed a neutral opinion, while no respondents selected the *disagree* or *strongly disagree* categories. These findings indicate that university leaders are widely recognized for adopting balanced, inclusive, and non-extreme approaches in institutional decision-making. The overwhelming positive perception suggests that the principle of *tawassuth* has been effectively operationalized as a guiding framework for governance, enabling leaders to accommodate diverse perspectives while maintaining institutional harmony, fairness, and organizational stability. Consequently, moderation functions not merely as a theological doctrine but as a practical leadership principle that shapes strategic decision-making and reinforces the implementation of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* values within the university.

Second, leadership integrity is demonstrated through the institutionalization of justice (*i'tidal*), with 96.2% of respondents acknowledging fairness, transparency, consistency, and accountability in university governance.

Table 2: Indicators of Leadership Integrity

Indicator	Description	Impact
Fairness	Equal treatment in academic services	Builds student trust
Transparency	Open decision-making process	Strengthens institutional legitimacy
Consistency	Stable policy implementation	Enhances organizational stability
Accountability	Responsibility in leadership roles	Improves governance quality

Table 2 demonstrates that leadership integrity at UNISNU Jepara is institutionalized through four interconnected dimensions: fairness, transparency, consistency, and accountability. Fairness is reflected in the equal provision of academic services, fostering students' trust in institutional leadership. Transparency is evident in open and participatory decision-making processes, which strengthen institutional legitimacy and reinforce stakeholders' confidence in university governance. Furthermore, consistency in implementing institutional policies contributes to organizational stability by ensuring that regulations are applied uniformly across academic and administrative activities. Accountability complements these dimensions by emphasizing leaders' responsibility for their decisions and actions, thereby enhancing the overall quality of governance. Collectively, these findings indicate that leadership integrity is not merely an ethical expectation but an operational governance mechanism that supports the implementation of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* values while strengthening institutional credibility, organizational effectiveness, and sustainable university development.

Third, leadership practices also embody the principle of *tasamuh*, with 95.4% of students perceiving that university leaders promote respect for diversity and inclusive academic interactions.

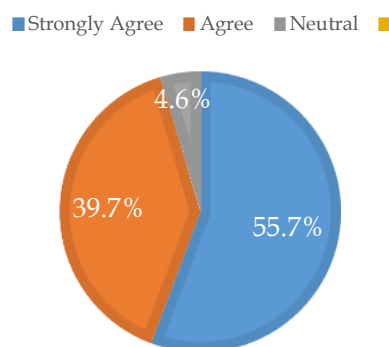


Figure 3: Student Perception of Tolerance in Leadership

Figure 3 illustrates students' perceptions of the implementation of the *tasamuh* (tolerance) principle in leadership at UNISNU Jepara. The results show that 55.7% of respondents *strongly agreed* and 39.7% *agreed* that university leaders consistently promote tolerance and inclusivity, resulting in a combined positive response of 95.4%. Meanwhile, 4.6% of respondents expressed a neutral opinion, and no respondents selected the *disagree* or *strongly disagree* categories. These

findings indicate that tolerance has been effectively institutionalized within leadership practices, fostering an academic environment characterized by mutual respect, openness, and appreciation for diversity. The absence of negative responses further suggests that *tasamuh* is not merely recognized as a normative religious principle but has become an integral component of institutional leadership, supporting harmonious academic interactions and strengthening the implementation of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* values across the university.

The findings demonstrate that leadership at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (UNISNU) Jepara has successfully institutionalized *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja) values as an operational framework for university governance rather than merely preserving them as a normative religious identity. The principles of *tawassuth*, *tasamuh*, *tawazun*, *i'tidal*, and *uswah hasanah* are consistently reflected in participatory decision-making, exemplary leadership, transparent governance, fairness, and inclusive academic interactions. The overwhelmingly positive responses from students across all leadership dimensions indicate that Aswaja values have been effectively embedded within institutional practices, shaping both organizational culture and leadership behavior. These findings suggest that value-based leadership at UNISNU Jepara has succeeded in bridging Islamic theological principles with contemporary governance practices, establishing a leadership model that simultaneously strengthens institutional integrity, stakeholder trust, and the sustainability of Islamic higher education.

b) Transforming Islamic Educational Development through Aswaja-Based Leadership

The second demonstrates that Aswaja-based leadership contributes significantly to the development of Islamic education at UNISNU Jepara. The influence of leadership extends beyond governance into academic programs, organizational culture, student character formation, and institutional collaboration. These dimensions illustrate how value-based leadership facilitates sustainable educational transformation.

1) Strengthening Academic Programs through Aswaja Integration

Leadership plays a strategic role in integrating Aswaja values into academic programs and curriculum implementation. Approximately 97% of respondents acknowledged leadership support in strengthening Islamic education through curriculum development, academic activities, and institutional learning programs.

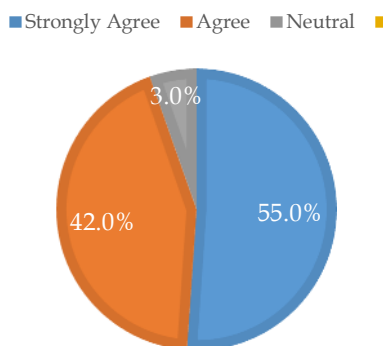


Figure 4: Leadership Support for Academic Programs

Figure 4 demonstrates that the majority of respondents positively perceived leadership support for the implementation of Aswaja-based academic programs at UNISNU Jepara, with approximately 97% expressing agreement. This finding indicates that university leadership plays a strategic role in integrating *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* values into curriculum development, academic activities, and institutional learning programs. The high level of positive perception suggests that leadership commitment extends beyond administrative responsibilities by ensuring that Aswaja principles are systematically embedded within the university's academic system. Consequently, leadership serves as a key driver in strengthening Islamic educational development through the institutionalization of value-based academic programs that reinforce both educational quality and the university's religious identity.

2) Developing an Aswaja-Based Institutional Culture

The findings further reveal that leadership has successfully cultivated an institutional culture characterized by professionalism, ethical interaction, inclusivity, and spirituality. Rather than functioning merely as administrative regulations, Aswaja values shape everyday academic behavior and organizational relationships.

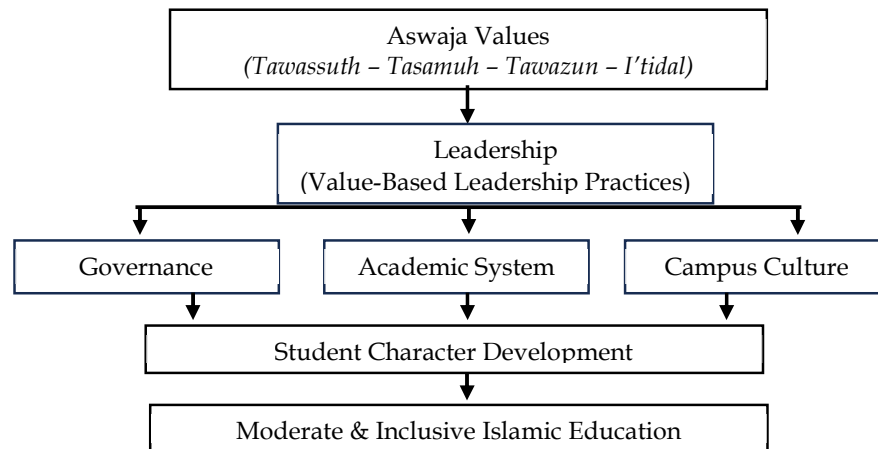


Figure 5: Model of Aswaja-Based Academic Culture

Figure 5 illustrates the conceptual pathway through which *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* values are translated into educational outcomes at UNISNU Jepara. The model indicates that value-based leadership serves as the central mechanism linking institutional principles with organizational practices across multiple domains. Rather than operating independently, governance, the academic system, and campus culture function as interconnected dimensions that collectively shape students' attitudes and behaviors. The convergence of these institutional processes ultimately contributes to the formation of graduates who embody moderate, inclusive, and ethically grounded Islamic values. This model suggests that the successful implementation of Aswaja is achieved through the integration of leadership, institutional management, and educational processes, enabling Islamic values to be internalized systematically rather than remaining at the level of normative discourse.

3) Character Formation and Institutional Sustainability

The influence of Aswaja-based leadership is also evident in student character development and institutional sustainability. Around 94.6% of respondents agreed that leadership actively supports spiritual and character-building programs rooted in Aswaja principles.

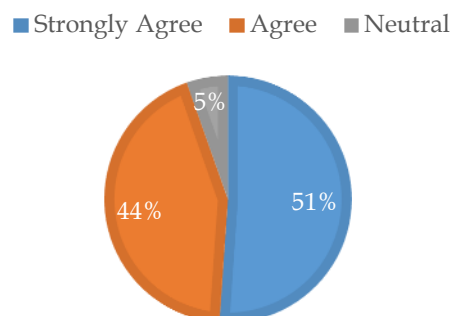


Figure 6: Leadership Influence on Student Character Development

Beyond internal institutional development, leadership also strengthens educational sustainability through partnerships with external institutions. Approximately 93.2% of respondents acknowledged that collaboration with governmental agencies, Islamic organizations, local communities, and external experts contributes to strengthening Aswaja-based education.

Table 3: External Collaboration and Its Impact

Type of Collaboration	Partner Institution	Impact on Students
Religious programs	Ministry of Religious Affairs	Strengthens moderation values
Academic collaboration	Islamic institutions	Expands knowledge and perspectives
Community engagement	Local society	Enhances social awareness
Training & seminars	External experts	Improves leadership and character

Table 3 demonstrates that the sustainability of Aswaja-based Islamic education at UNISNU Jepara is reinforced through strategic collaborations with various external stakeholders, each contributing to distinct aspects of institutional development. Collaboration with the Ministry of Religious Affairs primarily strengthens the implementation of religious moderation by aligning university programs with national policies and contemporary Islamic educational initiatives. Partnerships with other Islamic higher education institutions facilitate academic exchange and broaden scholarly perspectives through collaborative research, curriculum enrichment, and knowledge sharing. Engagement with local communities extends the impact of university education beyond the campus by fostering students' social responsibility, civic participation, and the practical

application of Aswaja values in addressing societal needs. Meanwhile, training programs and seminars conducted in collaboration with external experts enhance leadership competencies, professional development, and character formation among students and university members. Collectively, these partnerships indicate that Aswaja-based leadership is not confined to internal governance but is strengthened through cross-institutional collaboration that expands educational resources, reinforces institutional capacity, and promotes the long-term sustainability of Islamic higher education.

Thus, these findings indicate that Aswaja-based leadership not only strengthens governance within the university but also promotes sustainable Islamic educational development through curriculum innovation, institutional culture, character education, and strategic external collaboration. The evidence suggests that leadership serves as the primary mechanism linking ideological values with organizational transformation, thereby reinforcing the long-term sustainability of Islamic higher education.

2. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja)-based leadership at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (UNISNU) Jepara represents a transition from normative religious principles toward an institutional governance model in which Islamic values are systematically embedded within leadership practices. Rather than functioning solely as an ideological identity, the principles of *tawassuth*, *tasamuh*, *tawazun*, *i'tidal*, and *uswah hasanah* operate simultaneously as ethical guidelines, managerial orientations, and organizational norms that influence institutional decision-making, governance structures, and academic interactions. This finding suggests that value-based leadership is more effective when religious values are translated into everyday organizational practices instead of remaining symbolic institutional attributes. Consequently, leadership legitimacy is derived not only from formal authority but also from leaders' capacity to consistently embody institutional values through participatory governance, transparency, fairness, and exemplary conduct.

These findings support the perspective of transformational leadership proposed by Hadi Mogavi et al. (2024), which argues that leadership effectiveness emerges from leaders' ability to inspire organizational members through shared values and exemplary behavior rather than through hierarchical authority alone. Al-Emran & Griffy-Bzrow (2023), emphasize that ethical leadership fosters organizational trust by integrating moral values into decision-making processes. The present study extends these theoretical

perspectives by demonstrating that, within the context of Islamic higher education, ethical and transformational leadership are strengthened through the institutionalization of Aswaja principles (Ade oye et al., 2025; Mundiri et al., 2025; Ibda et al., 2023). Rather than viewing religious values as complementary elements of leadership, this study shows that Aswaja functions as the primary framework through which governance systems, organizational culture, and leadership behaviors are collectively shaped.

An important contribution of this study lies in explaining the mechanisms through which Aswaja values become institutionalized across multiple organizational dimensions. Previous studies on Islamic educational leadership have largely emphasized conceptual discussions of religious leadership or examined the influence of Islamic values on organizational commitment and religious moderation (Amelya et al., 2024; Huda et al., 2024; Safuan et al., 2024). However, empirical evidence explaining how these values are operationalized through governance systems, participatory leadership, academic management, and organizational culture has remained limited (Heinke et al., 2024; Ingaldi et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2024). The findings indicate that the institutionalization process occurs through the interaction between value internalization, participatory governance, policy consistency, and exemplary leadership, enabling ideological principles to become sustainable organizational practices (Assa'idi et al., 2021; Fatmawati et al., 2023; Shiddiq et al., 2021). This evidence addresses a significant gap in the existing literature, which has predominantly remained at the normative level without adequately explaining the organizational processes that transform religious values into institutional performance.

The study also demonstrates that the influence of Aswaja-based leadership extends beyond governance and significantly contributes to the development of Islamic educational culture. Leadership shapes curriculum implementation, academic programs, institutional culture, student character development, and external collaboration as interconnected dimensions of educational transformation. This finding suggests that educational development is not generated through isolated managerial interventions but through the alignment of institutional values, organizational systems, and educational practices. Such integration reinforces the argument that sustainable educational transformation depends on leadership capable of maintaining coherence between institutional identity and organizational innovation. Consequently, Aswaja values function not only as theological foundations but also as strategic resources that enable Islamic universities to respond to contemporary educational challenges while preserving their religious identity.

The conceptual model presented in Figure 5 further illustrates this relationship by positioning value-based leadership as the central mechanism connecting governance, academic systems, and institutional culture to educational outcomes (Jevnaker & Olaisen, 2021). Unlike previous leadership models that predominantly emphasize administrative effectiveness or organizational performance, this model highlights the reciprocal interaction between ideological values and institutional processes (Ho et al., 2024; Wahid et al., 2020). The findings therefore suggest that organizational culture is not merely an outcome of leadership but is continuously reproduced through consistent value-based governance, participatory decision-making, and ethical leadership practices (Haruna et al., 2024; Kawamoto et al., 2021). This dynamic relationship provides a more comprehensive explanation of how Islamic universities can sustain institutional transformation while preserving their theological foundations.

The novelty of this study lies in proposing an integrated model of Aswaja-based leadership that moves beyond the dominant normative discourse within Islamic educational leadership literature. Unlike previous studies that primarily conceptualize Aswaja as a theological doctrine or institutional identity, this research demonstrates its operational function as a leadership framework that systematically shapes governance systems, academic management, organizational culture, and educational development. By empirically explaining the mechanisms through which religious values are translated into institutional practices, this study extends existing theories of value-based leadership and offers a contextual model that can inform leadership development within Islamic higher education institutions. Accordingly, the findings contribute both theoretically by enriching the discourse on Islamic educational leadership and practically by providing a value-oriented governance framework capable of strengthening institutional sustainability, educational quality, and religious identity in contemporary higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (Aswaja)-based leadership at Nahdlatul Ulama Islamic University (UNISNU) Jepara has been systematically operationalized as an integrated framework for developing Islamic higher education. The findings reveal that Aswaja values, including *tawassuth*, *tasamuh*, *tawazun*, *i'tidal*, and *uswah hasanah*, are embedded within institutional governance, participatory leadership, academic systems, organizational culture, and student character development. Rather than serving merely as a theological identity, these values function as practical leadership principles that guide decision-making, strengthen institutional legitimacy, foster inclusive academic environments, and support sustainable educational development. The study further

confirms that value-based leadership enables Islamic universities to preserve their religious identity while responding effectively to contemporary educational challenges.

This research contributes to the literature by proposing an integrated model of Aswaja-based leadership that bridges the gap between normative Islamic values and their practical implementation in higher education governance. The model extends existing perspectives on Islamic educational leadership by demonstrating how religious values can be institutionalized through interconnected governance systems, organizational culture, and educational practices. Nevertheless, this study is limited to a single institutional context, which may restrict the broader applicability of its findings. Future research is therefore encouraged to examine the implementation of Aswaja-based leadership across different Islamic higher education institutions or through comparative and longitudinal approaches to further validate and refine the proposed leadership framework under diverse organizational and socio-cultural contexts.

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