

Mainstreaming Eco-Theology: Practices and Challenges of Environmental Activism in Islamic Student Organizations in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The environmental crisis presents a multidimensional challenge that is not only ecological but also moral and spiritual. In Indonesia, Islamic student organizations have strategic potential to advance environmental advocacy based on Islamic values, yet their role remains understudied. This study examines the practice and challenges of ecotheology-based environmental activism through a case study of the Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia (KAMMI). Data were collected through interviews, observations, literature reviews, and analysis of organizational documents. The findings reveal that KAMMI has initiated various environmental programs such as KAMMI Green Leadership and Pilkada Lestari yet these efforts remain fragmented, incidental, and not institutionalized in cadre training. A key challenge lies in the dominance of political and social agendas, which often marginalize ecological concerns. Nevertheless, opportunities exist in reinterpreting KAMMI doctrine of syumuliyah Islam to include ecological responsibility and in leveraging the growing ecological awareness among younger generations. The study contributes to eco-theology scholarship by extending its analysis to the relatively unexplored sphere of Islamic student activism. It also provides practical recommendations for integrating ecological values into cadre development and organizational priorities.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The current environmental crisis represents a global and multidimensional challenge that demands not only scientific and policy-based solutions but also moral, ethical, and spiritual responses. It is not merely an ecological issue; rather, it reflects a deeper crisis in the way humans conceptualize and interact with nature [1][2]. One emerging framework that addresses this dimension is ecotheology, a theological reflection on the relationship between humans and the environment which emphasizes moral responsibility, spiritual awareness, and ethical stewardship in sustaining the natural world [3][4][5]. In Islam, the Qur'an underscores the importance of maintaining the balance of the earth (Q. 30:41; Q. 7:56) and condemns acts of corruption and destruction, thereby highlighting that Islamic teachings provide a strong ethical and spiritual foundation for ecological movements. In Indonesia, as the country with the world's largest Muslim population, approaches grounded in Islamic values are considered strategic in fostering ecological awareness.

Among broader Islamic movements in Indonesia, Muhammadiyah has pioneered eco-theological activism through initiatives such as the Environmental Council and Kader Hijau Muhammadiyah [6][7]. Despite these developments, little research has examined the integration of ecotheology within Islamic student organizations, even though these organizations have historically been significant actors in Indonesia's sociopolitical landscape and continue to play a critical role in shaping public discourse. This gap is particularly important, since students frequently stand at the forefront of advocacy and social transformation in both local contexts and global environmental movements [8][9][10]. The Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia (KAMMI, Indonesian Muslim Student Action Union) offers a particularly relevant case. Founded upon the doctrine of syumuliyah Islam—the belief that Islam is a comprehensive religion encompassing all aspects of

human life, including ecological concerns [11]. Based on this ideological foundation, KAMMI holds significant potential to contribute to environmental activism. Yet, compared to its strong engagement in sociopolitical issues, its involvement in ecological concerns remains relatively limited.

Against this backdrop, the present study examines how ecotheology is understood, articulated, and practiced within KAMMI's activism. Specifically, it explores the extent to which eco-theological values are embedded in KAMMI's ideological foundation and organizational programs, while also analyzing the challenges and opportunities of integrating ecotheology into student-based Islamic movements. By doing so, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on ecotheology in Indonesia, shifting the analytical focus from established organizations such as Muhammadiyah toward the relatively understudied field of Islamic student organizations.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the practices and challenges of eco-theology-based environmental activism within Islamic student organizations. This approach was chosen as it is suitable for exploring complex and contextual socio-religious phenomena [12]. The unit of analysis in this research is the KAMMI student organization. Data were collected using four main techniques: in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and literature review. Among these techniques, document analysis and literature review served as the primary sources for examining the ideological construction, religious narratives, as well as environmental agendas and programs explicitly or implicitly carried out by the organization.

Document analysis was conducted by collecting archives, organizational guidelines, cadre development curricula, activity publications, and official organizational statements related to environmental issues. This method allowed the researcher to trace ideological continuity and transformation over time [13]. Meanwhile, the literature review covered academic writings, journals, articles, and books discussing Islamic eco-theology, student activism, and faith-based social movements. This review provided the conceptual foundation and strengthened the validity of the findings drawn from organizational documents.

Data analysis was carried out thematically by identifying key patterns in the documentary and literature data, which were then categorized according to the dimensions of eco-theology, forms of activism, as well as structural and cultural challenges. The analysis followed the stages of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing as proposed by Miles and Huberman [14].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. The Transformation of KAMMI during the Reformasi Era

Kesatuan Aksi Mahasiswa Muslim Indonesia (KAMMI) emerged as a prominent Islamic student movement in Indonesia, particularly after the fall of the New Order regime in 1998. The organization was established as a response to the political and social changes during the Reformasi era, which opened new opportunities for the development of Islamic political movements. The origins of KAMMI are closely linked to the Tarbiyah movement, which emphasized Islamic education and the integration of Islamic values into political and social life. This movement was heavily influenced by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and by the Prosperous Justice Party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera / PKS), which was formed after the Reformasi period [15][16] [17].

In its early years, KAMMI positioned itself as a student-based movement with the aim of promoting Islamic values and advocating for political reform. The organization played a crucial role in the 1998 student demonstrations that led to the fall of President Soeharto, reflecting its commitment to democratic reform as well as its rejection of authoritarian rule. However, KAMMI's involvement in these demonstrations also revealed its strategic approach to political activism, as the organization sought to balance its Islamic ideals with the broader democratic aspirations of Indonesian society [18] [19]. Since its founding during the 1998 Reformasi era, KAMMI has continued to expand rapidly, becoming one of the largest Muslim student organizations in Indonesia. By its 20th anniversary, KAMMI had established organizational networks in more than 30 provinces, with 174 regional boards, 946 district boards, 4,026 commissariat boards, and 4,961 active cadres across Indonesia [11].

The current development of KAMMI is characterized by its strategic role in political education, organizational communication, and its influence on Indonesia's socio-political dynamics. From its roots in the Reformasi 1998 movement, KAMMI has evolved into a key actor in shaping political awareness and Islamic values among students [20] [21]. In the post-Reformasi period, KAMMI has not only remained active in the political sphere but has also expanded into various social, economic, and environmental issues relevant to contemporary challenges.

Amin Sudarsono, one of KAMMI's senior figures and a former central board member, stated that KAMMI does not want to be known merely as an organization synonymous with street demonstrations, but also as a student force actively contributing to social issues within society. The term used by Amin Sudarsono was the transformation from a street movement to a social movement. Phirman Reza (2017) further highlighted that

KAMMI has socially established various platforms for social activism, such as Lentera Harapan, which focuses on mentoring children in the Doli district of Surabaya, as well as the KAMMI Quick Response Corps (Korps Reaksi Cepat / KRC), which has consistently been at the forefront of disaster response efforts.

The transformation of KAMMI's movement toward addressing social issues is an inevitability in light of shifting student orientations today. As Rahman et al. [22] point out, student street activism has declined in line with changing student interests toward more pragmatic issues with direct impact on society. Nevertheless, this change does not imply a weakening of the movement's ideals but rather signifies a renewal of strategies and ideological adjustments to remain relevant within the contemporary social context.

3.2. Environmental Activism in KAMMI

As the urgency of environmental issues continues to grow, KAMMI has begun actively initiating various concrete programs through activities and actions related to nature conservation and environmental sustainability.

Some of KAMMI practices of environmental activism can be explained as follows:

Table 1. KAMMI's Environmental Activism Activities 2020–2025

Activity	Year	Description
KAMMI Green Leadership	2025	Activities involving tree planting, ecological seminars, and environmentally oriented leadership training in collaboration with academics and the Ministry of Environment and Forestry (KLHK)
Gerakan Pilkada Lestari	2024	A program initiated by KAMMI in collaboration with Bawaslu and KLHK to promote the use of eco-friendly campaign materials and the recycling of political campaign props.
Diskusi: Deforestasi dan Dampaknya terhadap Keanekaragaman Hayati	2024	A KAMMI environmental division discussion addressing deforestation, its ecological impacts, and the role of youth in environmental conservation.
Kader Cinta Lingkungan	2023	River clean-up activities in Pematang Johor.
KAMMI Asri dan Bersih	2023	A discussion on best practices and strategies for implementing Zero Waste within the Pentahelix framework.
Diskusi: Polusi dan JKN	2023	A collaboration with BPJS Watch Advocacy.
Diskusi: Energi dan Masa depan Indonesia	2022	A discussion aimed at formulating a movement for sustainable energy in Indonesia's future.
Diskusi: Penggunaan BBM Ramah Lingkungan	2020	A discussion advocating for government adoption of environmentally friendly fuel use.

(Source: Interviews, Reports, and Media Coverage)

Looking at the series of activities carried out by KAMMI in recent years—from KAMMI Green Leadership 2025 and the Sustainable Local Election Movement (Gerakan Pilkada Lestari) 2024, to various environmental-themed discussions and river clean-up actions—it must be acknowledged that these initiatives remain incidental and largely dependent on the priorities of each leadership period. There has not yet been a structured cadre development platform or a long-term strategic agenda that specifically integrates environmental issues into the organization's ideological and practical framework. Nevertheless, this tendency has begun to show a positive direction, as KAMMI is starting to construct an environmental narrative within its activism. Although these activities have not yet been systematically embedded in the cadre development curriculum, they signal that environmental issues are increasingly being recognized as an integral part of the struggle of today's Islamic student movement. This provides an initial foundation for KAMMI to move forward with greater seriousness in integrating eco-theology and ecological issues into its cadre development agenda as well as its advocacy efforts.

3.3. The Eco-Theology Narrative in KAMMI

As an Islamic student organization grounded in the doctrine of Syumuliyah Islam, KAMMI views Islamic teachings as encompassing not only ritual worship but also the regulation of human relations with nature. In his book *Ijtihad Membangun Basis Gerakan* (2010), Amin Sudarsono, a former Central Board member of KAMMI, outlines the ideological and practical platform for KAMMI cadres. He emphasizes that the concept of Syumuliyah Islam is not merely a form of spiritual awareness but a comprehensive worldview for Muslims. Amin also formulated the scheme of Islam Kaffah ideology within KAMMI's movement, although its focus has remained primarily on political aspects and has not yet specifically addressed the realm of environmental activism [23].

Amid the increasingly urgent global environmental issues, the concept of eco-theology has become highly relevant to be internalized within Islamic student movements such as KAMMI. In this context, eco-theology is understood as a theological approach that integrates Islamic values with ecological awareness, positioning humans as khalifah (stewards) on earth who are entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining environmental balance.

When examined within *Manhaj Pengkaderan KAMMI* (the cadre education handbook), starting from the vision, mission, movement paradigm, elements of struggle, movement credo, up to the *Indeks Jati Diri Kader (IJKD)*, there is no specific content that explicitly incorporates the eco-theological model into the process of cadre formation and intellectual development. This was also acknowledged by Kholid Abdurrahman, Head of Cadre Development of the Central Board of KAMMI 2025, who stated that until now there has been no official formulation of eco-theology narratives explicitly included in the organization's cadre training guidelines (Interview, 2025). Nevertheless, values of environmental concern have begun to be reflected in one of the movement's elements, *Bina al-Qoidah al-Ijtimaiyah* (building a social base), where KAMMI actively collaborates with various NGOs and social movements focused on environmental issues. KAMMI cadres are also encouraged to participate directly in environmental agendas as part of the process of social cadre formation and the cultivation of leadership character that is responsive to humanitarian and ecological issues.

In his book *KAMMI: Reconstructing the Epicenter of Current Movement*, Syafii (2024) also urges KAMMI to reorient its movement more seriously towards environmental issues. He argues that problems such as climate change, environmental degradation, and ecological inequality have become central concerns for today's younger generation, and therefore KAMMI must be present not only in political and social spheres but also in environmental advocacy and action. According to Syafii, if KAMMI wishes to remain relevant amid the dynamics of contemporary issues, it must be able to respond to the concerns of today's generation by offering Islam-based solutions to increasingly urgent ecological problems [24].

So far, KAMMI has indeed begun to show involvement in various environmental agendas, although these activities remain programmatic and dependent on leadership periods rather than being integrated into a structured cadre system. It should be noted that these environmental agendas generally arise spontaneously, situationally, or as responses to emerging issues in society, rather than as outcomes of a systematic cadre formulation. As a result, eco-theological literacy among KAMMI cadres is still relatively limited and has not been fully integrated into the process of intellectual or ideological formation. This condition shows that while KAMMI has begun to engage with environmental issues, there has not yet been a serious effort to establish eco-theology as part of the ideological framework of cadre formation that can cultivate ecological awareness grounded in Islamic values among its members.

3.4. Challenges and Opportunities for Integrating Eco-Theology into the Agenda of Islamic Student Movements

Since the Reformasi era, KAMMI has transformed into a student movement that seeks to remain relevant to the dynamics of its time. This transformation is reflected in its responsiveness to political, social, and religious issues that shape the discourse of the younger generation. However, when it comes to ecological concerns, the eco-theological narrative within KAMMI has not yet been fully institutionalized. Eco-theology often appears as a personal discourse among cadres rather than being embedded in the organization's established agenda. This creates a gap between the ideal of syumuliyah Islam, which conceptually demands the integration of spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions, and the actual organizational practice that prioritizes political, social, and communal issues.

Within this context, several challenges hinder the integration of eco-theology into Islamic student movements. First, the absence of a systematic cadre training curriculum addressing environmental issues prevents eco-theological awareness from developing comprehensively. Second, environmental initiatives conducted by certain branches remain sporadic, incidental, and lack sustainability due to insufficient organizational support.

Third, the strong political orientation within student activism often marginalizes ecological concerns. As highlighted by Kholid Abdurrahman in an interview, "ecological awareness is indeed important, but within the structure of student movements this issue is often sidelined by more urgent political and social agendas. However, such issues can actually be collaborated; for instance, during regional elections, campaigns should be more closely tied to green initiatives, and therefore we initiated the idea of 'Pilkada Lestari' as a concrete example" (Interview, 2025). This statement underscores that the primary challenge does not lie in the absence of awareness but rather in the prioritization of agendas that fail to place ecology at a strategic level.

On the other hand, this study also identifies several opportunities. First, KAMMI's ideological foundation of syumuliyah Islam can be reinterpreted to emphasize that ecological concern is an integral part of Islamic praxis. Second, the growing awareness among younger generations about sustainability provides an entry point to align ecological advocacy with the aspirations of KAMMI cadres. Third, although still sporadic, the initiatives of several local branches in organizing environmental activities can serve as starting points for building a more structured and nationally coordinated program.

Taken together, these challenges and opportunities illustrate that integrating eco-theology into Islamic student movements is not merely about adding a new issue but rather about reconstructing organizational priorities, expanding cadre training curricula, and ensuring program sustainability. If such steps are taken, KAMMI has the potential to become a pioneer in embedding eco-theology into Islamic student activism in Indonesia, thereby contributing meaningfully to addressing the national ecological crisis.

4. CONCLUSION

Since its transformation after the reform era, KAMMI has positioned itself as a student movement that seeks to remain relevant to changing times. Within this trajectory, ecological issues have slowly entered its agenda through initiatives such as KAMMI Green Leadership, Pilkada Lestari, and local campaigns. However, these initiatives remain fragmented and ad hoc, not yet systematically integrated into cadre training or organizational priorities. This reflects a gap between the ideological vision of syumuliyah Islam and the practical emphasis on political and social agendas that often marginalize ecological concerns.

The findings indicate that responding to ecological challenges has become an urgent necessity for Islamic student organizations such as KAMMI. Theoretically, this study contributes to eco-theology by extending its application into the understudied domain of student movements, showing how environmental ethics can reframe activism and organizational identity. Practically, it calls for institutionalizing ecological values within the framework of cadre development and ensuring continuity of programs beyond leadership cycles, so that ecological engagement is not limited to temporary initiatives or individual commitments.

The study is limited by the fact that interview data were collected only from central-level leadership, leaving local perspectives unexplored. Future research should therefore include grassroots cadres and comparative studies with other student organizations to provide a more comprehensive picture. Despite this limitation, the study underscores the urgent need for KAMMI to integrate ecological concerns into its broader transformation agenda, not only to strengthen its relevance among today's generation but also to contribute meaningfully to addressing the ecological crisis facing Indonesian society.

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