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Liberation Theology and Social Empowerment: A Case Study of Nahdlatul Ulama in Subang, West Java

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the implementation of liberation theology within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), focusing on how religious values are integrated with social actions to address issues such as poverty, injustice, and structural oppression in the local context. For empirical evidence, the author focuses on the application of theology within Nahdlatul Ulama Subang, West Java. This study employs a qualitative approach, with data collection techniques including in-depth interviews, observations, and document analysis. The findings indicate that NU, particularly in Subang, adopts a substantialistic and rationalistic approach to liberation theology, focusing on empowering marginalized communities through critical awareness education, zakat- and infaq-based economic programs, and social advocacy. This approach has strengthened NU's role as an agent of social transformation at the local level, despite challenges such as structural resistance and internal organizational dynamics. This research contributes to the understanding of liberation theology as both an ideological and practical framework that aligns religious values with contemporary social justice efforts, while demonstrating the flexibility of religion to adapt to the needs of the times while preserving its spiritual essence.

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi implementasi teologi pembebasan dalam Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), dengan fokus pada bagaimana nilai-nilai agama diintegrasikan dengan aksi sosial untuk menangani isu-isu seperti kemiskinan, ketidakadilan, dan penindasan struktural dalam konteks lokal. Untuk bukti empirik, penulis mengambil fokus penerapan teologi pada Nahdlatul Ulama Subang, Jawa Barat. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan analisis dokumen. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa NU terutama di Subang mengadopsi pendekatan substansialistik dan rasionalistik dalam teologi pembebasan, dengan fokus pada pemberdayaan komunitas terpinggirkan melalui pendidikan kesadaran

kritis, program ekonomi berbasis zakat dan infaq, serta advokasi sosial. Pendekatan ini telah memperkuat peran NU sebagai agen transformasi sosial di tingkat lokal, meskipun menghadapi tantangan seperti resistensi struktural dan dinamika internal organisasi. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi untuk pemahaman teologi pembebasan sebagai kerangka ideologis dan praktis yang menyelaraskan nilai-nilai agama dengan upaya keadilan sosial kontemporer, serta menunjukkan fleksibilitas agama untuk menyesuaikan diri dengan kebutuhan zaman sambil mempertahankan esensi spiritualnya.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, religion often becomes the focal point of conflict, with its role in social transformation frequently questioned (Sandal, 2019). While some argue that religion exacerbates oppression within society, others believe that religion can serve as a transformative and progressive force. Peter L. Berger (2002) argues that for religion to be legitimate, it must offer ideological insights and cognitive understanding, allowing it to adapt to social changes while avoiding the pitfalls of harm and dogmatism (Al-Khu'i, 2003). This ability to evolve ensures that religion remains relevant and resilient to the challenges posed by changes in society.

However, critiques from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have long questioned the transformative power of religion, particularly its potential to perpetuate passivity rather than act as a catalyst for change (Stark, 2003). The duality of religion's role—whether promoting universal peace or fueling sectarian conflict—has been a focus of recent debates. A. N. Wilson, as cited by Nurcholis Madjid, draws attention to the crisis faced by religions today, warning that religion has deviated from its original transformative essence. These ongoing critiques highlight the importance of reassessing how religion functions in the modern age.

Religious spirit, according to developmental psychologists such as Thouless, peaks in later stages of life, often manifesting in extraordinary devotion to spiritual matters (Yudha, 2004). This phenomenon suggests that religion may function as a response to existential problems and the search for meaning. Max Weber, in his seminal work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1958), argues that religion, particularly Protestantism, plays a crucial role in shaping modern economic and social systems. Weber's perspective suggests that religious beliefs profoundly influence individual actions and social relations, especially in the economic and political spheres (Weber, 1992).

The concept of liberation theology, first developed by Gustavo Gutiérrez in the 20th century, expands on this by emphasizing religion as a tool for social transformation, which is also part of religious spirit. Liberation theology prioritizes praxis, or action, to address systemic oppression and inequality, arguing that theology must transcend intellectual discourse to become a revolutionary force (Gutierrez, 1983). This approach critiques classical theology, which is often seen as too abstract and detached from the real injustices in the world (Fakhry, 2004). Liberation theology advocates for active resistance to oppression, viewing human freedom as essential in shaping one's destiny, rather than passively accepting fate (Engineer, 2003).

In Indonesia, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—the largest Islamic organization in the country—has played a significant role in advocating for social justice. Historically, NU has contributed to the struggle for independence from colonialism and has been a staunch defender of marginalized groups. This tradition of social advocacy aligns with the principles of liberation theology, making NU a key player in addressing poverty, injustice, and marginalization in Indonesian society (Permana, 2023; Taufiq, 2024).

However, the literature on the application of liberation theology within NU remains limited. While existing studies highlight NU's role in promoting religious moderation and social justice (Fithriyyah & Umam, 2018; Haris, Salikin, Sahrodi, & Fatimah, 2023; Musyarrofah, 2023; Wulandari, Annisa, Ningsih, Fahrica, & Idami, 2021), there is a gap in understanding how the organization integrates liberation theology into its social movements (Hananti & Subandrijo, 2021; Permana, 2023). This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how NU applies liberation theology in its social efforts and identifying the challenges and opportunities it faces in advocating for social justice.

The purpose of this research is to explore the intersection of liberation theology and social movements within Nahdlatul Ulama. Empirically, I capture how NU Branch in Subang, West Java, embodies these ideas of liberation theology while examining its role in social movements within the community. This study aims to assess how NU's social programs, such as community empowerment and advocacy for marginalized groups, reflect the principles of liberation theology. Additionally, this research investigates the critical consciousness that arises within NU and its potential to drive social change, particularly in addressing issues such as poverty and inequality. This study is expected to provide valuable insights into how religious organizations can drive social transformation through a theological lens that prioritizes justice and equality.

Therefore, this research argues that Nahdlatul Ulama, through the application of liberation theology, has the potential to become a significant force for social change in Indonesia. By utilizing its established social networks and organizational infrastructure, NU can effectively implement programs focused on empowering marginalized communities, advocating for social rights, and addressing economic disparities. Through this analysis, concrete examples of NU's liberation theology practices are expected to emerge, illustrating the organization's role in promoting justice and social progress within Indonesian society.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

In this study, the object of research is Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Specifically, I study NU in Subang Regency, West Java, focusing on how the organization applies the principles of liberation theology in its social movements. The case selected for this study relates to the community empowerment and advocacy programs carried out by NU, with an emphasis on their contributions to social justice and the empowerment of marginalized communities in the local context. Subang Regency was chosen due to its diverse and plural society, as well as significant socio-economic challenges (Annisa, 2022; Mahmudin, 2016), including high poverty rates and religious diversity, making it a relevant location to examine the practical application of liberation theology (Darmawan, 2024; Fikri, 2021).

This study uses a qualitative approach, focusing on the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The data types are divided into primary and secondary sources (Djunatan, Haq, Viktorahadi, & Samosir, 2024; Haq & Setia, 2024; Setiadi, Natanael, & Haq, 2023). Primary data is obtained through direct interaction with the Nahdlatul Ulama leadership in Subang Regency, while secondary data consists of documents such as books, academic journals, and related research reports that provide context and insights into NU's theological and social practices. This study is descriptive in nature, aiming to explore and describe the phenomenon of NU's social movement and its alignment with liberation theology.

The research process involves two main stages in data collection: observation and in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews are conducted with key figures in NU leadership in Subang, allowing the researcher to gain insights into their perspectives on liberation theology and its application in their social programs. Observational data is collected by attending NU events and community service programs to directly observe the practices and strategies implemented by the organization in addressing local social issues.

Data analysis is carried out in three steps: first, data reduction, which involves selecting, focusing, and simplifying data to make it more manageable. Second, data presentation, which involves organizing the data into themes and categories that reflect the core aspects of NU's engagement with liberation theology. Finally, conclusions and inferences are drawn from the data, identifying key

patterns, challenges, and opportunities in the application of liberation theology within NU's social movement. This analysis allows a comprehensive understanding of how NU integrates theological principles into practical social actions, emphasizing empowerment and justice (Miles & Huberman, 2013).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theological and Ideological Foundations of Liberation Theology

Liberation theology emerges from a transformational approach to religion, which transforms religion from merely a series of doctrines and rituals into a praxis that confronts and addresses social realities (Dabashi, 2008). Unlike classical theology, which tends to focus on individual faith and intellectual constructs, liberation theology emphasizes religion as a tool for social change, advocating for justice, equality, and freedom (Gutierrez, 1984). Classical theology often functions to maintain the status quo, reinforcing structures of oppression, as it prioritizes metaphysical concerns over practical engagement with social issues (Pieris, 1980). In contrast, liberation theology calls for critical reflection on social injustice, encouraging active transformation through principles such as solidarity and justice (Engineer, 2003).

In this context, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) offers a distinctive theological framework that aligns with liberation theology's emphasis on justice and social change (Bashri, 2021; Bush, 2009). The theological orientation within NU, particularly its political stance, is not driven by the formation of an Islamic state but focuses on ethical values, norms, and the role of religion in promoting social justice (Madinier & Feillard, 1999). This political orientation arises from pragmatic considerations of social realities, where the concepts of *maslahat* (benefit) and *mudarat* (harm) play a central role in shaping NU's political engagement. Therefore, NU's theological perspective is grounded in the recognition of religious values as guiding forces for the welfare of society, without seeking formal political goals.

Furthermore, theological reflection within NU is neither fixed nor dogmatic; it is flexible and responsive to changes in the political and social context (Arifianto, 2021). The pragmatic nature of NU's political engagement ensures that religious objectives are pursued without coercion, allowing for a more inclusive and tolerant approach to religious pluralism (Hosen, 2004). This contrasts with other theological traditions that advocate rigid and exclusive interpretations of religious texts, which can lead to the imposition of religious idealism on political practices (Saenong, 2021).

Ideological Changes and the Role of NU in Subang, West Java

In Subang Regency, where socio-economic inequality and religious diversity present significant challenges (Darmawan, 2024), NU's progressive potential becomes very clear. Asep Alamsyah, the Chairman of GP Ansor Subang, highlights the ideological changes that have characterized NU's political trajectory. He explained that NU's progressivism fluctuates between cultural and structural dimensions, with significant political moments, such as when the organization functioned as a political party. However, these changes also reflect the complex interaction between mass movements and elite interests, which sometimes lead to conservative tendencies.

In an interview with Asep Alamsyah, Chairman of GP Ansor Subang, he stated:

> "We must first look at the span of history, ideological orientation, and interests, and if possible, changes in class relations. Greg Fealy's book, *Political Ijtihad of the Ulama,* provides a fairly adequate picture of this. Generally, NU's 'progressiveness' lies between the cultural and structural, between the masses and the elites, between the congregation and the organization. It depends on which side we want to see. There was a time when one was more advanced than the other. There was a time when NU's political dynamics were very advanced when it became a political party— the congregation was pushed forward by the organization. Then, conservatism and opportunism flourished—the congregation challenged and questioned the organization. These ideological shifts and interests are linked to changes in class relations." (Interview, September 17, 2024).

This interview reflects the dynamic nature of NU's ideological stance, which evolves in response to changing political, cultural, and social conditions. NU's flexible approach to political involvement allows it to adapt to evolving realities, enabling NU to remain a significant force in the social and political landscape of Subang.

Islam, as articulated by figures such as Ali Shariati, plays an important role in this ideological transformation. Shariati (1974) argued that Islam is not only a religion related to spiritual affairs but also a force for social liberation. Islam is a religion that encourages action, political involvement, and a commitment to justice and freedom. For Shariati, Islam's core mission is to challenge oppression and bring about social change, which aligns closely with the goals of liberation theology.

In the case of NU, this theological foundation provides a framework that integrates religious ethics into practical political action without imposing doctrinal rigidity. The substantive variant of NU's theology supports religious freedom and pluralism, viewing religion primarily as a set of values and norms that guide social behavior rather than a political instrument. This theological orientation enables a more tolerant and inclusive approach to politics, where the religious and cultural diversity in Subang can be navigated with respect and openness to differences.

Political Praxis and the Role of Liberation Theology

The application of liberation theology in NU's political praxis highlights the dynamic tension between ideal religious goals and the socio-political reality of Indonesia. The theological reflection within NU emphasizes the importance of aligning religious ideals with the lived experiences of the community, where social justice and the protection of marginalized groups are primary concerns. As scholars such as Charles Kimball (2002) note, the realistic variant of liberation theology avoids corrupting religious ideals by ensuring that religious goals are not imposed on political praxis in a way that disregards human dignity, tolerance, and pluralism.

NU's approach to political praxis reflects this understanding, where decisions are based on rational considerations of *maslahat* (benefit) and *mudarat* (harm), ensuring that political actions are guided by the practical realities of the community in which they operate. This approach allows for a flexible interpretation of religious principles, adapting them to the evolving political landscape while maintaining a commitment to justice and social equality. By avoiding the imposition of ideal religious symbols on politics, NU's theological perspective minimizes the risk of conflict and ensures that political actions remain inclusive and respectful of the diverse religious and cultural identities.

In conclusion, the theological and ideological foundations of liberation theology provide an essential framework for understanding NU's social movement in Subang. By emphasizing the ethical and pragmatic dimensions of religion, NU's political theology reflects a commitment to justice, pluralism, and social transformation. This approach not only aligns with the core tenets of liberation theology but also offers a concrete model of how religious organizations can engage with social issues in a way that remains faithful to their traditions while being responsive to contemporary challenges.

Implementation of Liberation Theology Praxis in the Context of NU Subang

In its early history, NU in Subang was heavily oriented towards the interests of the lower middle class, small traders who were threatened by the monopoly of Dutch colonialism, which made it tend to be resistive and highly aware of the need for independence. This changed in the 1940s when the influence of practical politics began to draw NU into state power. There was a lot of opportunism. If you read Fealy's book (2012), you will be surprised that many NU cadres were involved in problems, such as corruption and abuse of power. This occurred in the late 1950s when liberal democracy practices in Indonesia strengthened. This opportunism triggered a reaction from the idealistic congregation that wanted NU to continue its populist mission, based on an interview with Asep Hanafi (PC NU Subang Administrator) who stated that:

> "At this point, a deeper mapping is needed to determine where the NU Subang struggle pendulum really lies. NU may have progressive potential, but many parties have exploited NU for their own

> interests, which has hindered NU. In general, we see that the composition of NU's current board is very diverse and filled with many 'professionals.' NU is organizing itself into a modern organization. NU's position in government is also strong. So, it is very difficult for NU to take an opposition position against the regime." (Interview, September 18, 2024).

The progressive potential and the space to express it seem to be more found in the congregation outside the structural path. For example, the youth who do not have a Kartanu (NU Membership Card), or villagers who are still strongly involved in NU practices but are becoming more politically aware within NU. However, this must be built, not just emerge on its own.

Islam offers a solution by gradually changing *(tadriji)* the old institutions that bind the order. For example, regarding the accumulation of ownership *(takatsur),* Islam offers zakat and infaq (Supriatna, Syarif, Afrilia, Sundari, & Setia, 2024). Against the rigid social hierarchy model, Islam offers modalities in organizing society to collapse social status and class, through musyawarah *(shura),* equal rights and obligations before the law, and so on (Ikhsan, Islam, Khamis, & Sunjay, 2020).

How the working class fits into this change is interesting to analyze. This is because the Prophet, at one point, praised the workers. The best of people are those who work with their own sweat. The Prophet himself was an example of a worker; he worked for his employer, Siti Khadijah RA, and became her trusted one. So, the view that the Prophet was a trader is incorrect. Traders have capital. The Prophet was not a financier; he worked for others. The Prophet was also a farmer, living in a strong agrarian culture), based on an interview with Asep Hanafi (PC NU Subang Administrator) who stated that:

> "So, on one hand, there is a gradual but massive reorganization of the social structure carried out by Islam. We can call it an effort for liberation in the infrastructure realm. And it is not finished. Some were halted and interrupted by other social dynamics. The initial apostolic mission to abolish slavery was hampered, and slavery was even institutionalized later on. The apostolic mission to abolish the accumulation of ownership by a few people through *zakat* and *infaq* was halted, because Islamic political history then became busy strengthening the owning class through the monarchy system introduced by the Umayyad Dynasty, and so on." (Interview, September 18, 2024).

In discussing liberation theology, there are several distinctive characteristics of theology according to Engineer (2003): *First,* liberation theology begins by paying attention to and observing human life in this world and the hereafter. *Second,* liberation theology does not support or desire the status quo that protects the rich against the poor. Liberation theology can be described as anti-establishment. *Third,* the next characteristic of this theology is its role in defending the oppressed and those whose rights have been taken, then fighting for their rights by providing a strong ideological foundation to fight those who oppress. The main characteristic of liberation theology is the recognition of the need to seriously address the polarization, the spiritual-material problems of human life by rebuilding the existing social order into a just and egalitarian one. Liberation theology must encourage a critical attitude towards what remains and must continuously strive to explore new possibilities (Esha, 2003, p. 32). *Fourth,* liberation theology recognizes the freedom of humans to determine their own fate, not just being fixated on destiny. These two aspects complement each other, not contradict.

According to Asghar Ali Engineer, this is the hallmark of liberation theology. Likewise, Sayyid Hossain Nasr presents concrete evidence that the theology developed is in accordance with the conditions of the time. When debates occurred between Muslims and followers of other religions (Christians, Zoroastrians, and Manichaeans) in Syria and Iraq, Muslims attempted to defend and protect Islam with rational methods. This is similar to how adherents of other religions developed their arguments rationally with philosophy and theology (Nasr, 1996).

Furthermore, this thinking is supported by Ahmad Wahid (d. 1973) who stated that the existing Islamic theology at that time was no longer capable of creating dialogue with the thinking of Muslim scholars. The theory had lost its strength, and its explanations were too simplistic. The inability to create

a dialogical atmosphere was because Islamic theology still spoke the language of the past and did not meet the language or issues of the 20th century (Wahib, 1995).

Therefore, theology must have a dual function, vertical, which is internal, and horizontal - external. The internal function is to strengthen the faith of Muslims. Meanwhile, the external function serves as a guide in interpreting and confronting life in all its dimensions. M. Amin Abdullah (1995) proposes that Islamic theology must be a discipline capable of dialoguing with current realities and intellectual developments.

This aligns with the thinking of Fazlur Rahman, who argues that the Qur'an, as the main source of Islam, needs to be interpreted as a whole while considering its specific background and not interpreting verse by verse or part by part, meaning interpretation must understand the Qur'an as a whole, making its theological and ethical aspects a coherent unity (Rahman, 1984).

To this day, Nahdlatul Ulama Subang has successfully organized many Nahdlatul Ulama Branch Representative Councils (MWC) throughout Subang Regency with newly refreshed branch representative administrators. Thus, with the presence of MWC administrators and branches, it is expected that all programs of Nahdlatul Ulama Subang Branch can run well as expected. The Subang Branch of Nahdlatul Ulama has played a significant role in creating a good climate, so that with the current situation, the possibility for Nahdlatul Ulama to advance and develop rapidly in the future is wide open. The relationship between Nahdlatul Ulama and the government, the military, the police, and the community is very good, thus supporting the future programs of Nahdlatul Ulama.

In an interview with KH Musyfiq Amrullah (NU Subang Administrator), he stated that:

> "From various backgrounds and professions, NU in Subang Regency is expected to transform into a giant organization that is ready to serve Religion, the nation, and the state, by incorporating several multi-professional elements that will be able to make a tangible contribution to NU's existence according to its *khittah,* namely serving Religion, the nation, and the state. 'It's not about what you get from NU, but what you do for NU according to its *khittah,* which is to serve the people and the nation.'" (Interview, September 19, 2024).

On the other hand, liberation is understood as a moral struggle. A kind of subjectivity ethic, in contemporary terms. Here, we see how Islam encourages and motivates its followers to struggle for liberation through efforts called *jihad* or *mujahadah,* physical warfare *(qital),* and so on. This struggle is always defined in terms of fighting falsehood and evil, and upholding justice and virtue. There is militancy there, but also consistency, just thinking (for example, the struggle must not damage the environment, nor be based on lust, arrogance, or certain phobias), self-control *('afaf),* and so on. The liberation of the working class, whether carried out by the working class itself or by various parties concerned with the working class, in Islam moves between these two pendulums.

The prospects for the development of NU's liberation theology in Subang today, as stated by Ahmad Hanafi (PC NU Subang Administrator), are:

> "If we start from the advantages we have, what is really needed is not 'liberation theology,' but 'liberation *fiqh*.' The term 'theology' is too abstract and complicated for some Muslims. On the other hand, *'fiqh'* is easier to understand. This is considering the background of Muslims in Indonesia, whose awareness is more shaped by Islamic law than debates about doctrine. It has been proven that debates about *aqidah* recently have caused more division and conflict. A thousand times you quote Hassan Hanafi with his 'revolutionary theology,' for our people, it still loses to one time you quote a *fatwa* from Kiai Hasyim Asy'ari." (Interview, September 18, 2024).

The Qur'an does not formulate it completely, nor did the Prophet. He implemented it. That is the task of ijtihad for Muslims. In general, the Qur'an and Sunnah have given a vision, but how to build institutions, that needs to be continuously elaborated. The incompleteness of religious formulations actually provides an opportunity for new ideas and synthesis.

As I mentioned earlier, in the use of social vocabulary, I tend to understand the Qur'an as a snapshot of the social conditions of that time. So, if the Qur'an mentions *al-fuqara' wa al-masakin,* for example, "the poor and the needy," this condition must be understood and traced in the social context of that time. Of course, we will not find the term 'proletariat' in the Qur'an because the 7th-century Arab society had not yet produced a definitive proletariat class, as we understand it in the 19th century. Are 'the poor and needy' what we call 'proletariat' today? This also applies to concepts such as al-*aghniya*' (the rich), *al-mustadl'afin* (the marginalized), and so on. If studied in depth, perhaps we can develop new interpretations, for example, by expanding the meaning of the concept *al-aghniya'* to big capitalists and what Marx called the ruling class.

The basis of social liberation is a new vision of the world and humanity, and a new value system based on it. This new vision gives birth to a new theology and a new structure that can provide real benefits to humanity. That is the essence of liberation.

4. CONCLUSION

This study's findings highlight that the application of liberation theology within Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), particularly in this study's focus on NU Subang, West Java, offers a different and progressive paradigm for addressing social issues such as injustice, poverty, and oppression. Unlike classical theology, which often functions to preserve the status quo, the liberation theology movement in NU Subang integrates religious values with practical actions aimed at promoting social justice. This approach emphasizes the axiological dimension of religion, advocating for the defense and empowerment of marginalized groups. A key innovation of this research is how NU Subang applies these principles to achieve tangible results in economic empowerment, education for critical awareness, and social advocacy, which contribute to structural change within the local context. These practices reflect significant steps away from traditional theological frameworks and provide a concrete model for grassroots movements grounded in Islamic values.

This research contributes to the field by offering a new perspective on liberation theology interacting with *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), particularly within the context of Indonesia's socio-political dynamics. The study proposes that, rather than relying solely on abstract theological discussions, a more practical application of liberation theology through Islamic legal reasoning is necessary. This view expands the traditional understanding of liberation theology and offers a new approach to addressing issues of inequality and social injustice within the Islamic framework, providing valuable insights into how theology can serve as a tool for structural reform at the local level.

However, this study has several limitations that should be considered. It focuses exclusively on NU Subang, so its findings cannot be fully generalized to other NU organizations with different regional dynamics. Additionally, the data used in this study mostly comes from interviews with NU administrators, which may not fully represent the perspectives of grassroots members. The use of a qualitative descriptive approach also limits the ability to assess the quantitative impact of the liberation theology movement on the community. To gain a more comprehensive understanding, future research should incorporate a more diverse methodology, including quantitative analysis, and expand its scope to other regions, exploring broader perspectives from both NU leadership and general members.

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