

The Concept of Khalifah fi al-Ard and Indonesia's Ecological Crisis: A Comparative Study of the Thought of Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the concept of *khalifah fi al-ard* in the thought of Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid and to explain its relevance to contemporary ecological crises in Indonesia. The research employs a qualitative method using a library research approach and comparative-conceptual analysis. The primary data sources consist of Muhammad Abduh's *Risalat al-Tawhīd* and Nurcholish Madjid's works, including *Islam, Doctrine and Civilization*. The findings indicate that Abduh emphasizes rationality guided by *tawhīd* as the foundation of human responsibility toward nature, while Nurcholish Madjid highlights social ethics and collective responsibility in public life. Both view humans as trustees rather than absolute owners of the earth. The concept of vicegerency thus provides an ethical framework for addressing mining expansion, deforestation, and ecological disasters in Indonesia by affirming the principles of balance, justice, and sustainability.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics; Indonesian Ecological Crisis; Khalifah fi al-Ard; Muhammad Abduh; Nurcholish Madjid

Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis konsep *khalifah fi al-ard* dalam pemikiran Muhammad Abduh dan Nurcholish Madjid serta menjelaskan relevansinya terhadap krisis ekologi kontemporer di Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode kualitatif dengan pendekatan studi kepustakaan dan analisis komparatif-konseptual. Sumber data utama berasal dari karya Muhammad Abduh, khususnya *Risalat al-Tawhīd*, serta tulisan-tulisan Nurcholish Madjid seperti *Islam Doktrin dan Peradaban*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa Abduh menekankan rasionalitas yang dibimbing oleh *tawhid* sebagai dasar tanggung jawab manusia terhadap alam, sedangkan Nurcholish Madjid menegaskan dimensi etika sosial dan tanggung jawab kolektif dalam pengelolaan kehidupan publik. Keduanya memandang manusia sebagai pemegang *amanah*, bukan pemilik mutlak bumi. Konsep kekhalifahan tersebut relevan sebagai kerangka etis dalam merespons persoalan pertambangan, deforestasi, dan bencana ekologis di Indonesia melalui penegasan prinsip keseimbangan, keadilan, dan keberlanjutan.

Kata Kunci: Etika Lingkungan; Krisis Ekologis Indonesia; Khalifah fi al-Ard; Muhammad Abduh; Nurcholish Madjid

INTRODUCTION

The global ecological crisis has become one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century. Climate change, forest degradation, air and water pollution, and biodiversity loss indicate that the relationship between humans and nature is increasingly imbalanced.¹ Indonesia, as a country endowed with rich biodiversity yet heavily dependent on natural resource-based economic development, faces complex tensions between growth and sustainability.² In this context, religion can no longer be understood merely as a ritual system, but must be positioned as a source of ethical values capable of shaping ecological consciousness. The concept of *khalifah fi al-ard* in Islam offers a theological framework that places humans as trustees rather than absolute rulers over the earth.

In recent years, various developments have demonstrated the escalation of environmental crises in Indonesia. Nickel mining activities in Raja Ampat drew public attention again in 2023–2024 due to potential threats to one of the world’s richest marine biodiversity regions.³ In Papua, the expansion of mining concessions and national strategic projects throughout 2022–2024 led to land clearing and agrarian conflicts affecting Indigenous communities.⁴ The continued expansion of oil palm plantations through 2023 has also been linked to deforestation and forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan. These developments reveal that extractive-based development models still dominate policy directions, often neglecting ecological carrying capacity.

The impacts of these environmental crises are not merely ecological but also social. Major floods that struck parts of West Sumatra and Aceh in early 2025 affected thousands of residents, damaged infrastructure, and destroyed agricultural land and local livelihoods.⁵ These events were closely connected to watershed degradation, deforestation, and weak environmental governance.⁶ Low-income communities and rural populations were among the most severely affected. Thus, ecological crises cannot be reduced to technical issues alone; they are also matters of social justice and moral orientation in development policy.

Several studies have examined the relationship between Islamic theology and environmental ethics. Rakhmat argues that the concept of *khalifah* is often misinterpreted as legitimizing anthropocentrism, whereas it fundamentally represents a mandate of moral

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- 1 Sylvester Chibueze Izah et al., “Impact of Air Quality as a Component of Climate Change on Biodiversity-Based Ecosystem Services,” in *Visualization Techniques for Climate Change with Machine Learning and Artificial Intelligence* (Elsevier, 2023), 123–48, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-323-99714-0.00005-4>.
 - 2 Robi Kurniawan and Shunsuke Managi, “Economic Growth and Sustainable Development in Indonesia: An Assessment,” *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* 54, no. 3 (September 2, 2018): 339–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2018.1450962>.
 - 3 Grace Cheng and Astrid Cornelisse, “Being Economical with the Truth: Dutch Public Claims and Hidden Agendas about Papuan Self-Determination and the Economic Exploitation of Netherlands New Guinea,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, November 29, 2025, 1–43, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2025.2581043>.
 - 4 Rizal Justian Setiawan and Tony Tai Ting Liu, “Geopolitics of Natural Resource Investment: A Case Study of Chinese Nickel Ventures in Eastern Indonesia,” *Journal Innovation, Social, and Environment* 1, no. 1 (2025): 8–20.
 - 5 Nasri Nasri et al., “Ecological Disaster in Northern Sumatra: How Extreme Rainfall and Land-Cover Disturbance Triggered Widespread Flash Flooding,” *Jurnal Penelitian Kebutanan Wallacea* 14, no. 2 (December 30, 2025): 111–21, <https://doi.org/10.24259/jpkwallacea.v14i2.48907>.
 - 6 Rahmawati Husein and Kanako Iuchi, “Towards Sustainable Disaster Prevention: Strengthening Environment-Based Disaster Governance in Indonesia,” *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 1566, no. 1 (December 1, 2025): 012010, <https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/1566/1/012010>.

responsibility toward nature.⁷ Abdul Quddus identifies the principles of *tanḥīd*, *amānah-khalīfah*, and *akbīrah* as foundational elements of Islamic ecotheology in responding to global crises.⁸ Djuned further demonstrates that Islam promotes a mutualistic relationship between humans and the environment and emphasizes a holistic approach grounded in religious values.⁹ However, these studies have not specifically undertaken a comparative analysis of reformist thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid in relation to Indonesia's contemporary ecological crises, particularly those involving mining expansion, industrial development, and recent environmental disasters.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze the concept of *khalīfah fi al-ard* in the thought of Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid and to explain its relevance to contemporary ecological crises in Indonesia. Using a comparative-conceptual approach, the study seeks to demonstrate how Abduh's theological rationalism and Nurcholish Madjid's social ethics can serve as normative frameworks for evaluating development trajectories and strengthening Islamic-based environmental ethics. It is expected that this research will contribute theoretically to the development of Islamic ecotheology while also offering practical relevance in addressing Indonesia's environmental challenges.

Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using a library research approach, as all data were obtained through the examination and analysis of relevant literature related to the topic.¹⁰ The research focuses on exploring and comparing the concept of *khalīfah fi al-ard* in the thought of Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid, as well as its implications for contemporary ecological crises. Primary sources consist of the major works of both thinkers, including *Risālat al-Tanḥīd* by Muhammad Abduh and *Islam, Doctrine and Civilization* along with the collected works of Nurcholish Madjid. Secondary data were drawn from scholarly journals, academic books, policy reports, and research publications addressing Islamic eco-theology, environmental ethics, and the dynamics of Indonesia's ecological crisis during the period 2022–2024.

Data collection was conducted through documentation techniques by identifying, critically reading, and classifying relevant ideas from both primary and secondary sources. The collected data were then analyzed using a comparative-conceptual approach to identify similarities, differences, and points of convergence between the two thinkers. The analytical process involved data reduction, thematic categorization, and contextual interpretation to construct a comprehensive understanding of the concept of vicegerency and its relevance to environmental issues. This approach enabled the study to systematically and argumentatively connect classical theological frameworks with contemporary ecological realities.

7 Aulia Rakhmat, "Islamic Ecotheology: Understanding The Concept Of Khalifah And The Ethical Responsibility Of The Environment," *Academic Journal of Islamic Principles and Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (June 30, 2022): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.22515/ajipp.v3i1.5104>.

8 Abdul Quddus, "Ecotheology Islam: Teologi Konstruktif Atasi Krisis Lingkungan," *Ulumuna* 16, no. 2 (November 7, 2017): 311–46, <https://doi.org/10.20414/ujs.v16i2.181>.

9 Muslim Djuned, "Relasi Manusia Dan Lingkungan Hidup Dalam Islam," *SINTHOP: Media Kajian Pendidikan, Agama, Sosial Dan Budaya* 2, no. 2 (December 31, 2023): 124–34, <https://doi.org/10.22373/sinthop.v2i2.4080>.

10 Sugiyono, *Metode Penelitian Kuantitatif, Kualitatif, Dan RD*, Cet. ke 23 (Bandung: Penerbit Alfabeta, 2016).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid: Life, Works, and Intellectual Background

Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) and Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005) were two major Muslim reformers who emerged in different socio-political contexts yet confronted similar crises within the Muslim world. Abduh lived in nineteenth-century Egypt during British colonial domination and a period of intellectual stagnation marked by rigid *taqlid* (blind imitation).¹¹ In contrast, Nurcholish Madjid—widely known as Cak Nur—operated in postcolonial Indonesia, where Muslims grappled with modernization, democratization, and globalization.¹² These differing historical settings significantly shaped their intellectual orientations. Abduh concentrated on theological reform and the revitalization of rational thought, whereas Cak Nur emphasized the renewal of Islamic thought within a pluralistic society and a modern nation-state. Despite these contextual differences, both were united by a shared commitment to *iṣlāḥ*, or reform.

Biographically, Abduh was educated within the classical scholarly tradition of al-Azhar, yet he was profoundly influenced by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who inspired him to pursue intellectual and political reform.¹³ His experience of political exile and involvement in educational reform deeply shaped his rational and critical approach to theology. His seminal work, *Risālat al-Tawḥīd* (The Theology of Unity), underscores the central role of reason (*‘aql*) in understanding Islamic teachings. Abduh rejected rigid and literalist interpretations of religion and called for the reopening of the gates of *ijtihad*. For him, the decline of Muslim societies was not caused by Islam itself, but by intellectual stagnation and uncritical traditionalism. Reforming theology and education, therefore, became the core of his intellectual project.

In contrast, Nurcholish Madjid was raised in a pesantren (Islamic boarding school) environment in Jombang before pursuing higher education at the State Islamic Institute (IAIN) in Jakarta and later earning his doctorate from the University of Chicago.¹⁴ His engagement with both classical Islamic scholarship and modern Western thought shaped a dialogical and inclusive intellectual outlook. Through works such as *Islam, Doctrine and Civilization* and his collected writings, Cak Nur emphasized the importance of contextualizing Islamic teachings within Indonesia’s pluralistic reality. He introduced the idea of “secularization” in the sense of desanctifying the profane, rather than separating religion from public life. For him, Islam should function as an ethical and liberating force, fully relevant to democratic modern society.

In terms of authorship, Abduh wrote within the Middle Eastern reformist tradition, employing a systematic theological and philosophical style of argumentation. *Risālat al-Tawḥīd*

11 Moh. Nor Ichwan et al., “Muhammad Abduh and Sufism: Building Spiritual Consciousness in the Context of Social Change,” *Teosofi: Jurnal Tasawuf Dan Pemikiran Islam* 14, no. 1 (June 15, 2024): 163–87, <https://doi.org/10.15642/teosofi.2024.14.1.163-187>.

12 M. Amin Abdullah, “Nurcholish Madjid and Religious Pluralism in Indonesian Islam,” in *Pluralism in Islamic Contexts - Ethics, Politics and Modern Challenges. Philosophy and Politics - Critical Explorations*, 2021, 189–99, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66089-5_11.

13 Mohamed Haddad, “A Muslim Reformist: Muhammad Abduh,” in *Muslim Reformism - A Critical History. Philosophy and Politics - Critical Explorations*, 2020, 15–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-36774-9_2.

14 Mushlihin Amali, “From Politics to Education: Nurcholish Madjid and the Reform of Education In Indonesia,” *Hayula: Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Islamic Studies* 3, no. 1 (January 28, 2019): 17–24, <https://doi.org/10.21009/003.1.02>.

represents his attempt to synthesize modern rationality with Islamic creed. He also collaborated with Rashid Rida in producing *Tafsīr al-Manār*, a Qur'anic exegesis emphasizing the social dimensions of revelation.¹⁵ By contrast, Cak Nur's writings were largely reflective essays and socio-religious analyses rather than systematic theological treatises.¹⁶ He did not compose a formal Qur'anic commentary; instead, his ideas were disseminated through lectures, articles, and books addressing the relationship between Islam, modernity, and Indonesian identity. This difference in literary form reflects differing intellectual strategies: Abduh sought to reform theological foundations, while Cak Nur aimed to cultivate socio-ethical consciousness.

Their respective socio-political environments also profoundly shaped their intellectual trajectories. Abduh witnessed firsthand the consequences of British colonial rule and the decline of Islamic educational institutions in Egypt. Consequently, he regarded rationality, science, and curricular reform as essential to civilizational revival (*tamaddun*). Cak Nur, on the other hand, operated within a nation-state struggling to define the relationship between religion and politics. Living through the New Order regime and Indonesia's democratic transition, he emphasized civil society and public ethics. If Abduh sought to rescue the Muslim community from theological stagnation, Cak Nur sought to position Islam as an inclusive moral force within modern public life.

Epistemologically, Abduh placed reason at the center of religious understanding. He argued that no genuine contradiction exists between religion and science, since both originate from the same divine source.¹⁷ This approach produced a conception of *tawhīd* that extended beyond ritual devotion to encompass social responsibility. Cak Nur, by contrast, stressed the importance of historical and contextual readings of religious texts.¹⁸ Employing a hermeneutical approach, he interpreted Islamic teachings in light of justice, humanity, and pluralism. Thus, while Abduh articulated reform in the language of theological rationalism, Cak Nur expressed it through the language of social ethics and democratic values.

Despite differences in generation and geography, both thinkers shared a fundamental conviction: Islam is rational, dynamic, and compatible with modernity. Abduh and Cak Nur rejected religious formalism devoid of substantive moral content. For them, reform was a historical necessity rather than a threat to doctrinal purity. Although their contexts shaped distinct emphases, their underlying orientation remained aligned: to restore Islam as a liberating force that harmonizes faith, reason, and social responsibility. It is within this broader framework that their thought continues to offer valuable insights, including for contemporary discussions on environmental ethics.

15 Akhmad Arif Junaidi, "The Death of Prophet Isa in Tafsīr Al-Manār by Muḥammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida," *Jurnal Theologia* 34, no. 1 (June 25, 2023): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.21580/teo.2023.34.1.17191>.

16 Alifa Ihfazna Rafida, Sahri Sahri, and Faizal Amin, "Contemporary Islamic Moderation: Insights from Al-Qaradawi, Nurcholis Madjid, and Abdurrahman Wahid," *ISTIFHAM: Journal Of Islamic Studies*, November 5, 2025, 112–29, <https://doi.org/10.71039/istifham.v3i2.103>.

17 Hakan Çoruh, "Relationship Between Religion and Science in the Muslim Modernism," *Theology and Science* 18, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 152–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746700.2019.1710355>.

18 Dian Dian et al., "Nurcholish Madjid's Perspective About Thought of Religious Pluralism," *Munaddhomah: Jurnal Manajemen Pendidikan Islam* 3, no. 2 (December 18, 2022): 139–48, <https://doi.org/10.31538/munaddhomah.v3i2.242>.

The Concept of *Khalīfah fī al-Ard* in the Thought of Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid

The concept of *khalīfah fī al-ard* constitutes a central element of Islamic theological anthropology, positioning human beings as God's vicegerents on earth. The term refers to the divine mandate mentioned in Q.S. al-Baqarah [2]: 30, when God declares His will to appoint a *khalīfah* on earth. In classical exegetical tradition, this concept is generally understood as a delegation of responsibility to cultivate and preserve the earth (*imārat al-ard*). In modern Islamic thought, however, the notion has undergone reinterpretation in response to contemporary challenges. Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid both approach the concept dynamically, though with different emphases. Their differences lie not in the foundational principle itself, but in their epistemological orientations and the socio-historical contexts that shaped their perspectives.

For Muhammad Abduh, the concept of *khalīfah* is closely tied to the human capacity for reason (*‘aql*). In *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, he argues that humanity was chosen as *khalīfah* because of its rational ability to comprehend God's laws, whether revealed through scripture or manifested in the natural order (*sunnatullāh*).¹⁹ Vicegerency, therefore, cannot be separated from intellectual responsibility. Abduh rejects fatalistic interpretations that diminish human agency. On the contrary, as *khalīfah*, humans are required to actively cultivate civilization (*tamaddun*) through education, science, and social reform. In this framework, vicegerency represents a mandate to develop the world rationally and ethically, guided by divine principles rather than blind imitation.

Beyond rationality, Abduh connects the concept of *khalīfah* to *tawhīd*. For him, monotheism is not merely a verbal affirmation of God's oneness, but a comprehensive awareness that all human activity must remain within the framework of servitude (*‘ubūdiyyah*). Human authority over nature does not imply absolute ownership; rather, it signifies a trust limited by divine moral law. Consequently, the exploitation of natural resources or actions that disrupt the balance (*mīzān*) constitute deviations from true *tawhīd*. Within this perspective, the concept of *khalīfah* carries a profound ethical dimension: the greater humanity's capabilities, the greater its accountability before God.

Nurcholish Madjid, by contrast, interprets the concept of *khalīfah* within a broader social and historical framework. He views vicegerency as a collective human mandate rather than merely individual authority.²⁰ In his writings, Cak Nur emphasizes that being a *khalīfah* requires the realization of justice, openness, and solidarity in public life. Vicegerency should not be understood as a legitimization of domination, but as a call to manage life democratically and with dignity. Within Indonesia's pluralistic context, this concept becomes a foundation for social ethics, demanding respect for fellow human beings and for the natural environment as integral parts of God's creation.

Furthermore, Cak Nur associates the concept of *khalīfah* with the Qur'anic ideal of *rahmatan li al-‘ālamīn* (a mercy to all creation). To be a *khalīfah* means to embody mercy toward the

19 Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *Risālat al-tawhīd*, trans. Ḥusayn Yūsuf Ghazāl, al-Ṭab‘ah (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-‘Ulūm, 1977).

20 Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin & Peradaban* (Gramedia pustaka utama, 2019).

entire cosmos, not merely toward a particular community.²¹ He therefore rejects exclusivist interpretations of religion that resist historical development. Vicegerency must be translated into concrete actions that promote the common good, including responsible environmental stewardship. In this framework, ecological responsibility forms an integral part of social worship (*'ibādah ijtimā'iyah*). Humans are accountable to God vertically, but also horizontally to society and to the natural world.

When compared, Abduh and Cak Nur converge on the understanding that humans are not absolute owners of the earth, but trustees entrusted with responsibility. Both reject unrestrained exploitation and emphasize the importance of balance. However, Abduh places stronger emphasis on theological and rational reform as the foundation for civilizational revival, whereas Cak Nur underscores social ethics and the democratization of values within the public sphere. These differences reflect their historical contexts: Abduh confronted intellectual stagnation, while Cak Nur grappled with pluralism and political modernity.

Thus, the concept of *khalifah fi al-ard* in the thought of both figures is dynamic rather than static. For Abduh, vicegerency becomes the basis for rational and moral renewal within the Muslim community. For Cak Nur, it serves as a foundation for inclusive and transformative social ethics. Both affirm that the mandate of vicegerency is inseparable from spiritual, intellectual, and social responsibility. The integration of theological rationality and humanistic ethics in their thought opens space for reinterpreting *khalifah* as a foundational principle for environmental ethics and sustainable development in the modern era.

The Concept of Khalifah and Its Implications for Contemporary Ecological Crisis

When the ideas of Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid are examined within today's Indonesian context, the concept of *khalifah fi al-ard* becomes increasingly urgent. Abduh emphasized rationality guided by *tamhīd*, while Cak Nur highlighted social responsibility in the public sphere. Both agreed that humans are trustees, not absolute owners of the earth. In a situation where resource exploitation continues in the name of economic growth and investment, the concept of vicegerency functions as an ethical critique of development policies. It affirms that progress must not sacrifice balance (*mizān*) and justice, since ecological destruction ultimately reflects humanity's failure to fulfill its divine mandate responsibly.

The nickel mining activities in Raja Ampat, which drew significant public attention in 2023–2024, illustrate the tension between industrial interests and environmental preservation.²² This region, widely recognized as one of the world's richest centers of marine biodiversity, faces ecological risks due to mining operations and supporting infrastructure projects. From Abduh's perspective, technology and industry operating without moral restraint represent rationality detached from *tamhīd*. Nature is reduced to a mere economic commodity. Yet as *khalifah*, humans are meant to perceive nature as *āyāt kauniyyah*—signs of divine greatness—whose continuity must be safeguarded rather than recklessly exploited.

21 Nurcholish Madjid, *Khazanah Intelektual Islam* (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2019).

22 Kurniawan Arif Maspul, "Sacrificing Paradise: Indonesia's Green Energy Ambitions and the Future of Raja Ampat," *Journal of Environmental Economics and Sustainability* 2, no. 3 (June 11, 2025): 22, <https://doi.org/10.47134/jees.v2i3.711>.

A similar pattern can be observed in the expansion of large-scale mining and national strategic projects in Papua throughout 2022–2024, including the extension of mining concessions and infrastructure development.²³ Land clearing and agrarian conflicts involving Indigenous communities reveal that development often proceeds without adequate ecological protection or respect for local rights. Here, Cak Nur’s framework of public ethics becomes particularly relevant. Vicegerency entails social justice and collective accountability. When state policies generate ecological inequality and disproportionately harm vulnerable communities, the principle of *khalifah* is compromised.

The expansion of oil palm plantations has also remained a pressing issue through 2023, particularly in relation to deforestation and forest fires in Sumatra and Kalimantan. Although the government has expressed commitment to a moratorium on new palm oil permits, field reports continue to indicate land conversion and pressure on natural forests. Within the framework of *khalifah*, the central issue is not merely legal compliance, but the moral orientation underlying economic activity. Abduh would stress the necessity of science-based regulation and rational oversight,²⁴ while Cak Nur would call for transparency and public accountability.²⁵ Without both elements, development risks becoming systemic exploitation.

The perspectives of these two thinkers can be mapped across several dimensions that demonstrate their relevance to Indonesia’s environmental crisis. Vicegerency encompasses theological consciousness, responsible use of reason, and commitment to social justice and ecological balance. Table 1 below presents a concise mapping of these dimensions and their connection to contemporary environmental cases in Indonesia.

Table 1. The Concept of *Khalifah* and Its Relevance to Indonesia’s Environmental Crisis (2022–2024)

Dimension	Muhammad Abduh	Nurcholish Madjid	Relevance to Current Cases
Theological	<i>Tamḥīd</i> as the foundation of moral responsibility	Faith as public ethics	Moral critique of mining in Raja Ampat (2023–2024)
Rational	Science and <i>ijtihād</i> for progress	Openness and renewal	Evaluation of mining and extractive industry policies in Papua (2022–2024)
Social	Moral and educational reform	Social justice and public participation	Protection of Indigenous communities affected by major projects
Ecological	Balance (<i>mīzān</i>) and trust (<i>amānah</i>)	<i>Raḥmatan li al-‘ālamīn</i>	Controlling deforestation and oil palm expansion (2023)

Source: by Author

23 Rheza Auliya Rahman and Markus Anugrah S, “Balancing Growth And Equity: An Evaluation of Foreign Direct Investment Policies in Papua in 2023,” *Jurnal Administrasi Publik* 16, no. 02 (December 30, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.62870/jap.v16i02.35973>.

24 Muhamad Haris et al., “Muhammad Abduh’s Thought and Its Practical Implications on Government Work Programs For 2024-2029,” *Journal of Social Research* 4, no. 2 (January 25, 2025): 175–95, <https://doi.org/10.55324/josr.v4i2.2424>.

25 Madjid, *Khazanah Intelektual Islam*.

Thus, the concept of *khalifah fi al-ard* extends beyond theological discourse and becomes an ethical framework for evaluating the direction of Indonesia's contemporary development. Mining in Raja Ampat, industrial expansion in Papua, and forest pressure due to oil palm cultivation demonstrate that ecological crises are rooted in how humans perceive and relate to nature. If the earth is understood as a trust, then economic and political policies must be subordinated to principles of balance and justice. At this point, the thought of Abduh and Cak Nur reveals its concrete relevance in addressing Indonesia's ongoing environmental crisis.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the concept of *khalifah fi al-ard* in the thought of Muhammad Abduh and Nurcholish Madjid holds strong relevance to contemporary ecological crises, particularly in Indonesia. Abduh emphasized rationality guided by *tawhīd* as the moral foundation for managing nature, while Nurcholish Madjid underscored the dimension of social ethics and collective responsibility in the public sphere. Both agreed that humans are trustees rather than absolute owners of the earth. In the context of nickel mining in Raja Ampat (2023–2024), industrial expansion projects in Papua (2022–2024), and forest pressures caused by oil palm expansion (2023), the concept of vicegerency can function as an ethical framework for evaluating development policies. Environmental crises are therefore not merely technical problems, but reflections of moral and spiritual failures in humanity's relationship with nature.

Based on these findings, concrete steps are required to integrate the values of vicegerency into policy and social practice. First, Islamic education should strengthen ecological literacy grounded in *tawhīd*, ensuring that environmental awareness becomes an integral part of faith. Second, the government and religious authorities should promote stronger regulations and ethical guidance against exploitative practices that disrupt ecological balance. Third, civil society and religious communities must be actively involved in monitoring development policies and promoting environmental preservation initiatives. In this way, the concept of *khalifah fi al-ard* moves beyond theological discourse and becomes a tangible ethical foundation for building a just and sustainable future for Indonesia.

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