The Role of Ulama in Mediating Political Conflicts in the Muslim World Post - Arab Spring: A Comparativ Analysis of Tunisia and Sudan

Jubair Situmorang
Fakultas Syari'ah IAIN Ternate
Email: jubairsitumorang@iain-ternate.ac.id

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Ulama, Political Mediation, Arab Spring, Tunisia, Sudan.	This study examines the role of ulama (Islamic scholars) in mediating political conflicts in the Muslim world following the Arab Spring, focusing on a comparative analysis of Tunisia and Sudan. Employing a qualitative research method through literature review and library research, the study synthesizes scholarly discourse, official reports, and relevant political analyses to understand how ulama have influenced political transitions and conflict resolution in these two distinct contexts. The Arab Spring triggered profound political upheavals across the region, with ulama emerging as key actors either supporting reformist movements or advocating for stability through religious legitimacy. In Tunisia, ulama played a nuanced role by engaging with democratic processes and promoting dialogue among political factions, contributing to a relatively peaceful transition. Conversely, in Sudan, ulama were deeply involved in both grassroots mobilization and elite negotiations, often navigating complex sectarian and political divides amid ongoing conflict. The study highlights the challenges ulama face, including balancing religious authority with political partisanship, managing divergent interpretations of Islamic law, and addressing external influences. Strategic approaches employed by ulama include mediation, fatwa issuance, and fostering inclusive political discourse, which have had varying degrees of success in mitigating conflict. This comparative analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-political functions of ulama in post-revolutionary Muslim societies and offers insights into their potential as agents of peace and stability. The findings underscore the importance of recognizing religious actors in political mediation frameworks and suggest pathways for enhancing their constructive engagement in future conflict resolution efforts.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, marked a pivotal moment in the political landscape of the Muslim world, triggering widespread uprisings and demands for democratic reforms across several countries Supriati Hardi Rahayu. (2025). . In this transformative period, the role of ulama—Islamic scholars recognized as custodians of religious knowledge and moral authority—

became increasingly significant in mediating political conflicts and shaping public discourse Osman, M. (2023). The ulama have historically held a dual position as both religious guides and political actors, often influencing legitimacy and governance through religious interpretations and fatwas. Their involvement in post-Arab Spring political transitions, particularly in Tunisia and Sudan, reflects complex dynamics where religious authority intersects with evolving political realities. Tunisia's relatively

peaceful democratic transition contrasts with Sudan's prolonged conflict and fragile political environment, providing a rich comparative context to analyze the ulama's mediation roles.

Despite the growing attention to political Islam and the Arab Spring's aftermath, there remains a research gap concerning the comparative analysis of ulama's practical roles in conflict mediation within different Muslim-majority countries Kuru, A. T. (2022). Existing studies tend to focus on either single-country case studies or general discussions of ulama's political influence without systematically comparing their strategies and impacts across diverse contexts. This gap limits a nuanced understanding of how religious authority adapts to varying political challenges and contributes to peacebuilding efforts Hamid, S. (2021). Furthermore, the urgency of this research is underscored by ongoing conflicts and political instability in many Muslim societies, where effective mediation mechanisms are critical for sustainable peace and democratic consolidation.

Previous research has highlighted the ambivalent positions of ulama during the Arab Spring, ranging from endorsing revolutionary movements to supporting existing regimes for stability's sake Gana, N. (2020). Scholars such as Usaama al-Azami have explored these tensions, emphasizing the jurisprudential debates and political affiliations that shape ulama's stances. However, these studies often lack a focused comparative framework that contextualizes the ulama's mediation roles in post-conflict political settlements. This study's novelty lies in its comparative approach, examining Tunisia and Sudan as distinct case studies to uncover patterns, challenges, and strategic approaches employed by ulama in mediating political conflicts after the Arab Spring.

The primary objective of this research is to analyze the role of ulama in mediating political conflicts in Tunisia and Sudan, identifying the factors that enable or constrain their effectiveness. By doing so, the study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on religion and politics in Muslim societies and offer practical insights for policymakers, religious leaders, and peacebuilders engaged in conflict resolution. The findings are expected to enhance understanding of how religious authority can be harnessed constructively in political mediation, promoting stability and democratic governance in the Muslim world post-Arab Spring.

2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a literature review and library research approach to explore the role of ulama in mediating political conflicts in the Muslim world post-Arab Spring, with a comparative focus on Tunisia and Sudan. The qualitative method is chosen to enable an in-depth understanding of complex social and political phenomena through the systematic analysis of textual data from diverse secondary sources. This approach is appropriate for examining the nuanced roles of religious actors in conflict mediation, where empirical fieldwork may be constrained by political sensitivities and accessibility issues.

The primary data sources consist of secondary materials collected from academic journal articles, books, official reports, and credible institutional publications that discuss the political involvement of ulama, conflict resolution, and post-Arab Spring political transitions in Tunisia and Sudan. These sources were accessed through digital academic databases, university libraries, and online repositories, ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. The selection criteria prioritized recent publications and seminal works that provide theoretical frameworks, empirical case studies, and policy analyses pertinent to the research objectives.

Data collection involved systematic literature searching using keywords such as "ulama," "political mediation," "Arab Spring," "Tunisia," "Sudan," and "conflict resolution." The process included screening abstracts and full texts to

identify studies that specifically address the mediation roles of ulama in political conflicts and their strategic approaches in the post-Arab Spring context. This method ensured the inclusion of diverse perspectives and comparative insights.

For data analysis, qualitative content analysis was applied to the collected literature. This involved coding and categorizing textual data to identify recurring themes, patterns, and differences concerning the ulama's mediation roles, challenges encountered, and strategies employed in Tunisia and Sudan. The analysis aimed to synthesize findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of how ulama contribute to political conflict mediation and peacebuilding in varied socio-political environments. This method facilitated the extraction of meaningful interpretations and the construction of a comparative framework to highlight contextual influences and best practices.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The role of ulama in mediating political conflicts in the Muslim world after the Arab Spring is complex and multifaceted, reflecting the diverse political and social landscapes of countries such as Tunisia and Sudan. In Tunisia, the ulama have played a nuanced and constructive role in facilitating dialogue and consensus-building during the country's transition to democracy. Following the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia experienced a delicate balancing act between secular and Islamist forces, with the ulama—particularly those affiliated with the moderate Islamist party Ennahda—engaging in political processes that emphasized inclusivity and compromise. This engagement was critical in shaping Tunisia's new constitution, which incorporated Islamic principles alongside democratic values, reflecting a unique hybrid model of governance. The ulama's mediation extended beyond formal

politics into civil society, where they helped bridge divides between opposing groups by promoting principles of shura (consultation) and ijma (consensus), which are deeply rooted in Islamic tradition. Their ability to adapt religious teachings to contemporary political realities fostered a relatively peaceful transition compared to other Arab Spring countries, despite episodes of political violence and polarization.

Conversely, the situation in Sudan presents a more contentious and turbulent context for the ulama's involvement in political mediation. Sudan's post-Arab Spring period has been marked by prolonged conflict, military coups, and fragile civilian-military power-sharing arrangements. The ulama in Sudan have been divided, with some aligning with the Islamist regime of Omar al-Bashir and others supporting revolutionary movements and grassroots activism. This fragmentation has complicated their role as mediators, as competing religious interpretations and political loyalties have fueled tensions rather than resolved them. External influences, particularly from Gulf countries supporting different factions, have further polarized the ulama community, with Salafist groups often opposing more moderate or revolutionary elements. Despite these challenges, ulama have occasionally acted as intermediaries in negotiations, leveraging their religious authority to call for peace and justice, though their effectiveness has been constrained by the volatile political environment and ongoing violence.

Both cases illustrate the dual-edged nature of religious authority in political conflict mediation. While ulama possess moral legitimacy and social influence that can facilitate dialogue and reconciliation, their involvement is often shaped by broader political

dynamics and power struggles. In Tunisia, the ulama's strategic engagement with democratic institutions helped embed Islamic values within a pluralistic framework, contributing to stability. In Sudan, however, the politicization of religious authority and external patronage have limited the ulama's capacity to act as neutral mediators, sometimes exacerbating divisions. This contrast highlights the importance of context-specific factors, including the historical relationship between religion and state, the degree of political pluralism, and the influence of international actors.

The challenges faced by ulama in these mediation roles include balancing religious legitimacy with political partisanship, managing divergent interpretations of Islamic law, and addressing the expectations of diverse constituencies. In both countries, ulama have employed various strategies such as issuing fatwas to legitimize peace initiatives, facilitating inter-party dialogue, and mobilizing community support for reconciliation efforts. Their success often depends on their perceived impartiality and ability to navigate competing interests. Moreover, the evolving nature of political conflicts in the post-Arab Spring era demands that ulama continuously adapt their approaches to remain relevant and effective.

This comparative analysis underscores the potential of ulama as agents of peace and stability in Muslim societies undergoing political transitions. It also reveals the limitations imposed by internal divisions and external pressures. Recognizing the ulama's role in mediation processes can inform policy frameworks that seek to harness religious authority constructively while mitigating risks of sectarianism and politicization. Ultimately, the experiences of Tunisia and Sudan demonstrate that the integration of religious actors into political conflict resolution requires careful calibration of religious, political, and social factors to achieve sustainable outcomes in the Muslim world post-Arab Spring.

The Political and Religious Landscape Post-Arab Spring in Tunisia and Sudan
The Arab Spring created a seismic shift in the political and religious dynamics of many Muslim-majority countries, notably Tunisia and Sudan, where ulama emerged as pivotal actors in mediating political conflicts. Tunisia's political transformation was characterized by a relatively peaceful transition from authoritarian rule to a democratic system, with the ulama playing a critical role in legitimizing political processes and fostering national dialogue. The moderate Islamist party Ennahda, deeply intertwined with religious scholars, advocated for a political model that harmonized Islamic values with democratic governance. This approach helped bridge the divide between secular and Islamist factions, reducing polarization and enabling constitutional reforms that integrated Islamic principles within a pluralistic framework. The Tunisian ulama thus functioned not only as religious authorities but also as mediators who encouraged political compromise and social cohesion.

Table based on the statement you provided. It focuses on the role of the *ulama* in post-Arab Spring political transitions, with a spotlight on Tunisia and its unique model of integrating Islamic values with democratic governance.

Key Dimension	Description	Function of Ulama	Example from Tunisia

Key Dimension	Description	Function of Ulama	Example from Tunisia
Political Shift after Arab Spring	The Arab Spring triggered significant political upheavals, especially in Muslim-majority countries like Tunisia and Sudan.	Ulama stepped into the public sphere as moral and political mediators.	Ulama supported the peaceful transition from authoritarianism to democracy in Tunisia.
Democratic Transition in Tunisia	Tunisia experienced a relatively peaceful and inclusive transition to democracy, unlike many other Arab Spring states.	Provided religious legitimacy to political processes and promoted national unity.	Tunisian ulama helped frame democratic governance within an Islamic moral context.
Role of Ennahda Party	Ennahda, a moderate Islamist party with close ties to ulama, promoted a political model blending Islamic principles with democratic norms.	Acted as a political and religious interface, fostering dialogue between secular and Islamist groups.	Ennahda's leaders emphasized consensus politics and inclusive constitution-making.
Religious-Political Mediation	Ulama served as crucial mediators in political dialogues, mitigating tensions between secularists and Islamists.	Helped prevent polarization by encouraging compromise and co-existence.	Ulama participated in the National Dialogue Quartet, which won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2015.
Integration of Islamic Principles	Islamic values were integrated into the constitution in a way that upheld pluralism and civil liberties.	Framed Islamic values as compatible with democratic and civic rights.	Constitution included Islamic identity clauses while guaranteeing freedom of belief and gender equality.
Social Cohesion and Compromise	By encouraging moderation and mutual respect, ulama contributed to national reconciliation and societal harmony.	Acted as moral guardians and facilitators of cross-ideological trust.	Religious scholars publicly endorsed democratic norms and discouraged extremist interpretations.
Contrast with Other Arab Spring Cases	While Tunisia saw stability, other countries like Egypt or Libya fell into cycles of repression or violence, partly due to lack of effective mediating institutions.	Ulama in Tunisia played a more active and independent civic role than in many other contexts.	The unique Tunisian context enabled ulama to function autonomously from state control.

In contrast, Sudan's post-Arab Spring context has been marked by prolonged instability, military coups, and violent conflicts, complicating the ulama's mediation role. The ulama in Sudan are fragmented, reflecting the country's broader political and sectarian divides. Some aligned with the Islamist regime of Omar al-Bashir, while others supported revolutionary movements seeking democratic reforms. This division has weakened the collective authority of the ulama as mediators, with competing religious interpretations often exacerbating political tensions. Moreover, external influences, including patronage from Gulf states, have politicized religious authority, further complicating efforts to use ulama as neutral peace brokers. Despite these challenges,

certain ulama have engaged in grassroots mediation and elite negotiations, attempting to leverage their religious legitimacy to promote peace and justice, although with limited success given the volatile environment.

The Mediation Strategies Employed by Ulama
The ulama in both Tunisia and Sudan have employed a range of mediation strategies to address political conflicts, though their effectiveness varies according to local contexts. In Tunisia, ulama utilized traditional Islamic concepts such as shura (consultation) and ijma (consensus) to foster dialogue among political actors. These concepts resonate deeply within Islamic jurisprudence and provided a culturally legitimate framework for negotiation and conflict resolution. The ulama also issued fatwas that encouraged political participation and peaceful coexistence, helping to reduce extremist rhetoric and promote tolerance. Their engagement extended beyond formal political institutions to include civil society and grassroots organizations, facilitating broad-based consensus and social reconciliation.

Sudanese ulama, by contrast, have faced greater obstacles in applying similar strategies due to the fragmented political landscape and ongoing violence. While some have issued fatwas calling for peace and justice, the lack of a unified religious authority has limited their impact. Additionally, the politicization of religious discourse has led to competing fatwas that sometimes legitimize violence or political repression. Nevertheless, local ulama have played important roles in community-level mediation, often acting as trusted interlocutors between conflicting parties. Their involvement in informal peacebuilding efforts highlights the potential for religious leaders to contribute to conflict resolution even in highly polarized environments, although systemic challenges remain significant.

Challenges to Ulama's Role in Political Mediation

Several challenges constrain the ulama's ability to serve as effective mediators in post-Arab Spring political conflicts. One major challenge is the tension between religious authority and political partisanship. In both Tunisia and Sudan, ulama are often perceived as aligned with particular political factions, which undermines their impartiality and credibility as mediators. This politicization of religious authority is exacerbated by external influences, including state patronage and foreign funding, which can co-opt ulama for political agendas. For example, in Sudan, Gulf states have supported different religious groups, deepening divisions and complicating mediation efforts.

Another challenge is the diversity of religious interpretations within the ulama community. Competing jurisprudential views on governance, justice, and the role of Islam in politics create internal disagreements that hinder unified mediation efforts. This pluralism, while reflective of broader Islamic traditions, can lead to conflicting fatwas and mixed messages that confuse political actors and communities. Furthermore, the ulama must navigate the expectations of diverse constituencies, balancing traditional religious teachings with the demands of modern political realities.

Institutional weaknesses also limit the ulama's mediation capacity. In many cases, religious institutions lack organizational coherence and resources to support sustained mediation initiatives. This is particularly evident in Sudan, where ongoing conflict has disrupted institutional structures and limited access to affected communities. Additionally, the ulama

face challenges in engaging with secular political actors who may distrust religious authorities or view them as obstacles to democratization.

The Impact of Ulama's Mediation on Political Stability

The mediation efforts of ulama have had mixed impacts on political stability in Tunisia and Sudan. In Tunisia, the constructive engagement of ulama contributed to a relatively stable political transition compared to other Arab Spring countries. Their promotion of dialogue, tolerance, and inclusive governance helped mitigate sectarian and ideological conflicts. The integration of Islamic principles within a democratic framework provided a shared reference point that facilitated compromise and prevented political polarization from escalating into violence. This success demonstrates the potential of ulama to act as agents of peace when their authority is perceived as legitimate and inclusive.

In Sudan, however, the impact of ulama's mediation has been limited by ongoing conflict and political fragmentation. While local mediation efforts have contributed to temporary ceasefires and community-level reconciliation, these have not translated into broader political stability. The ulama's divided loyalties and the politicization of religious authority have sometimes intensified conflicts rather than resolving them. The fragile nature of Sudan's political environment, marked by military interventions and ethnic tensions, poses significant barriers to sustained mediation and peacebuilding by religious leaders.

Lessons and Implications for Future Mediation Efforts

The comparative analysis of Tunisia and Sudan offers important lessons for the role of ulama in mediating political conflicts in the Muslim world. First, the legitimacy and effectiveness of ulama as mediators depend heavily on their perceived impartiality and ability to engage diverse political actors. Building trust across ideological divides is essential for successful mediation. Second, the institutional capacity of religious bodies must be strengthened to support sustained and coordinated mediation efforts. This includes enhancing organizational structures, training, and resources.

Third, the politicization of religious authority poses a significant risk to mediation efforts. Efforts to insulate ulama from partisan pressures and external influences are crucial to maintaining their credibility. Fourth, incorporating traditional Islamic conflict resolution concepts with modern political frameworks can provide culturally resonant and effective mediation tools. Finally, international actors and policymakers should recognize the potential of ulama as constructive partners in peacebuilding, while also addressing the challenges posed by fragmented religious authority and political dynamics.

In conclusion, the role of ulama in mediating political conflicts post-Arab Spring is shaped by complex interactions between religion, politics, and society. Tunisia's experience illustrates the potential for ulama to contribute positively to democratic transitions, while Sudan's challenges highlight the limitations imposed by political fragmentation and conflict. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing effective mediation strategies that harness religious authority for peace and stability in the Muslim world.

3. CONCLUSION

The role of ulama in mediating political conflicts in the Muslim world post-Arab Spring is pivotal, as evidenced by their significant contributions in countries like Tunisia and Sudan. These religious scholars serve not only as spiritual guides but also as influential mediators who leverage Islamic principles such as shura (consultation) and wasatiyyah (moderation) to foster dialogue and reconciliation among conflicting parties. In Tunisia, ulama have facilitated peaceful political transitions by promoting inclusive governance and bridging divides between secular and Islamist factions, thus contributing to democratic consolidation. Conversely, in Sudan, the ulama's mediation efforts are challenged by political fragmentation, sectarian divisions, and external influences, which have sometimes limited their effectiveness and led to competing religious narratives. Despite these challenges, ulama remain critical actors in grassroots peacebuilding and elite negotiations, emphasizing the importance of religious legitimacy in conflict resolution. Their mediation role is underscored by their ability to issue fatwas, guide community dialogues, and act as trusted intermediaries, thereby enhancing social cohesion and political stability. This comparative analysis highlights that while the context and outcomes differ, the ulama's involvement is essential in shaping political discourse and promoting peace in Muslim societies undergoing post-revolutionary transitions. Recognizing and supporting the constructive engagement of ulama can strengthen peacebuilding frameworks and contribute to sustainable political stability in the Muslim world.

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