

FROM RECOGNITION TO POPULISM: THE CONSTRUCTION OF *HARI SANTRI* AS A NATIONAL COMMEMORATION IN INDONESIA

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Abstract: The designation of *Hari Santri* as a national commemoration has generated debate among Islamic groups in Indonesia since its inception. While traditional Islamic organizations, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama, strongly supported the formalization, modernist groups such as Muhammadiyah expressed concern that it could reinforce intra-Islamic sectarianism. This article aims to analyze how *Hari Santri* was socially and politically constructed as a national commemoration and to examine the implications of this process for state-Islamic group relations. Employing a qualitative historical-contextual approach, the study analyzes historical documents, policy statements, and relevant scholarly literature to trace how past narratives regarding santri contributions were reconstructed to serve contemporary political agendas. The findings reveal a mutually beneficial relationship between the state and traditional Islamic groups, wherein santri identity is formally recognized as part of national citizenship while simultaneously being instrumentalized by the state to advance political legitimacy. This study contributes to discussions on religion and politics by highlighting the role of memory, identity, and power in the institutionalization of religious commemoration.

Keywords: *Hari Santri*; Islam and the state; religious commemoration; political identity; Indonesia

Abstrak: Penetapan Hari Santri sebagai peringatan nasional sejak awal menimbulkan pro dan kontra di kalangan umat Islam di Indonesia. Kelompok Islam tradisional, khususnya Nahdlatul Ulama, menjadi penggagas utama peringatan ini, sementara kelompok Islam modernis seperti Muhammadiyah menolaknya karena kekhawatiran akan munculnya sektarianisme internal. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana Hari Santri dikonstruksikan sebagai peringatan nasional serta implikasinya terhadap relasi antara negara dan kelompok Islam. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif historis-kontekstual dengan menganalisis dokumen sejarah, kebijakan negara, dan literatur akademik untuk menelusuri bagaimana narasi masa lalu tentang kontribusi santri direkonstruksi demi kepentingan kontemporer. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya hubungan timbal balik antara negara dan kelompok Islam tradisional, di mana identitas santri memperoleh pengakuan formal sebagai bagian dari kewarga-

negara nasional, sekaligus dimanfaatkan negara untuk memperkuat agenda politiknya. Studi ini berkontribusi pada kajian agama dan politik di Indonesia dengan menyoroti peran memori, identitas, dan kekuasaan dalam institusionalisasi peringatan keagamaan.

Kata kunci: Hari Santri; Islam dan negara; peringatan keagamaan; identitas politik; Indonesia

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Introduction

The official designation of Hari Santri¹ as a national commemoration since 22nd October 2015 has marked a new era of Islamic development in Indonesia. The designation stipulated by Presidential Decree Number 22 Of 2015 which was signed and issued on 15th October 2015. Since then, this day, which coincides with the Jihad Resolution fatwa issued by KH Hasyim Asy'ari on 22 October 1945, has been commemorated annually and celebrated by santri community in Indonesia across regions. This recognition has significance for the santri community considering that the contributions of pesantren to the historical development of the nation have been neglected pesantren's contribution to historical development of nation has been neglected since a very beginning. As recognition is always tied up with the sort of redistribution and representation (Fraser, 2008), the following events such as the legalization of Constitutional Law Number 18 of 2019 concerning pesantren and Presidential Decree Number 82 of 2021 about pesantren endowment funds, show that the Hari Santri commemoration is not only about ceremonies and performance, rather it has significant impacts in many aspects.

Another important event as the aftermath of the formalization of Hari Santri is the increasing number of national hero figures recognized from santri groups. The very significant event of national revolution (1945-49) which also involved santri signifies the discourse of santri to be revitalized at the national level in the current era, especially in the realm of heroic narratives. It is important to be noted that what made Hari Santri

¹ In this article the choice of using "Hari Santri" in Indonesian is preferred by the author instead of "Santri Day" to make it more familiar.

crucial with the Jihad Resolution as the departing point is its occurrence in the period of 1945-49, as this period was the formative period of Indonesia when national identity was formulated (Frakking & Wahid, 2023, pp. 19–20). To this broader phenomenon of formalization, there are pros and cons in whether the existence of Hari Santri is necessary or not, or whether this determination is counterproductive or not. Those who support this designation are Islamic traditionalist groups, especially Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) for the perceived identity of santri-ness. Not only supporting to Hari Santri, but NU can be said as initiator and proposer for this formalization (Saadah, 2019, p. 54). Muhammadiyah as a representative of modernist groups became at the forefront in rejecting the formalization of Hari Santri. The fears of sectarianism and exclusivism were their main reasons on that rejection (ASH, 2017, p. 4; Prabowo, 2015a, 2015b; Saadah, 2019, pp. 57–58).

So far, there have been few studies concerning the formalization process of Hari Santri. They also less emphasized on the deep structure of what worked behind the formalization process and its relationship with the broader impacts of Indonesia's socio-political conditions. The existing studies related with Hari Santri at least can be categorized into three main trends. First, studies that tend to focus generally on seeing the phenomenon of Hari Santri designation as merely a historical fact in the past without impacts for the current situation. The research tendencies have been mostly about capturing the contribution of santri, pros and cons towards Hari Santri, national and heroic values (Amzad et al., 2020; ASH, 2017; Muhsin, 2024; Syahriyah & Mawardi, 2025). Second, studies exploring the political dimension of Hari Santri has been also seen on the narrow dimension of political communication and political bargaining of pesantren and NU leaders towards the government. The manifestation of political promise of Jokowi in campaign process became the main concern on that (Muhsin, 2024; RAHMAN, 2016). Third, the discourse of Hari Santri as a populist phenomenon although it has been not explored in extensive and explicit ways. Existing works has captured Hari Santri

phenomenon as an instrumentalized political agenda (Burhani, 2013, 2017; Mu'tafi et al., 2023).

Departing from these observations, this article aims to fulfill what is left by the previous works on the discourse of Hari Santri commemoration in Indonesia. The research will focus on the construction process of Hari Santri along with its populist agendas from the government behind the recognition. The interwoven relationship between identity, nationalism, and populism is also crucial for revealing the reality behind this construction. The article will also explain the sense of collective memory fostered by this commemoration. Those issues are, in my viewpoint, still understudied by scholars. On those all purposes, the main question of this article to be explored on those issues is "how was Hari Santri constructed as a national commemoration?" The answers for this question will contribute on comprehending the dynamics of Hari Santri discourse in terms of revealing what happened behind that phenomenon beyond only about the recognition and its responses from many parties. Also, the shift from recognition to the populism phenomenon will be explored as the aftermath of Hari Santri designation in a broader sense of social and political dimensions. This article argues that although the formalization of Hari Santri is a form of recognition of santri contributions, it is fundamentally a state construction of national memory. This can be grasped through state's instrumentalization on a particular religious history of entangled with national building for populist political agendas. That is to say that everything entangled with sort of power relations should not be taken for granted, whether it seems good or bad in the public sphere.

This study employs the historical-contextual method to examine the construction of Hari Santri as a national commemoration in Indonesia. The contextualism became a starting position in which the meanings are constructed by historians through context and contextual thinking because the context can move beyond the textual dimensions (Iggers, 2005; Jordanova, 2019; Tosh, 2015). The focus will be related on how historical events, political interests, institutional dynamics, and religious

narratives converge to produce a new form of national memory. Scholarly writings on history of religion, nationalism, and state as well as the politics of memory or commemoration in Indonesia will be zoomed in to be reconstructed in a new way. The sources then will be analyzed with Eric Hobsbawm's concept of invented tradition (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012) to grasp how Hari Santri represents a newly formalized tradition based on a selective memory. The theory of Maurice Halbwachs about collective memory (Halbwachs, 2020) helps us to understand how public remembrance has been shaped through commemorative practices. Having situated in a broader social and political context, Hari Santri phenomenon could inform us how religious history has been instrumentalized in contemporary nation-building agendas, and how state-religious alliances influence the construction of national identity.

Historical Background: Santri, Nationalism, and Jihad

Santri, as a part of Indonesian **society**, has existed long before the Indonesian independence. Its existence cannot be separated from pesantren (Islamic Boarding School) where the santri's values has been disseminated and perpetuated. Referring to the explanation of Babad Kraton (1718) on Prang Santri or holy war, perhaps pesantren already established as early as the early eighteenth century (Ricklefs, 2006, p. 89). It is undeniable that what is meant by santri and pesantren at that time does not necessarily santri and pesantren in the present time. At least, this fact shows the estimation of the earliest time on the establishment. However, in the modern period the use of santri term has been contested and debated. Often juxtaposed with abangan and secular nationalist groups, there are at least two definitions of santri. First or mainstream definition, according to Geertz santri refers to groups of pious Muslims, meaning that they practice the stricter form Islam. This contrast with abangan or nominal or non-pious Muslims who do not practice Islam in a proper way (Geertz, 1976, pp. 5–6). Also, secular-nationalist views that santri has independent political standing different from them (Benda, 1955, pp. 201–202). Second or non-mainstream definition, according to Fogg citing from

Ma'arif, santri or pious Muslims are those consider Islam as an inspiration for their behaviors. This is humbler definition of santri as it covers what is avoided in defining abangan (Fogg, 2020, pp. 28–29). In this article, the use of santri, ulama, and NU will be interchangeable to describe the same point as have been well-known by many parties. Santri generally refers the traditionalist community associated with pesantren where the ulama are mostly the leaders on that institution. NU refers to the biggest Islamic organization which become the representative of traditional Islamic form which consist of santri and ulama.

Regardless of the definition, santri has been contributing to Indonesian society in many aspects such as education, socio-cultural movements, and the struggle for independence. As for education, for instance, pesantren in colonial era become the alternative of civilians where they did not have access to schools provided by colonial governments. Not only become alternative, but also become the individual preferences to choose pesantren as the symbolic resistance to the colonialism (Latif, 2006, pp. 115–116). This shows how pesantren has until now provided educational access to local people for hundred years ago. The contribution narratives somehow need to be emphasized because at some points santri or traditionalist groups recently has sort of consciousness that their contributions have been neglected since a long time in national level. the main reason behind this, perhaps, is because the founding father and his successor in the new order tended to feature the nationalists' parties who primarily contributed to Indonesian independence. Also, the individual tendency of Soekarno which was antipathy towards traditional Islamic point of views might also affect his preferences consciously or not (Bolland, 1971, pp. 124–126). This can be understood because long before the independence, as around 1920s, nationalistic views became the spearhead of local politics (Elson, 2009, p. 112) as nationalist views were deemed more promising for national interest. As a consequent, the nationalistic narratives have been continuously perpetuated in many aspects because they hold dominant positions of the gate keeper of knowledge production in political sense.

In terms of independence struggle, the involvement of santri and ulama in many events has been also largely overlooked in official historical accounts. It is likely also the effect of being considered insignificant by the government's authority. Some historical evidence reveals the direct engagements of santri in independence struggle such as the Diponegoro War (1825-1830), the Aceh War (1873-1904), the Banten Revolt (1888), and several Islamic movements in the early 20th century. Involved in those critical moments, many santri actively resisted the colonial power in their own ways. Religious symbols and narratives were inseparably the instrumental tools in driving their movements. This involvement continued until the peak of independence moment. Although in few numbers, figures like Wahid Hasyim and Abdul Kahar Muzakir marked on the capacity of santri in independence affairs. Besides that, the fingerprint of santri can be traced from the post-independence moments of revolution. As have been mentioned above, this period was very crucial to the new-established nation state to formulate the national identity. Uniting a multicultural and a multireligious state was not easy. Many groups had their own motives in attaining the independence. It requires sort of communal struggle which often led to many forms of violence. Despite that reality, the desire of being liberated from colonial power brought them to the same spectrum of common goals, including santri; they felt to have responsibilities to defend national agendas based on their own values and agendas. This kind of nationalism is categorized as anti-imperial nationalism by Reid because it is the common goal and motivation on that struggle (Reid, 2010, pp. 8–12).

Among the greatest event related with that struggle, which is then designated as Hari Santri or National Santri Day is what has been broadly known as Jihad Resolution. The sort of fatwa issued by KH Hasyim Asy'ari on 22nd of October 1945 mobilized Muslims in East Java to fight against British troops which were mainly based in Surabaya. This fatwa declared that defending Indonesia's independence and fighting against British armies who sought to reestablish colonization became religious obligation (*wajib*). Muslims around Surabaya, which many of them were santri, received that fatwa by participating in the

Surabaya battle. With its immediate impact, the big battle of Surabaya which culminated in the event of 10th November 1945 successfully pushed back and defeated the British colonial to leave Indonesia. This day has been commemorated to become national hero day since 1959, which narratives emphasize mainly on the nationalist contribution. The contribution of santri on that critical event has been neglected in official historical accounts since the beginning prior to the recognition of Hari Santri in 2015. This marks a turning point in recognizing santri contributions to be considered in a broader national narrative. The Hari Santri commemoration which precede National Hero Day is a main narrative in featuring santri's contribution in history and continue until today.

To this point, the construction or invention of such sacred days cannot be released from the critical events in the past. In the same way, the formalization or ritualization of Hari Santri cannot be separated or released from many events in the past (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012, pp. 4–6). Without downplaying the role of Jihad Resolution fatwa, the choice of designating Hari Santri on 22nd October based on that event only might be problematic. It must be noticed that Jihad Resolution is not the only one fatwa regarding the struggle against colonizers, there are many fatwas spread surrounding the issued fatwa on Jihad Resolution. The condition which is called as “flood of fatwas” by Fogg could simply show that there was collective consciousness of ulama and Islamic organizations regarding the national condition. Several fatwas recorded by history are such as fatwa Aceh on perang sabil issued on 15th October 1945, fatwa of KH Hasyim Asy'ari on September or October 1945, fatwa of jihad resolution by NU on 21st October 1945, fatwa of the resolution of Masjumi congress on 7th-8th November 1945, and fatwa of All-Muslim congress on 6th-9th December 1945. The reality is that commemorating Hari Santri based only on a part of the broader spectrum of fatwas at some points becomes ahistorical and political in a sense that the common struggle is just simplified only to one specific event. This selective choice of designating one event to be remembered and to be celebrated as a nationality identity must be reconsidered. The growing narrative that Hari

Santri is just for traditional Muslims strengthens the reluctant of others on commemorating this national day, assuming that Hari Santri is a new construction of historical memory to celebrate the contribution of traditional Muslims in Indonesia.

Political Negotiation and The Road to Formalization

The formalization of Hari Santri in 2015 marked a significant political moment in Indonesia. The process of formalizing Hari Santri itself cannot be separated from political efforts of traditional Islamic community, especially NU as the main representative. The initiative began when a leader of pesantren from East Java made a request to Jokowi in his campaign before becoming officially president in 2014, for designating a special day to remember the contribution of santri who fought for Indonesia's independence. To get the support from traditional Islamic community, especially ulama who engaged in politics and have authority to mobilize their santri (Saadah, 2019, pp. 32–33), This has been a tradition of any candidate to visit religious leaders during the campaign time as a form of political communication, because these leaders hold strong positions of power brokers in grassroots level (Fealy & Bush, 2014). Jokowi promised that, if elected, he would realize that request. This situation was welcomed by NU since its purpose was in line with NU community's collective desire, even PBNU gave the recommendation to the government to formalize Hari Santri as a national commemoration (ASH, 2017, p. 64; Saadah, 2019, p. 54). The accusation towards the close relationship of NU with the government of being opportunistic even have been addressed by Gus Dur, became escalated with the phenomenon of Hari Santri. This becomes the continuation of NU in the struggle for power and negotiation with the government (Burhani, 2012, pp. 569–570; Bush, 2009; Madinier, 2015, p. 434).

After being elected, Jokowi fulfilled his promise to traditional Islamic groups who supported him in the campaign era. The presidential decree regarding the designation of Hari Santri was signed on 15th October 2015, after which Jokowi formed a committee which consisted of many representative people from different Islamic organizations which are included in Islamic

friendship organization (LPOI) (Saadah, 2019, p. 76). Since the initiative came from traditional Islamic groups, the decision on which day will be determined as Hari Santri should be identical to the santri identity. Eventually, the event of Jihad Resolution which coincided on 22nd October was chosen because the figure who issued the fatwa about that, KH Hasyim Asy'ari, came from traditional Islamic community (Saadah, 2019, p. 56). This process can be understood as explicitly political in a sense that the initiators were santri and the characteristic of Hari Santri was based on santri identity, although it was expected to be more general in practice. In his speech on the first ceremony of Hari Santri Jokowi stated that the designation of Hari Santri is to emulate the spirit of jihad in loving Indonesia as our homeland. Santri has been an important part of Indonesia, so he hoped that santri both inside and outside pesantren will maintain to instill a religious and national spirit (Grabillin, 2015). This speech and ceremony of the formalization of Hari Santri become turning point in the history where their voice was forgotten for a long time. By that day, the role of santri is no longer underestimated and considered as the guardians of nationalism.

Although there have been many critics and objections towards the formalization of Hari Santri, the voices of Muhammadiyah and its figures might be considered as the most vocal towards Hari Santri designation to some extent. Muhammadiyah is the second biggest Islamic societal organization in Indonesia, after Nahdlatul Ulama as the biggest. This refutation also might be also seen as the refutation from the modernist to traditionalist Islamic organizations, although the problem is more complex than this ideological clash. Since the beginning, some representative of Muhammadiyah like Din Syamsuddin and Fajar Rizaul Haq, have responded publicly to the designation of Hari Santri critical ways. Hari Santri, by them, is subjected to a very specific group of Muslims in Indonesia which are people of traditional Islamic organizations (BBC, 2015). The simplification of attributing Hari Santri to people from pesantren is deemed problematic. As from the analysis of Najib Burhani, one of the Muhammadiyah scholar, the formalization of Hari Santri as a national commemoration has a risk of the reemergence of the clash

between santri and non-santri (abangan) following the trichotomy notion of Clifford Geertz (Burhani, 2017). The dichotomy between who are deemed as santri and not was very influential in the 1950s and continued to be instrumentalized as a political tool until the early 2000s. Santri refers mainly to the pious Muslims, whereas non-santri or abangan refers to the nominal Muslims who practice Islamic values not as good as the ideal doctrines as the santri do. There has been many critics towards that categorization, but the categorization is still there embedded in the societal daily use (Burhani, 2017, pp. 335–342; Fogg, 2020, pp. 26–29).

There has been the decline of the dichotomy between santri and abangan, although that categorization is still relevant until the recent time by some parties. This is because the resurgence of Islam in the 21st century has led on the growth of Islamic movements and organizations. The emergence of the term of New Santri might describe this condition, where there has been Islamic groups that have new authority different from the existing authorities in Indonesian Islam (Burhani, 2017, pp. 344–345; Machmudi, 2008; Saat & Burhani, 2020). Amidst this condition, the designation of Hari Santri which is intentionally to be specific to the specific groups of santri (traditional Islamic groups) is worried to revive the old tensions between santri and non-santri groups. Even what is the broader impact than that, the designation of Hari Santri has triggered on the tensions not only between santri and abangan, but also from modernist santri (Muhammadiyah) and the new santri such consisting of new religious and transnational movements such as Jama'ah Islamiyah, HTI, and Salafism. This dilemmatic condition, to me, is an intentional decision from the government which has a long close relationship with the santri from traditionalist Islamic groups. The vision of traditional Islam which is considered appropriate and in line with the nationalism agenda becomes the manifestation of what Indonesian Islam is. (Akmaliah et al., 2024; Burhani, 2013, pp. 41–42). In line with that, the designation of Hari Santri signifies not only on the recognition of the contribution and position of traditional Islamic groups, but it also becomes the implicit expression from the government authority

that the visions of traditional Islamic groups represent what Indonesian Islam is. That Islam a state-approved version of Islam which combines the Islamness and Indonesianess, which is far from political Islam. This condition is the main reason which necessitates the designation of Hari Santri possible.

Santri Identity and Populist Islam

The relationship between the state and santri or Islamic traditionalist groups has been intricate since a long time, and perhaps remains stronger after the formalization of Hari Santri as a national commemoration. It means that santri identity has been not only recognized for its contributions, santri identity has also been used a national symbol representing Indonesia in both national and international level. At this point, it can be grasped that the annual celebration or commemoration of Hari Santri has continuously constructed the collective memory of Indonesian society to perceive the historical facts that santri gave crucial contributions to Indonesia in defending for the national independence. This process of imposing a new collective memory is not a given in nature. Following Halbwachs' notion of collective memory, there is always a social construction process when the authoritative parties decide what should be remembered as a collective memories and identities and not (Halbwachs, 1980, p. 48). This selective process is in line with the desire of the government who hold the authority powers to realize the santri's desire to be remembered for their struggle at a national level. What must be problematized is why the supposedly a national commemoration day for santri only follow certain notion of santri identity. It is known that the term santri has a broader meaning as mentioned above, covering modernist, traditionalist, and new sentry groups. Rather than emphasizing on its broader use for nationalistic pluralism purposes, the santri identity constructed through the formalization of Hari Santri has been monopolized by traditional Islamic groups because the santri day coincides with the Jihad Resolution event in the past which involved mainly Islamic traditionalist groups. As the consequence, the people outside the traditionalist Islamic groups have been

reluctant to celebrate and commemorate because they are aware that they are not part of that event.

The sort of formalization and ritualization process of Hari Santri by the government which reconstructed the past historical struggle of santri to be a national commemoration has been realized for the political mobilization purposes. The inventing process of Hari Santri as a symbolic national commemoration is not a free gift from the government, rather there has been also the so-called take and give mechanism (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 2012, pp. 3–4). The negotiation process between santri and a politician who then became a national president should be put in a box of populism reasoning to some extent. This is because in that process and the aftermath of following events after that are objected to be a political move to get the direct or indirect supports from the traditional Islamic groups who have been given a special gift, so that they have to do something in return as a mutual process (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 4). Put as an example, the selection process of Jokowi as President in his second period in 2019 involved a figure of santri even an influential traditionalist Islamic leader, KH Ma'ruf. The symbolic feature of santri has been used by the politician to mobilize the supports from the traditional Islamic groups, which eventually won the election in 2019. Also, this close relationship between traditionalist Islamic groups, especially NU, has also been used recently by the authority to shut down the voices of mainstream Islam. The concession of mining resources for mass organizations made their voices less critical because their closeness.

The negotiation process which continuously occurs shows that the identity of santri which has been popularized by the government is instrumentalized to many purposes. Understanding this process must be on both two directions, while santri identity and symbol have been used for the national and governmental purposes, santri groups also receive many benefits from this relationship. The moderation projects that posit traditional Islamic groups as pioneers in both the local and international levels might explain this situation. As explained by Burhani, Menchik, Freedman, Brown, and Hefner (Brown, 2019; Burhani,

2013; Freedman, 2009; Hefner, 2011; Menchik, 2019), the strategic position of santri as the holder of Indonesian vision and identity in their values and ideologies enables them to be trusted as the representative of Indonesian Islam. The spirits of patriotism and nationalism which also have been propagated and campaigned through the narrative of the Jihad Resolution make the state-santri alliances successful in inventing and constructing such a collective identity not only for nationalism purposes but also for traditionalist Islamic purposes. In terms of santri or traditionalist groups which have been neglected for a long time since the beginning of independence, this momentum becomes the right time to demand or require to the government recognize their rights as other citizens receive. Amidst this condition which might be deemed as an ideal by traditional Islamic groups, they must consider the broader impact of the decision to be upheld as a national identity. This is because acknowledging a specific value or group as a national identity while neglecting the other Islamic groups risks the occurrence of sectarian conflicts, which are not appropriate with their moderate visions. The solutions for these agonistic conditions are urgent for the stakeholders and the internals of Islamic groups to achieve harmony and peace for a sustainable future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the formalization process of Hari Santri is not merely about a symbolic ritual or commemoration. It involved the negotiation and contestation process before, during, and after the formalization. Although it was intended and supposed to be covering broader Islamic groups, the reality that it has been intentionally for the traditionalist Islamic organizations desire cannot hinder the public and other Islamic organizations' attention. The populism uses which resulted as the aftermath of recognizing Hari Santri as a national identity perhaps will always be happening because the government intends to implement its policies in reciprocal ways. In this agonistic condition of being suspected as opportunistic by other groups because of the closeness to the authority, traditionalist Islamic groups must be aware of their risk. The sense of sectarianism which emerges and

increases as a consequence of the formalization process must be reconsidered by the leaders to find a solution for this unhealthy situation to avoid the unintentional or unexpected conflicts.

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