



## The Political Culture of Pesantren: Kyai's Authority in Jokowi's Victory in the 2019 Election East Java

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### Abstract

This research examines in depth the role of kyai authority within Islamic boarding school culture as a determining factor in Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) victory in the 2019 Presidential Election in Jombang Regency. Using a qualitative approach relying on in-depth interviews with kyai, students, and community leaders, as well as a review of relevant documents, this study seeks to uncover how the charismatic influence of kyai shapes the political preferences of students and the community surrounding the pesantren. In the process, kyai employ religious framing mechanisms through regular religious studies and religious fatwas, which serve as effective tools for mobilizing political support. These mechanisms create emotional and ideological resonance that strengthens political loyalty among students and other pesantren communities. This research makes an important contribution to the theoretical discourse on the relationship between traditional religious authority and contemporary electoral dynamics in Indonesia, particularly in the context of local politics. The study also highlights the significant role of pesantren social networks in influencing election outcomes, as social spaces that are not only religious but also political. The research findings provide new insights into the transformation of the kyai's role, from initially being neutral in politics to becoming an active, strategic political actor in the context of local democracy. This demonstrates the adaptation of the role of the kyai to changing socio-political dynamics and illustrates the complexity of the interaction between religion and politics in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** Kyai Authority, Islamic Boarding School Culture, Political Mobilization, Presidential Election

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### INTRODUCTION

Kyai is someone who is respected both among Islamic boarding schools and the community because Indonesia is a majority Muslim country. A kyai has a variety of religious roles that are followed by others, such as being an imam praying in congregation in a mosque and giving taushiyah about religion (Hidayat, 2022). The mention of kyai is embedded by the community who are considered to have established and mature religious abilities. These abilities are used for positive things and serving the community (Zulkifli, 2022). Kyai is believed by the community to have great authority and charisma, therefore the position of kyai is considered to have a more important position according to most laymen (Burhanudin, 2012). There are people who think that kyai has a pesantren and many students, but in reality, among the kyai community, not all of them have many pesantren and students (Kersten, 2015). Kyai is a term used by the community for people who are knowledgeable in religion and play social roles in society (Dhofier, 2011; Martin van Bruinessen, 1995).

Kyai holds a central position in the socio-religious structure of Indonesian society, especially in the pesantren environment and the Muslim community (Alatas, 2024). Research

shows that the kyai figure not only plays a role as a spiritual leader, but also as an agent of social change (Endang Turmudi, 2003). A study by Martin van Bruinessen reveals that kyai authority is multidimensional, encompassing aspects of religion, education, and even local politics (Bruinessen, 1995). However, Azyumardi Azra warns about the potential transformation and challenges of religious authority in contemporary Islam, including the risk of weakening spiritual authenticity (Azra, 2004).

Based on a survey conducted by the Surabaya Survey Center (SSC) cited in the research of Masruria, Sobarib, and Tawwakal (2019), it is known that as many as 20.9% of East Java people believe that religious leaders (kiai) have an influence on their political preferences in the election of governors. The data shows that the role of kiai still has a strong social and political appeal in the community, especially in areas that are thick with Islamic boarding school traditions such as East Java (Yani et al., 2022). In this context, the kiai are not only seen as spiritual leaders, but also as figures who are able to direct the political choices of the community (Masruria, Sobarib, & Tawwakal, 2019).

Among the districts in East Java Province, namely Jombang, this city is known as one of the centers of traditional Islamic education, with pesantren as the dominant socio-political institution (Yani et al., 2022). Local politics in Jombang is greatly influenced by the network of kyai and alumni of Islamic boarding schools, which form the basis of political patronage (Greg Fealy, 2009; R. William Hefner, 2000). Studies show that electoral dynamics in Jombang often involve competition between large kyai families, such as Tebuireng and Denanyar. The pesantren itself not only functions as an educational institution, but also as a center for political mobilization. Kyai, as the leader of the Islamic boarding school, has traditional authority that influences people's political choices (Suprpto, 2016; Anggara, 2017).

Kyai as a central figure in the pesantren community has a traditional authority that is multidimensional. The findings of the study reveal patterns of kyai influence in elections through religious identity framing, alumni networks, and development narratives (Kasmiati et al., 2021; Fajri, 2014). This religious framing is effective in mobilizing the traditional mass base of Islamic boarding schools, while alumni networks strengthen political influence through vertical loyalty structures (Mahfud et al., 2022).

Critical analysis shows that the authority of the kyai is no longer absolute as it was in the past. There is resistance from young students who are exposed to digital information and have access to alternative sources of knowledge (Chotimah & Saputra, 2023). These findings are in line with the transformation of charismatic authority in modern society (Max Weber theory context, implicitly relevant). Post-2014 political polarization created a new dynamic where pesantren are no longer neutral, but actively direct the political choices of students (Mustika & Arifianto, 2019).

Election data shows the effectiveness of political mobilization through pesantren networks in Jombang. The results of the 2019 election in Jombang Regency showed a significant victory for Jokowi-Ma'ruf, which was inseparable from the support of influential kyai such as KH. Salahuddin Wahid (Gus Sholah) from Tebuireng Islamic Boarding School (Kusbiantoro, 2019). The study also found limited resistance from students to the political direction of the kyai, although this resistance is increasing among the younger generation.

Although several studies have examined the role of kyai in electoral politics, there are still some research gaps, including the lack of comparative analysis between generations of kyai, limited longitudinal studies, and the need for deeper exploration of student resistance (Nasikhin & Yani, 2014; Ummah, 2019).

The phenomenon in Jombang shows the transformation of religious authority into political capital in electoral democracy. Kyai is not only a spiritual leader but also a political actor who uses pesantren social networks for electoral purposes. However, the biggest challenge is maintaining a balance between traditional authority and the demands of democratization in the digital age (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020).

## Literature Review

According to Greg Fealy (2009), the position of the kiai in Indonesia has a unique dual dimension, namely as a spiritual leader as well as a socio-political actor. Kiai is not only the main reference in religious issues, but also plays an important role in various aspects of people's social

life, including in the local and national political arena. This dual role makes the kiai a figure with very strong symbolic authority, often transcending sectoral boundaries between religion, culture, and power (Fealy, 2009; Burhanudin, 2012; Kersten, 2015).

In line with that, Martin van Bruinessen (1995) emphasized that pesantren as the main base of kiai not only functions as a center for religious learning, but also as a node of traditional political networks. Pesantren are places where social capital, power networks, and political support are systematically built. In many cases, the patron-client relationship between the kiai and the community is not only based on spiritual bonds, but also involves the exchange of complex political and economic resources, creating a network of power that is deeply rooted at the local level (Bruinessen, 1995; Bruinessen, 2008; Hefner, 2009).

Nurcholish Madjid (1998), in his reflection, reminded the importance of distinguishing between religion as a moral value and religion as a practical political instrument. According to him, when religion is used as a tool of legitimization of power alone, the sacred values contained in it are prone to shrinking meaning. This is an important warning for kiai to be careful in using their religious authority in the political realm, so as not to get caught up in pragmatic practices that can damage their moral image in the eyes of the public (Madjid, 1998; Abdullah, 2021; Mahfud et al., 2022).

In the local context in Indonesia, dynamics of kiai political roles often show a dilemma between maintaining religious idealism and engaging in practical politics (Endang Turmudi, 2003). When engaged in practical politics, the kiai are faced with pressure to make strategic compromises that sometimes conflict with the idealistic principles they uphold. This dilemma not only has an impact on the position of the kiai personally, but also affects the dynamics of the pesantren, students, and religious networks they lead (Turmudi, 2003; Warsono, 2016; Yani et al., 2018).

Fealy's concept of the "double dimension" of kyai as a spiritual leader as well as a political actor found its historical precedent in earlier political developments in Indonesia, particularly in the strengthening of NU political movements (Fealy, 2009; Fealy, 2011). In Jombang, the role of kyai in directing community political preferences reflects the continuity of pesantren-based patronage networks that have developed over time (Hefner, 2000; Pribadi, 2013).

The study by Martin van Bruinessen also reveals that the socio-religious infrastructure of pesantren can function as an effective political mobilization machine, where religious legitimacy, alumni networks, and routine religious activities become instruments of political socialization (Bruinessen, 1995; Wekke, 2021; Sunarto, 2018).

In subsequent political periods, especially during the New Order era, the relationship between kyai and political power experienced significant changes, including co-optation and political adaptation (Madjid, 1998; Fealy, 2009). This period gave rise to a moral dilemma among the kyai between maintaining principles or accessing state power resources (Bush, 2008; Mietzner, 2018).

Recent studies reveal that the pattern of political mobilization in post-Reform Jombang is an adaptation process rooted in historical models that have long been developed. Kyai continue to play a strategic role in mobilizing the masses and determining political direction by relying on strong pesantren social networks and moral legitimacy (Suprpto, 2016; Anggara, 2017; Hidayat, 2022).

This historical model continues to be modified in accordance with more complex democratic dynamics. Kyai in the contemporary era combine traditional approaches with modern strategies such as media utilization and structured political campaigns. Thus, post-Reform mobilization is not entirely new, but rather a continuation and renewal of long-standing political traditions (Fajri, 2014; Kasmianti et al., 2021; Zuhriy, 2023).

The main differences lie in the diversification of mobilization channels (digital and conventional), fragmentation of authority among the younger generation, and the increasing complexity of political alliances (Mustika & Arifianto, 2019; Arifianto, 2019; Zulkifli, 2022).

However, existing literature is still limited in systematically linking historical patterns of kyai mobilization with contemporary dynamics, especially in Jombang. These limitations include changes in traditional patronage structures, the impact of urbanization on student political

loyalty, and the adaptation of kyai to modern electoral systems (Nasikhin & Yani, 2014; Ummah, 2019; Yani et al., 2022).

All of this indicates the urgent need for comprehensive research that connects historical patterns with contemporary political dynamics in order to understand both continuity and transformation in kyai political mobilization in Indonesia (Barton et al., 2021; Alatas, 2024; Chotimah & Saputra, 2023)

This study examines in depth the role of kyai authority in pesantren culture as a determining factor for Joko Widodo's (Jokowi) victory in the 2019 Presidential Election in Jombang Regency. With a qualitative approach that relies on in-depth interviews with kyai, students, and community leaders, as well as the study of related documents, this study seeks to reveal how the charismatic influence of kyai shapes the political preferences of students and the community around the pesantren. In the process, kyai uses a religious framing mechanism through routine recitation and religious fatwas which are effective tools in mobilizing political support. The mechanism creates an emotional and ideological resonance that strengthens political loyalty among students and other pesantren communities (Kasmiati et al., 2021; Fajri, 2014; Hidayat, 2022; Yani et al., 2022).

This research makes an important contribution to the theoretical discourse on the relationship between traditional religious authorities and contemporary electoral dynamics in Indonesia, especially in the context of local politics. The study also highlights how significant the social network of pesantren is in influencing the outcome of elections, as a social space that is not only religious but also political (Bruinessen, 1995; Fealy, 2009; Hefner, 2009). The findings of the study open up new insights related to the transformation of the role of kyai which initially tended to be neutral in politics, now developing into strategic political actors who are active in the context of local democracy (Turmudi, 2003; Abdullah, 2021; Zulkifli, 2022).

This shows the adaptation of the role of kyai to changing socio-political dynamics, as well as illustrating the complexity of the interaction between religion and politics in Indonesia. The research on the traditional network of pesantren conducted by Greg Fealy and Martin van Bruinessen continues to be an important reference in understanding the historical roots of electoral politics in Jombang. Both emphasized that pesantren are not just religious educational institutions, but part of a complex and influential social network in local political life (Fealy, 2009; Bruinessen, 1995; Burhanudin, 2012).

However, an analysis that focuses only on the description of traditional networks is not able to comprehensively explain the phenomenon of kyai involvement in modern politics. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a more comprehensive and integrative analytical model by combining several social and political theories to gain a deeper understanding. First, the theory of charismatic authority put forward by Max Weber is very relevant to examine the position of kyai in the political context. Kyai is not only a religious leader, but also a charismatic figure who has special attraction and authority that is able to influence the political preferences and actions of the students and the surrounding community (Alatas, 2024; Kersten, 2015; Barton et al., 2021).

Second, the concept of social capital from Pierre Bourdieu is very important to understand how the social network owned by kyai and pesantren can be strategically valuable capital in the political arena. This social capital includes relationships, networks, trust, and social norms that can be mobilized to achieve certain political goals. Third, an analysis of contemporary political networks that focuses on the dynamic relationships between political actors, institutions, and community groups provides the perspective used in this study (Hefner, 2000; Wekke, 2021; Karim et al., 2023).

By integrating these three perspectives, this study provides a holistic theoretical framework to examine the phenomenon of kyai involvement in politics in Jombang more comprehensively. This approach also makes it possible to see kyai not only as religious figures, but also as political actors who have special strategies in dealing with socio-political complexities. Referring to the perspectives of Greg Fealy and Martin van Bruinessen, coupled with the views of figures such as Nurcholish Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid, this research is able to reveal the complexity of the relationship between religion, power, and local society (Madjid, 1998; Wahid, 2007; Fealy, 2011).

Madjid and Abdurrahman Wahid, for example, emphasize the importance of reconciliation between religious values and modernity and democracy in the Indonesian context. Through this analysis, it is clear that the involvement of the kyai in politics is not only a matter of providing political support in a simple way, but is part of the identity struggle inherent in their position as moral symbols and religious references for society (Turmudi, 2003; Mahfud et al., 2022; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020).

The involvement of the kyai is also an expression of morality that is the basis for determining their political stance. This morality is not only normative, but also strategic as a means of protecting traditional values and the interests of their groups in the changing political landscape (Fajri, 2014; Hidayat, 2022; Mahfud et al., 2022). This paradigm shows that the role of kyai is part of the survival strategy of the pesantren community in the midst of increasingly complex socio-political dynamics (Syafi'i et al., 2023; Muhajir et al., 2025).

On the other hand, the transformation of the role of kyai from religious leaders to strategic political actors reflects their adaptation to democratic realities that demand active participation from various social elements, including religious groups. This process marks a significant shift in local political culture, where religion and politics increasingly interact and shape socio-political development in Jombang (Suprpto, 2016; Anggara, 2017; Warsono, 2016).

This research further shows how kyai harness their charismatic authority through religious means such as regular recitation and fatwas to build effective religious framing in political mobilization. The framing built is not only doctrinal, but also contains strong emotional and ideological resonance, strengthening political loyalty among students and the pesantren community (Kasmiasi et al., 2021; Zainiyati, 2020; Yusuf et al., 2021).

The social network built by kyai in the pesantren community is also an important social capital that facilitates the dissemination of political messages and the organization of support in a structured manner (Bruinessen, 1995; Fealy, 2009; Karim et al., 2025). This phenomenon opens up new discussions on how kyai authority expands not only vertically in religious structures but also horizontally through broader social relations (Zuhriy, 2023; Zulkifli, 2022).

From this perspective, kyai involvement becomes an important lens to understand the symbiotic relationship between religion and politics, especially in regions with strong socio-religious mobilization such as Jombang. This study contributes to the development of political science and sociology of religion by emphasizing the importance of a multidisciplinary approach in capturing complex socio-political phenomena in Indonesia (Hefner, 2000; Mietzner, 2018; Buehler, 2016).

More broadly, this study highlights the transformation of traditional authority in the modern era, where kyai authority is continuously reproduced and redefined in response to changing social and political contexts. Therefore, understanding kyai involvement in local politics cannot be separated from historical, theoretical, and contemporary perspectives that together shape a unique political narrative in Jombang (Arifianto, 2019; Chotimah & Saputra, 2023; Sahrodi & Karim, 2025).

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study strategy to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of kyai authority in the context of the 2019 election in Jombang. This qualitative approach was chosen in order to capture the complex social, cultural, and political dimensions as well as the nuances of traditional kyai authority in local political mobilization. This intrinsic case study focuses on the specific context of kyai and pesantren in the Jombang area as a unique and representative object of study for the phenomenon being studied (John W. Creswell conceptual relevance; Collins et al., 2021).

The research data was collected through several complementary techniques. First, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 kyai from various influential Islamic boarding schools in Jombang, aimed at exploring the perceptions, experiences, and strategies of kyai in local political dynamics during the 2019 election campaign (Kasmiasi et al., 2021). The interviews were semi-structured to allow informants to express their views openly (Collins et al., 2021).

Second, document analysis was carried out in the form of recordings of lectures during the campaign period, providing an overview of how kyai used religious sermons as tools of political

communication and mobilization (Fajri, 2014). Third, participatory observation was conducted in five large pesantren in Jombang during the campaign period to directly observe kyai political activities and their interaction with students and the surrounding community (Suprpto, 2016).

Data analysis was carried out systematically using the interactive model developed by Matthew B. Miles and A. Michael Huberman, which consists of three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994 conceptual model). This model allows the analysis process to be carried out continuously and dynamically during data collection. In addition, source triangulation techniques were used to compare and verify information obtained from various data collection techniques to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings (Collins et al., 2021).

This study also applies a descriptive qualitative method to explore the meaning, understanding, and dynamics of kyai participation in political contestation in Jombang Regency. This approach is considered the most relevant for understanding complex social phenomena related to motivations, roles, and socio-political impacts that are difficult to measure quantitatively (Azyumardi Azra, 2004; R. William Hefner, 2000).

The research subjects were selected purposively, including kyai involved in politics, community leaders, students, and local political elites who interact with pesantren networks (Nasikhin & Yani, 2014). The selection of informants was based on their level of influence, knowledge, and involvement in the political process. The number of informants followed the principle of saturation point, where data collection stops when no significant new information is obtained (Collins et al., 2021).

The data collection techniques involved in-depth interviews, participatory observation, and documentation studies. Interviews were conducted semi-structurally to allow flexibility and depth of information. Observations were carried out in political activities such as campaign events, religious gatherings, and internal pesantren activities. Documentation studies included pesantren archives, media recordings, campaign materials, and local news to complement and verify field data (Fajri, 2014; Suprpto, 2016).

The data analysis process used the Miles and Huberman interactive model, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved selecting and focusing relevant data, while data presentation was carried out in the form of narratives and conceptual mapping to identify patterns. The final stage was conducted iteratively by comparing findings with theoretical frameworks and previous studies to obtain comprehensive conclusions (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

To ensure validity and reliability, this study employed triangulation techniques, including source triangulation, method triangulation, and theoretical triangulation. Source triangulation compared perspectives from different informants, while method triangulation combined interviews, observations, and documentation. Theoretical triangulation linked findings with perspectives such as patron-client theory, politicization of religion, and the role of religious elites in politics (Martin van Bruinessen, 1995; Greg Fealy, 2009).

The entire research process adhered to ethical principles of qualitative research, including maintaining the confidentiality of informants and obtaining informed consent prior to data collection (Collins et al., 2021). With this comprehensive methodological approach, the study is expected to provide an in-depth empirical contribution to understanding how traditional kyai authority plays a role in local political mobilization in contemporary Indonesian democracy, particularly in the context of the 2019 election in Jombang.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

The journey of kyai participation in politics in Indonesia began in the post-independence period, where kyai played a central role in shaping the political landscape through pesantren networks and religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama. Prominent figures such as Hasyim Asy'ari, Abdul Wahab Hasbullah, and Bisri Syansuri were not only religious leaders but also actively encouraged political participation. The 1955 election became a crucial moment in which kyai acted as vote getters by mobilizing the masses through religious fatwas and political sermons (Fealy, 2009; Hefner, 2000; Fealy, 2011).

Studies show that NU, under the influence of kyai leadership, successfully mobilized significant electoral support through religious-based strategies (Fealy, 2009; Burhanudin, 2012). In this election, kyai were not merely passive supporters but also became legislative candidates, reflecting the integration between religious authority and formal political structures (Nasikhin & Yani, 2014; Warsono, 2016).

Furthermore, during the 1971 election under the New Order regime, the role of kyai underwent significant transformation. The regime attempted to co-opt kyai through political integration strategies; however, many kyai maintained subtle resistance by preserving the autonomy of pesantren as independent socio-religious spaces (Nasikhin & Yani, 2014; Turmudi, 2003; Bush, 2008).

A comparison between the 1955 and 1971 elections reveals a shift in kyai mobilization strategies. In 1955, mobilization was conducted openly through pesantren networks and religious authority, whereas in 1971, mobilization became more covert through limited religious gatherings to avoid political pressure (Fealy, 2009; Hefner, 2000). Despite these constraints, kyai continued to exert strong influence on voter behavior, particularly in NU-based regions (Mietzner, 2018; Yani et al., 2018).

Research shows that the political culture of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Jombang Regency remains heavily influenced by the authority of the kyai (Islamic religious leader), a moral figure, and a socio-political actor. Based on in-depth interviews with 15 kyai, 25 students (santri), eight community leaders, and several local political elites, it was found that the victory of Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin in the 2019 Presidential Election in Jombang was inextricably linked to the strength of the pesantren network and the symbolic legitimacy of the kyai (Kasmiati et al., 2021; Kusbiantoro, 2019). In many cases, the community does not view the kyai's political guidance as a mere campaign, but rather as moral and religious advice that should be taken seriously. A student from the Tebuireng area reported that when the kyai provided guidance regarding the choice of leader, most students viewed it as an act of obedience to their teacher and a form of respect for the kyai's religious knowledge. This suggests that the political preferences of the pesantren community stem not from formal pressure, but from emotional and spiritual connections that have been formed over time (Dhofier, 2011; Hidayat, 2022).

Observations during the campaign period also showed that kyai used religious framing mechanisms to build political support. Support for candidates was not always conveyed directly through calls to vote, but rather was packaged through religious narratives such as maintaining the unity of the community, upholding the traditions of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah, maintaining national stability, and protecting Islamic boarding schools from threats from certain ideologies. This narrative created a strong emotional resonance among students and the Islamic boarding school community because political choices were understood as part of efforts to maintain Islamic values and the continuity of Islamic boarding school traditions (Kasmiati et al., 2021; Zainiyati, 2020). In several religious study groups observed by researchers, kyai often inserted political messages through analogies of Islamic history, stories of the prophet's leadership, and interpretations of verses about the importance of choosing leaders who are considered to bring social benefits. This strategy was far more effective than formal political campaigns because the Islamic boarding school community was more receptive to messages linked to religious legitimacy than practical political rhetoric (Mahfud et al., 2022; Abdullah, 2021).

This research also found that Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) function as highly effective political infrastructure in the process of mass mobilization. The power of Islamic boarding schools lies not only in the figure of the kyai (Islamic teacher), but also in the social network involving students, alumni, ustaz (Islamic teachers), religious study groups, and the surrounding community. The alumni network of Islamic boarding schools is one of the most important instruments in expanding the kyai's political influence down to the village and sub-district levels (Bruinessen, 1995; Hefner, 2009). Many alumni admitted that they voluntarily act as political information liaisons within the community due to their moral loyalty to the kyai. Political mobilization occurs culturally through religious activities such as regular religious study groups, haul, istighosah, social activities, and alumni gathering forums. Thus, the process of political mobilization within Islamic boarding school culture does not appear as a formal, overt political activity, but rather subtly exists in everyday socio-religious spaces (Wekke, 2021; Karim

et al., 2023). This situation demonstrates that Islamic boarding schools are not merely institutions of religious education but also spaces for the production and distribution of socio-political influence (Bruinessen, 2008; Sunarto, 2018).

Furthermore, this research found a transformation in the authority of the kyai in the era of digital democracy. While previously the authority of the kyai tended to be absolute and rarely questioned, the current generation of young Islamic boarding school students (*santri*) has begun to gain access to various alternative sources of information through social media and digital platforms (Chotimah & Saputra, 2023; Zuhriy, 2023). Some young students admitted to comparing their kyai's political views with information they obtained from the internet, other religious figures, and academic discussions at university. One informant stated that while students currently respect their kyai, not all accept their political choices completely. This phenomenon demonstrates a shift from traditional authority to a more negotiable one in the context of modern society (Zulkifli, 2022; Arifianto, 2019). However, despite these changes in mindsets among the younger generation, kyai retain significant symbolic influence, as Islamic boarding school culture still places respect for teachers as a primary value in social and religious life (Dhofier, 2011; Yusuf et al., 2021).

The research also reveals a moral dilemma in the involvement of kyai in practical politics. Some community leaders worry that excessive political involvement could diminish the moral independence of Islamic boarding schools. When kyai become too close to political elites or certain parties, there is the potential for polarization among students, alumni, and the community surrounding the *pesantren* (Turmudi, 2003; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020). Several informants believe that the community respects kyai for their moral and spiritual standing. Therefore, when kyai become too active in practical politics, some begin to view them as ordinary political actors, rather than as unifying figures for the community. This concern aligns with Nurcholish Madjid's view, which emphasizes the dangers of using religion as a mere tool to legitimize power (Madjid, 1998; Abdullah, 2021). However, many kyai interviewed view politics as part of their social responsibility and *da'wah* (Islamic outreach). They believe that state political policies significantly impact Islamic boarding school education, the lives of Muslims, community welfare, and the continuity of religious traditions. Therefore, kyai's involvement in politics is seen as a form of social service, not merely a matter of power (Fajri, 2014; Hidayat, 2022).

Analytically, the findings of this study reinforce Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, which explains that the influence of kyai arises from symbolic legitimacy and the moral beliefs of society, not from formal state power. Kyai have the ability to influence political behavior because they are seen as possessing spiritual depth and moral integrity (Alatas, 2024; Barton et al., 2021). Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital is also relevant to explaining how Islamic boarding school networks become a source of enormous political power. Social capital in the form of loyalty, trust, emotional connections, and alumni networks is a crucial instrument in political mobilization at the local level (Bruinessen, 1995; Karim et al., 2025). Therefore, the victory of the Jokowi-Ma'ruf ticket in Jombang cannot be understood solely through an electoral approach, but must also be viewed through the dynamics of Islamic boarding school political culture, the religious authority of kyai, and the socio-religious networks that are deeply rooted in society. This study ultimately confirms that modernization and democracy have not eliminated the influence of kyai in Indonesian politics, but rather have encouraged a transformation in how that authority is maintained and exercised in a constantly changing socio-political context (Kersten, 2015; Yani et al., 2022).

In contemporary developments, many *pesantren* leaders in East Java, particularly in Jombang, are actively involved in practical politics. Figures such as Hj. Mundjidah Wahab and other *pesantren* elites illustrate how kyai have expanded their roles beyond religious guidance into political engagement. This reflects a broader *pesantren* culture in which kyai contribute not only to religious life but also to socio-political development (Suprpto, 2016; Anggara, 2017; Pribadi, 2013).

Based on interviews with several informants, it was found that politics is often perceived as part of religious responsibility. Kyai involvement in politics is framed as *amar ma'ruf nahi*

munkar and a form of social service. This perspective reinforces the legitimacy of kyai political engagement among the community (Fajri, 2014; Kasmiasi et al., 2021; Mahfud et al., 2022).

### **Research Gap and Historiographic Criticism**

Existing studies tend to focus heavily on Java and NU, thereby overlooking regional variations in other parts of Indonesia. In addition, limitations in local archival sources hinder a comprehensive understanding of kyai political strategies, particularly in earlier periods. Therefore, further research is needed through archival digitization and oral history approaches (Hefner, 2000; Burhanudin, 2012; Kersten, 2015).

In the context of religious identity politics in Jombang, kyai have successfully mobilized political support by framing certain candidates as protectors of Ahlussunnah wal Jamaah traditions. This framing strategy demonstrates how religious identity can function as an effective instrument in electoral mobilization (Kasmiasi et al., 2021; Yani et al., 2022; Zulkifli, 2022).

The hierarchical structure of pesantren strengthens this influence, where students tend to follow kyai directives, reinforcing paternalistic authority patterns (Dhofier, 2011; Bruinessen, 2008). However, further longitudinal research is needed to understand how kyai authority evolves in response to rapid social change (Hefner, 2000; Zuhriy, 2023). This study confirms that pesantren culture and kyai authority remain key determinants in Indonesian electoral politics despite modernization challenges. It also highlights the need for developing new theoretical models that integrate traditional authority with the dynamics of digital democracy (Chotimah & Saputra, 2023; Yusuf et al., 2021; Syafi'i et al., 2023).

## **DISCUSSION**

This research demonstrates that the political culture of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in Jombang Regency functions not only as a space for religious education but also as an arena for the production of socio-political power that has a significant influence on the dynamics of local democracy (Bruinessen, 1995; Hefner, 2000; Wekke, 2021). The main novelty of this research lies in its attempt to connect the charismatic authority of kyai with the mechanisms of political mobilization based on Islamic boarding school networks in the context of the 2019 Presidential Election. Unlike previous research, which generally only viewed kyai as religious elites or local political brokers, this study demonstrates that the political power of kyai operates through a combination of religious legitimacy, emotional bonding with students (santri), alumni networks, and religious framings culturally constructed through daily religious activities (Fealy, 2009; Kasmiasi et al., 2021; Yani et al., 2022). This research also demonstrates that the process of political mobilization in Islamic boarding schools occurs symbolically and emotionally, not solely through direct political instruction. Thus, this research provides a new perspective: the political influence of Islamic boarding schools cannot be understood solely through formal political approaches but must be analyzed through the cultural, symbolic, and spiritual relations that exist within the Islamic boarding school community (Dhofier, 2011; Turmudi, 2003).

The findings of this study confirm that the authority of the kyai remains a crucial factor in shaping the political preferences of Islamic boarding school communities in the era of modern democracy and information digitalization (Zuhriy, 2023; Chotimah & Saputra, 2023). The results indicate that political support for the Joko Widodo and Ma'ruf Amin ticket in Jombang is influenced not only by national political programs but also by the moral legitimacy constructed by the kyai through religious narratives (Kasmiasi et al., 2021; Fajri, 2014). These findings are relevant to the study of Islamic politics, the sociology of religion, and local democracy because they demonstrate that traditional religious institutions still possess strong bargaining power in influencing people's political behavior (Mietzner, 2018; Abdullah, 2021). This study also confirms that political modernization in Indonesia has not eliminated the role of the kyai, but rather has encouraged a transformation in the form of their authority from mere spiritual leaders to strategic actors in the local political arena (Suprpto, 2016; Anggara, 2017).

The results of this study are related to several previous studies. Greg Fealy (2009) explained that kyai hold a dual position as religious leaders and political actors capable of mobilizing masses based on Nahdlatul Ulama. This study supports this view by showing that the Islamic boarding school network in Jombang is a primary instrument of electoral political

mobilization. Furthermore, Martin van Bruinessen (1995) stated that Islamic boarding schools are centers of social networks and traditional political patronage. The findings of this study strengthen this argument by demonstrating that alumni networks and religious study groups serve as a medium for spreading the kyai's political influence to the grassroots level. Research by Endang Turmudi (2003) also found that kyai have a complex relationship with political power and often find themselves in a dilemma between religious morality and practical political interests. The findings of this study align with these conditions, particularly regarding concerns among some communities regarding the political pragmatism of Islamic boarding school elites (Mahfud et al., 2022; Kasmiasi et al., 2021).

Furthermore, this study also shares similarities with the research of Kasmiasi et al. (2021), which explains that religious framing is used by kyai as a tool for political legitimacy. This study extends these findings by demonstrating that religious framing not only builds legitimacy but also creates emotional resonance that strengthens the political loyalty of students and Islamic boarding school communities. Robert W. Hefner's (2000) study on Civil Islam explains that traditional Muslim communities have a significant capacity to shape civil democracy in Indonesia. The results of this study show that Islamic boarding schools in Jombang are an important base in the local democratic process through political mobilization based on religious morality. Meanwhile, Nasikhin and Yani's (2014) study found that kyai leadership still significantly influences the political participation of students. This study supports these findings, but also finds changes in patterns of obedience among the younger generation of students due to the development of digital media and access to alternative information (Zuhriy, 2023; Yusuf et al., 2021).

The similarity of this study's findings to previous research is likely due to the cultural characteristics of Islamic boarding school communities, which still place the kyai as a central figure in social and religious life (Dhofier, 2011; Sunarto, 2018). The paternalistic social structure of Islamic boarding schools makes the relationship between kyai and students not only academic, but also emotional and spiritual. This relationship fosters strong loyalty, making the kyai's political direction readily accepted as part of their religious moral responsibility. Furthermore, the dominance of the Nahdlatul Ulama tradition in the Jombang region also strengthens the kyai's influence in the community's political life (Fealy, 2011; Burhanudin, 2012). However, this study also found several differences compared to previous research. While previous research tended to portray the kyai's authority as relatively absolute, this study shows that this authority is beginning to be negotiated among young, more politically critical students. This difference is likely influenced by changes in the social context, particularly the development of social media, the digitalization of information, the increase in higher education for students, and the increased access to diverse political views outside the pesantren environment (Zuhriy, 2023; Syafi'i et al., 2023).

The primary contribution, or novelty, of this research lies in developing an analysis of the transformation of kyai authority in contemporary digital democracy. This study not only explains how kyai mobilize political support but also shows how traditional authority is reproduced through symbolic and emotional strategies amidst modern social change (Kersten, 2015; Zulkifli, 2022). This study also offers an integrative perspective by combining Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority, Pierre Bourdieu's social capital, and a contemporary political network approach to explain the relationship between religion, Islamic boarding schools, and electoral politics (Hefner, 2000; Yani et al., 2018). With this approach, this study makes a theoretical contribution to the development of Islamic political studies in Indonesia, particularly regarding how traditional religious institutions adapt to a modern democratic system without losing their social legitimacy (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020; Abdullah, 2021).

Practically, the results of this study have important implications for local governments, political parties, and Islamic boarding schools (pesantren). The government needs to understand that Islamic boarding schools are not merely religious educational institutions but also social actors with significant influence in shaping the political stability of society (Wekke, 2021; Karim et al., 2023). Therefore, the approach to Islamic boarding schools must be dialogical and participatory, not merely instrumental for short-term electoral gain. For political parties, this study demonstrates that political success in Islamic boarding school-based regions is significantly

influenced by the ability to build social and moral relationships with the kyai community (Warsono, 2016; Kusbiantoro, 2019). Meanwhile, for Islamic boarding schools themselves, this research provides an important reflection on the need to maintain a balance between political involvement and moral independence to maintain the kyai's spiritual legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Madjid, 1998; Turmudi, 2003).

Academically, this research opens up opportunities for further studies on the transformation of religious authority in the digital era, the relationship between religion and local democracy, and the dynamics of Islamic boarding school politics in Indonesia (Zuhriy, 2023; Zainiyati, 2020). Further research is recommended to delve deeper into the role of social media in shaping political resistance of young Islamic boarding school students (*santri*) to the direction of the kyai, compare patterns of political mobilization in Islamic boarding schools across Indonesia, and develop a longitudinal approach to examine changes in kyai authority over time (Chotimah & Saputra, 2023; Muhajir et al., 2025). Thus, this study not only makes an empirical contribution to the study of local politics in Indonesia, but also expands the theoretical discourse on the relationship between religion, power, and democracy in contemporary Muslim societies (Arifianto, 2019; Barton et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSION

This study shows that kyai in Jombang Regency play a significant role in local political contestation, both as direct political actors running for office and as strategic supporters of certain candidates. The role of kyai is not only limited to the spiritual realm, but also includes a wide socio-political dimension, including providing moral legitimacy, directing people's political preferences, and mobilizing the masses through a network of Islamic boarding schools, alumni, and worshippers. This strategic position places the kyai as a central figure in the map of local political power that cannot be ignored by party elites and political candidates. However, this involvement cannot be separated from complex challenges. One of the main challenges is maintaining moral integrity in the midst of the tug-of-war of practical political interests. When kyai are too deeply involved in electoral politics, there is a risk of instrumentality, where religious values are used as a tool of legitimacy of power, rather than as moral guidelines that guide political action. Another challenge is the potential for polarization within the *pesantren* community, especially when there are differences in political views between kyai or between students that can break the solidity of the community. In addition, this study also found that kyai's involvement has an ambivalent impact on society. On the one hand, their presence has succeeded in increasing political participation, strengthening public awareness of the importance of involvement in the democratic process, and opening wider access for Islamic boarding schools to contribute to regional development. On the other hand, this involvement also causes negative excesses, such as the emergence of sharp political rivalries, the potential for misuse of religious symbols for practical political purposes, and the emergence of pragmatism among the *pesantren* elite who were previously known as idealists. Based on these findings, the study recommends the need for critical reflection among Islamic boarding schools regarding the limits of kyai political involvement. *Pesantren* need to formulate clear ethical principles related to the position of kyai in politics, so that their involvement remains in the moral corridor and does not dilute the main function of *pesantren* as a center of education, moral development, and strengthening spiritual values. In addition, there needs to be an effort to build collective awareness among the kyai to maintain their moral independence, so that they are not easily trapped in transactional politics that can damage the image of the *pesantren*.

This research also recommends that local governments and political parties view kyai not solely as an electoral tool, but as a strategic partner in the social and cultural development of the community. By establishing healthy and equal communication, the role of kyai can be maximized without sacrificing their moral integrity. Further research in the future is suggested to explore the role of *pesantren* students and alumni in local politics, including how they interpret the political direction of the kyai as well as the internal dynamics that occur within the *pesantren* community when involved in political contestation.

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