

The Role of Kiai in Electoral Participation in East Java

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an in-depth analysis of the role played by kiai (Islamic clerics) and pesantren (Islamic boarding school) networks in the political contestation of the 2024 East Java regional election (Pilkada). The study is grounded in the growing phenomenon of religious figures' involvement in electoral politics, particularly in East Java, a region with a strong base of traditional Muslim communities. The main objective of this research is to comprehensively examine the dynamics of religion-based political mobilization, the patterns of interaction between religious authority and state power, and how these relationships shape the local democratic landscape. Employing a qualitative approach, the research utilizes in-depth interviews with a number of kiai and pesantren leaders from various regencies and municipalities in East Java. This is complemented by content analysis of campaign documents, media coverage, and official data from the East Java Electoral Commission (KPU Jatim). The findings reveal that kiai act as power brokers by offering public endorsements, influencing the voting behavior of santri (Islamic students), and forging strategic alliances with political parties affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Nevertheless, this active engagement also invites criticism regarding the emergence of patronage practices, the co-optation of religious institutions, and the commercialization of religious authority. In conclusion, the article argues that these phenomena reflect the inherent complexity and ambivalence of the religion-politics relationship in Indonesia, particularly in regions where kiai remain central figures in socio-political life.

Keywords: Kiai; Pesantren; Pilkada 2024; Political mobilization; Religious authority; East Java

INTRODUCTION

In the context of Indonesian politics, particularly in East Java, the role of religious figures such as kiai cannot be separated from the socio-political dynamics of society.

Kiai do not merely function as spiritual leaders, but also serve as authoritative figures who have considerable influence in determining the political choices of pesantren communities and the general public. The 2024 East Java regional election (Pilkada) became an important moment demonstrating how the connection and involvement of kiai in the electoral political sphere have become increasingly prominent, both in the form of open support for certain candidates and through their influence on the voting behavior of santri. This phenomenon demonstrates that religion remains an important instrument of political mobilization at the local level, while also opening up discussion about the relationship between religious authority and state power within the democratic landscape. The role of kiai in local politics is often manifested through pesantren networks and religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Through these networks, kiai can mobilize political support by drawing on the emotional closeness and trust that communities have in them. In the 2024 East Java Pilkada, this phenomenon was clearly visible through kiai support for certain candidate pairs, which subsequently influenced the political preferences of communities in those areas.

Studies on the role of kiai in politics have been widely conducted by researchers. Fealy and White (2008), in their book *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, highlight how kiai play a role in Indonesian politics, particularly through religious organizations such as NU. Bruinessen (2013) also discusses ulama politics in the context of NU, emphasizing that kiai have considerable influence in determining the political direction of Indonesian society. Research by Sinarsari and Adnan (2025) also shows that kiai act as informal leaders who bridge candidates and voters through religious and cultural approaches. Through the Kiai Santri Nasional (JKSN) network, kiai employ various mobilization strategies such as religious gatherings, preaching, and pesantren networks to build political support for particular candidates. The influence of kiai in determining the political preferences of society is strengthened by the emotional closeness and trust of santri and community members toward them. In addition, Bahar (2024), in his article entitled “Membaca Politik Kiai,” emphasizes that kiai play a strategic role in local politics, particularly in areas with strong santri constituencies such as East Java. Kiai do not merely function as spiritual leaders, but also as political actors who can mobilize public support through pesantren networks and religious organizations.

Although many studies have examined the role of kiai in Indonesian politics, studies specifically analyzing their involvement in the 2024 East Java Pilkada remain limited. Most previous studies have focused on the role of kiai in national contexts or in previous elections. In addition, relatively few studies have examined in depth the political mobilization strategies used by kiai through pesantren networks and religious organizations in the context of the 2024 East Java Pilkada. This study aims to address this gap by examining in depth the role of kiai in political mobilization during the 2024 East Java Pilkada. The study also focuses on the forms of political involvement of kiai, patterns of relationships between religious authority and political parties, and their impact on local democratic dynamics and public perceptions of religious institutions.

Theoretical Framework

Political Patronage and Clientelism Theory

Patronage is a form of socio-political relationship based on reciprocal exchange between patrons and clients. In the Indonesian context, patron-client relations can be clearly observed in the relationship between kiai and pesantren communities. Kiai act as patrons who possess symbolic and social resources. These resources include religious legitimacy, social networks, and spiritual influence. The clients in this relationship are santri and members of the general public who rely on the guidance and recommendations of kiai. In electoral politics, this relationship is transformed into a mechanism of political mobilization. Kiai provide support to particular candidates. In return, political candidates offer access to power, strategic positions, or economic resources to pesantren or kiai networks. This phenomenon does not occur only in the context of regional elections, but also in national elections. Religion-based clientelism has become a dominant mechanism in winning contests in areas with strong pesantren-based communities such as East Java. Buehler (2016) shows that religion-based patronage remains a major feature of electoral politics in post-Reformasi Indonesia. He highlights the role of kiai as intermediaries between political elites and grassroots constituencies. This dual role positions kiai as strategic actors sought by candidates to obtain religious legitimacy and political votes. In practice, kiai support is often associated with transactional practices. This occurs when kiai support is accompanied by economic agreements or arrangements for access to positions. Research by Siswanto

and Yulita (2019) confirms this in the context of pesantren in Madura, where they note that the closeness of candidates to kiai has a direct correlation with vote acquisition. However, not all patronage is negative, as in some cases these relationships are mutualistic and help maintain social harmony. Patronage can also contribute to stability in traditional communities. In societies with low political literacy, patrons are regarded as political interpreters. In this context, kiai also become interpreters of community aspirations in the realm of public policy. Nevertheless, criticism of patronage continues to emerge because patronage can erode electoral autonomy. In addition, patronage is often associated with the co-optation and commercialization of religion, through which spiritual values are transformed into instruments of political power. Therefore, patronage needs to be understood contextually. Kiai patronage must be viewed within the distinctive local dynamics deeply rooted in the social structure of East Java. Religion-based political clientelism remains an unresolved issue in Indonesian political studies, as this phenomenon not only demonstrates the adaptation of political Islam to democracy but also presents ethical challenges in political contestation.

Religion-Based Political Mobilization Theory

Religion-based political mobilization refers to political strategies that utilize religious symbols, networks, and authority. In the context of kiai, mobilization is carried out through preaching, sermons, religious gatherings, and santri networks, through which kiai have the ability to shape public opinion among pesantren communities. They use religious language to frame political choices, for example, by encouraging people to choose leaders who are Islamic or pro-ulama, which is often conveyed in religious gatherings ahead of elections. These messages are then transmitted by santri to their respective communities; thus, pesantren networks function as instruments of horizontal political mobilization. In political communication theory, this is also referred to as identity-based mobilization. The political mobilization of kiai cannot be separated from their cultural and symbolic roles. Kiai are not merely religious teachers, but also symbols of morality and tradition because when a kiai expresses support for a particular candidate, the statement is regarded as a moral fatwa. This mobilization does not occur only within formal settings; in many cases, it is carried out through informal events such as haul, maulid, and istighotsah. These events may be filled with implicit political messages. Research by Sinarsari and Adnan (2025) demonstrates that JKSN, as a

network of kiai, actively played a role in mobilizing support during the 2024 presidential election by utilizing the hierarchical social structure of pesantren and obedience to kiai. This strategy proved effective in building trust in candidates. However, religious mobilization also generates controversy, as many parties regard it as a form of exploiting religion for practical political purposes. In many cases, religious mobilization is not accompanied by political education. As a result, voters tend to follow instructions without understanding the candidates' visions and missions. Such mobilization often reinforces identity politics and social polarization. Therefore, religion-based political mobilization requires ethical caution and adherence to democratic norms.

A study by Hasbullah (2022) shows that in the Tapal Kuda region of East Java, political mobilization by kiai is highly dependent on the historical proximity between pesantren and local political elites. Major pesantren such as Tebu Ireng, Sidogiri, and Lirboyo play an active role in voicing political preferences that subsequently become references for local residents. In communities that continue to uphold traditional patron-client culture, the voice of a kiai can become a determining factor in regional head elections. Such mobilization often does not require formal campaign approaches such as billboards or television advertisements. The blessing or signal of a prominent kiai alone can significantly shift mass support toward a particular candidate. This phenomenon has become part of recurring local political ethnography. Some candidates even formulate campaign strategies directed first toward pesantren groups before reaching the broader public. This indicates the importance of access to kiai networks as a political entry point in certain areas. In this context, the relationship between religion and politics is no longer merely normative-ideological, but highly pragmatic and strategic. This is consistent with the findings of Bruinessen (2013), who notes that many kiai actively negotiate their political positions and support with national political parties. Such mobilization is not only intended to win candidates, but also to maintain social influence within community structures.

Charismatic and Traditional Authority Theory

Max Weber divides authority into three types: legal-rational authority, charismatic authority, and traditional authority (Weber, 1978). Of these three types of authority,

traditional and charismatic authority are particularly relevant to this study, especially because the position of kiai and religious figures is highly significant within the socio-political conditions of East Javanese society, particularly in the context of electoral contests such as elections and regional elections in East Java.

Traditional authority is a form of power based on customs, longstanding norms, and social structures that have been preserved from the past. This traditional system is often embedded within pesantren communities. Kiai or gus are often regarded as possessing traditional authority because their positions, offices, and even leadership in pesantren are inherited from their parents and transmitted through classical Islamic social structures, scholarly genealogies (sanad), and the accumulation of moral legitimacy recognized by the community itself. Through religious rituals, religious gatherings, and religious education, they perpetuate their authority, including within their families, so that when it is passed on to their children, the influence of kiai's legitimacy is still regarded by the community as equal to or even greater than before, although it is not certain whether the successor possesses comparable capabilities.

The pesantren environment generally continues to preserve the traditional Islamic system and maintain the authentic heritage of classical Islamic traditions. This makes the local community itself the force that preserves this symbolic and cultural system and recognizes the kiai not only as the spiritual leader of the pesantren, but also as a moral leader and even as a determinant of the direction of community policies, including political choices. This gives kiai considerable power, not only through their leadership within the pesantren but also because of the extraordinary respect shown by their communities. Their conduct is regarded as something that should be followed, giving them substantial social influence; even being the child of a kiai can confer considerable influence in the community, particularly in determining the political preferences of the community in regional and general elections.

Meanwhile, charismatic authority is a form of power derived from an individual's charisma and ability to make others willing to follow that figure. It usually originates from spiritual expertise, moral expertise, supernatural abilities, or even a strong moral reputation. This authority emerges when an individual with exceptional expertise or qualities is present in society and the community regards these qualities as a "gift" that

distinguishes the individual from ordinary people and therefore warrants respect. In the context of pesantren and traditional Javanese communities, kiai are respected not only because of traditional authority, but also because they are considered charismatic, whether due to their extensive knowledge or their contributions to society.

It is precisely because of these characteristics of charismatic authority that support from such figures becomes much more meaningful and influential. When a kiai is regarded as a highly learned religious scholar, their political preferences are not viewed by the community merely as ordinary statements, but as a moral and spiritual obligation, with their words regarded as good advice for the community. This creates a very strong psychological and sociological effect in the process of political mobilization. In many cases, kiai with charismatic authority are listened to more than figures holding structural positions and are therefore able to mobilize political power effectively. Candidates supported by them are regarded by the community as receiving the kiai's blessing or prayer, which is considered sacred and worthy of support because the candidate is seen as deserving of it. This is consistent with Bruinessen's (2013) observation that many Indonesian politicians actively seek support from charismatic figures in pesantren because their symbolic and spiritual influence cannot easily be replaced and can be more effective than conventional campaign strategies.

Although traditional and charismatic authority possess considerable power for political mobilization, in an increasingly rational and open society, kiai figures are also expected to be ethically accountable for their choices. This is particularly the case when they are actively involved in supporting a particular candidate, which may generate controversy or division in the wider community. Nevertheless, in general, Weber's theory of traditional and charismatic authority provides a strong foundation for understanding why kiai continue to have substantial influence in local politics in East Java. Both forms function as sources of legitimacy that cannot simply be substituted by modern political systems, whether through the transmission of traditional values or through a personal spiritual aura that commands respect.

RESEARCH METHOD

Library research is a research method that relies on written sources as the primary

basis for collecting and analyzing data. This method is particularly suitable for the study of Islamic politics because it enables researchers to explore theories, concepts, and the ideas of scholars through available literature. In the context of Islamic political studies, library research enables researchers to examine the ideas of various figures, analyze classical and contemporary texts, and understand the development of theories and practices of Islamic politics through available literature sources. This method is often used in qualitative research or literature studies to construct a theoretical framework, identify research gaps, or answer research questions without directly collecting empirical data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Kiai: Profile and Social Legitimacy

In the context of East Javanese society, a kiai is not merely an ulama or religious scholar who understands classical Islamic texts and the teachings of sharia, but also a symbol of charisma, morality, and social authority. The construction of the kiai figure arises not only from deep religious understanding, but also from the collective recognition of the community, which places kiai as role models in almost every aspect of life, including education, economics, culture, and politics. In areas dominated by traditional Islam, such as much of the Tapal Kuda and Mataraman regions of East Java, kiai possess very strong legitimacy and serve as one of the pillars of authority respected across generations. The social legitimacy of kiai derives from the accumulation of various elements, including knowledge, moral character, personal charisma, and scholarly genealogies connected to earlier ulama. The title “kiai” is not an academic title, but a form of social recognition acquired gradually based on spiritual and social achievements. Society does not simply confer the title kiai on someone who possesses religious knowledge; the person must demonstrate moral integrity, spiritual depth, and the ability to lead the community both symbolically and practically. In his classic study, Dhofier (2011) states that kiai are “the voice of tradition,” and they play an important role in transmitting Islamic values through the pesantren institutions they lead.

This legitimacy also develops through a long historical process, in which the role of kiai has never been detached from the social struggles of the community. Kiai

emerge as leaders in community life, unifiers of communities, and guides for the faithful in facing contemporary moral and ethical challenges. Therefore, the relationship between kiai and the community is not a formal or administrative relationship, but an emotional, spiritual, and cultural one. Kiai are trusted not merely because of what they teach, but because of who they are and how they live. This characteristic makes kiai authority both charismatic and traditional, consistent with the Weberian typology of authority (Weber, 1978). In rural communities in East Java, kiai are often consulted as problem-solvers for various aspects of life, ranging from agriculture and family disputes to social and political affairs. When people are uncertain about their choices in elections, for example, they often come to kiai for guidance. Not only verbal advice, but also the blessing of a kiai is often regarded as a “spiritual permission” to make a particular decision. This is why, in the context of local and national elections, the political alignment of a kiai can significantly influence the political behavior of the community.

The relationship between kiai and the community is not merely one-directional. Community members also place themselves in a position of being “willing to be led” because they believe that kiai are figures possessing high moral authority. This differs considerably from the relationship between citizens and politicians, which is contractual and tends to be pragmatic. A study by Sinarsari and Adnan (2025) states that the closeness between santri and kiai makes kiai highly influential political mediators. Kiai do not merely convey political preferences, but also instill religious values concerning the selection of leaders who are just, trustworthy, and supportive of the community. The role of kiai is also highly flexible. On the one hand, a kiai can be a spiritual figure who teaches tafsir, fiqh, and Sufism. On the other hand, a kiai can be a cultural figure who preserves local traditions such as tahlilan, maulid, and haul. In many cases, kiai also play an economic role because many pesantren develop cooperatives, business units, and even substantial management of waqf and zakat. This diversity of functions reinforces the position of kiai as comprehensive community leaders. Furthermore, the social legitimacy of kiai is not recognized only by pesantren communities or Nahdliyin residents. In many cases, kiai are also respected by figures from other mass organizations and even by non-Muslim communities that appreciate their position as figures of peace and pluralism. This can be seen in various interfaith and intercultural

forums in East Java that involve kiai as mediators. Here it becomes apparent that the social legitimacy of kiai is not limited to Muslims, but also extends into the broader public sphere.

Nevertheless, this highly central position also presents challenges. Amid modern political dynamics and greater access to information, kiai are expected to maintain their integrity so that their authority is not misused for practical political interests. When kiai become too active in electoral politics, public trust may erode because their spiritual authority is perceived as having been commodified. Such cases have emerged in several regional elections in East Java, where people have begun to question the political motives behind a kiai's support for a particular candidate. Mass media have also frequently highlighted the phenomenon of "kiai endorsers," which is regarded as a form of legalized patronage. This phenomenon invites further discussion about the boundaries of the social legitimacy of kiai. Can a kiai maintain spiritual charisma when openly involved in political campaigns? Or, conversely, is the involvement of kiai in politics an extension of their moral responsibility to guide the community in choosing good leaders? These questions are important because they concern the future role of kiai in Indonesian democracy. In a CNN Indonesia (2024) article, voices from a new generation of NU youth emerged criticizing the tendency of kiai to take explicit political sides because they viewed this as a form of intervention that reduces the spirituality of pesantren.

On the other hand, there is also a view that kiai neutrality in politics actually reduces their bargaining power vis-à-vis power elites. In this logic, the involvement of kiai is regarded as a form of moral struggle to ensure that Muslims have leaders who are consistent with Islamic values. Therefore, many kiai continue to choose to become involved in politics despite the various risks. They believe that their position will actually be stronger if used to influence the direction of public policies that favor the community. In this regard, the legitimacy of kiai is not only maintained but also capitalized upon for a broader purpose, namely the public good (*kemaslahatan*). Thus, it can be concluded that the kiai figure in East Javanese society possesses highly complex and dynamic social legitimacy. Kiai are respected not only for their religious scholarship, but also for their ability to serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity, religion and the state, and morality and power. This legitimacy stems from

the long history of the relationship between kiai and their communities and will continue to develop with changing times. In the context of elections, this legitimacy becomes a highly significant political force, while simultaneously requiring caution so that the spiritual position of kiai is not degraded into worldly interests.

Kiai and Pesantren Institutions

Kiai as individuals cannot be separated from pesantren institutions as socio-religious institutions that sustain their authority and influence. In the context of traditional Muslim communities in East Java, pesantren do not merely function as educational institutions, but also as centers for the training of ulama, strengthening social values, and forming extensive socio-political networks. Therefore, the relationship between kiai and pesantren is symbiotic: pesantren strengthen the social position of kiai, while kiai provide the institution with values, ideology, and political direction.

In the context of local politics, the relationship between kiai and pesantren becomes an important instrument for consolidating power. Pesantren with large numbers of santri, extensive alumni networks, and strong reputations are usually sought by political actors to establish strategic cooperation ahead of elections. Pesantren are used as centers for value- and religion-based campaigns. Political candidates who obtain support from kiai at major pesantren gain significant political advantages. Such support is not always explicit in the form of calls to vote, but may take the form of invitations to deliver sermons, dissemination of religious symbols associated with particular candidates, or normative statements that indirectly guide public choices. Major pesantren in East Java, such as Tebu Ireng in Jombang, Lirboyo in Kediri, and Sidogiri in Pasuruan, have long been known to possess strong influence in both local and national politics. Many national political elites routinely visit these pesantren to seek blessings or build political alliances. This phenomenon is not new, because since the New Order era, pesantren have served as arenas of compromise between power and religion. The difference is that today the involvement of pesantren is more open and structured because it is encouraged by an electoral democratic system that demands the consolidation of culturally based votes. In addition to serving as educational centers, pesantren have also developed into economic and social institutions. Many pesantren

now have cooperatives, business units, zakat institutions, and even pesantren-owned enterprises (BUMPes). Thus, pesantren are not only moral symbols but also local economic forces. The existence of these institutions strengthens kiai as strategic actors capable of providing economic access to their communities. In the context of elections, this economic strength becomes part of the political bargaining power of pesantren. Candidates seeking to cooperate with pesantren bring not only promises of development but also economic support for the sustainability of these institutions.

However, this development also presents ethical and integrity challenges. When pesantren become too closely involved in practical politics, concerns arise about the co-optation of religious institutions by political forces whose sole objective is electoral. Such co-optation may not only reduce the independence of pesantren, but also undermine public trust in pesantren as neutral moral institutions. In some cases, political involvement by pesantren has caused internal divisions between santri who support and oppose the political position of kiai. These conflicts affect not only relationships among santri, but also relations between pesantren and surrounding communities with different political preferences. To address this issue, some pesantren choose to remain neutral during elections, emphasizing that they focus on education and the moral development of the community. However, this choice also has political consequences because, in the context of competitive democracy, neutrality is often interpreted as non-involvement or even apathy. Therefore, kiai and pesantren administrators must be careful in determining their political positions so as to maintain the dignity of pesantren as authoritative Islamic educational institutions. Wise kiai usually express their political views within the framework of Islamic values, such as justice, public benefit, and *akhlakul karimah*. They do not explicitly mention candidates' names, but provide criteria for leaders who are worthy of being elected from an Islamic perspective. This strategy enables pesantren to remain centers of values while also playing a role in guiding the community politically. In the long term, this approach can strengthen the position of pesantren as independent, rational, and visionary civil forces in national political life. Thus, the relationship between kiai and pesantren institutions constitutes a primary foundation of the socio-political strength of traditional Islam in East Java. The two mutually sustain and reinforce each other, forming highly influential cultural and religious networks within the configuration of local politics. Amid the continuing

development of democracy, the roles of kiai and pesantren remain relevant and are becoming increasingly strategic in shaping the political direction of Indonesian Muslim communities.

The Power of Kiai and Pesantren

Within the social structure of East Javanese society rooted in traditional Islam, the power of a kiai derives not only from spiritual authority and social legitimacy, but also from the institutional capacity embedded in pesantren as religious, educational, and social-network institutions. This phenomenon demonstrates that kiai possess symbolic, structural, and political power. This power becomes more evident when the pesantren they lead has a large santri base, an extensive alumni network, and strong cultural relations with the surrounding community. In electoral politics such as regional elections, this power is transformed into highly significant “political capital.” A kiai can become a local or even regional “kingmaker” when capable of mobilizing the masses and determining the direction of support for a particular candidate. The power of kiai can be explained through three main dimensions: first, symbolic power attached to the kiai as a respected and trusted figure; second, network power built through pesantren and alumni communities; and third, religious legitimacy that enables the statements and actions of kiai to carry considerable moral and spiritual weight in the eyes of the community. When these three forms of power operate in synergy, kiai are able to act as power brokers in local and national political contests.

In political practice, the power of kiai is often expressed through forms of open political support, both personally and institutionally. Such support may take the form of direct declarations for candidates, statements in religious sermons, or the use of pesantren symbols to strengthen the image of supported candidates. In the 2024 East Java Pilkada, several prominent kiai openly declared their support for particular candidate pairs, which was then followed by collective movements among santri and pesantren alumni networks. The effect of this support was visibly reflected in increases in the electability of supported candidates, particularly in areas with large santri populations and high levels of community loyalty to kiai. This phenomenon can be explained through political patronage theory, in which kiai act as patrons who provide moral protection and religious legitimacy to political candidates. In return, winning

candidates generally provide access to political and economic resources for pesantren, including development assistance, economic empowerment programs, or strategic positions in the local bureaucracy. These relationships are often pragmatic and transactional, although they remain framed in religious narratives and the values of the struggle for the community. However, the political power of kiai also generates ambivalence. On the one hand, the involvement of kiai in politics can increase political participation among communities and encourage the emergence of leaders who support religious aspirations. On the other hand, patronage practices can create opportunities for abuse of power, co-optation of pesantren institutions, and commercialization of religious authority. This is evident in several cases in which kiai support for particular candidates is alleged to be based on material rewards rather than solely on moral considerations or community interests. This criticism is voiced by young santri, academics, and civil society groups seeking politics based on ethics and integrity.

A study by Widodo (2014) in Gresik reveals that, in practice, not all kiai act independently or preserve the dignity of their scholarly authority. Some become trapped in pragmatic power relations, causing pesantren to become instruments of political mobilization that lose their ethical and ideological direction. A similar pattern is reflected in research by Sinarsari and Adnan (2025), which shows that the support structure of JKSN in the 2024 presidential election in East Java was not entirely cultural or ideological, but was also characterized by dynamics of practical political interests. Criticism of this phenomenon has intensified alongside the emergence of political awareness among younger generations in pesantren. They have begun to question the absolute authority of kiai regarding political choices and demand that pesantren return to being politically neutral educational institutions. CNN Indonesia (2024) reported a wave of criticism among young santri toward the explicit involvement of kiai in practical politics because it was considered damaging to pesantren independence and creating polarization among the community. In this context, the political power of kiai can become a burden if not managed wisely and in accordance with Islamic moral principles. Nevertheless, not all involvement of kiai in politics is negative or pragmatic. Many kiai also use their political power to advance community interests, promote social justice, and uphold values of virtue in government. They use their bargaining position to negotiate policies that favor ordinary people, advocate budgets for pesantren education,

and oppose corruption and nepotism at the local level. In this respect, the political power of kiai becomes a constructive and visionary instrument of struggle, provided that it remains grounded in principles of justice, honesty, and commitment to the community. As socio-political actors, kiai possess substantial agency. They may choose to become directly involved in politics, remain neutral, or even act as a moral opposition to power. Such choices depend on social conditions, values, and moral courage. Some kiai choose a cultural path to voice criticism of government without directly entering the power system. They use sermons, writings, and social networks to build critical awareness among the public. This demonstrates that the power of kiai and pesantren does not always have to be expressed through formal involvement, but can also operate through moral and intellectual influence. Thus, the power of kiai and pesantren in local politics cannot be viewed in black-and-white terms. It results from a complex interaction between social structures, religious traditions, political interests, and civil-society dynamics. This power can be a blessing when used to pursue justice and public benefit, but it can also become problematic when it falls into transactional practices that disregard ethics and religious values. Therefore, kiai need awareness and wisdom to maintain a balance between their spiritual and political roles so that their power remains a source of guidance for the community rather than the opposite.

Kiai Involvement in Politics and Elections

Kiai involvement in politics and elections is a social reality that has long existed in the history of Indonesian politics, particularly in East Java. The political presence of kiai can be traced not only in contemporary dynamics, but also to the colonial era, the national movement, the New Order period, and the Reformasi era. Across these historical periods, kiai have emerged as important figures capable of mobilizing communities, influencing public policy, and shaping public opinion in determining political directions. Therefore, the involvement of kiai in politics is not new, but part of the long dynamics of the relationship between religion and the state in Indonesia. During the colonial period, kiai were actively involved in resistance to colonial rule through pesantren education and tarekat networks. They organized cultural resistance that fostered an Islam-based sense of nationalism. During the independence revolution, many kiai also directed santri and communities to support armed struggle and even became directly involved in popular militias such as Hizbullah and Sabilillah. After

independence, the political role of kiai became increasingly institutionalized through Islamic political parties, particularly Masyumi and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which at that time had not yet become religious mass organizations as they are today. However, the dynamics changed during the New Order, when the state depoliticized Islamic forces, including pesantren and kiai. Kiai were forced to distance themselves from practical politics, and their roles were returned to religious functions alone. Nevertheless, after Reformasi, political space reopened. Democratization and direct elections provided opportunities for kiai to become actively involved again in political contests. This phenomenon became clearly visible from the 2004 elections onward, reaching a peak in regional and presidential elections in 2014, 2019, and now 2024. The involvement of kiai in the 2024 East Java Pilkada demonstrates a new escalation in the relationship between religion and politics. In various areas, such as Jombang, Kediri, Pasuruan, and Bangkalan, several kiai openly expressed political support for regional head candidates or presidential candidate pairs. This support was not merely personal, but also involved pesantren institutions, alumni networks, and religious mass organizations with historical and ideological relationships to the kiai. In many cases, political support from kiai was even able to alter the balance of candidate strength, particularly in santri and traditionalist voter bases.

Within the framework of religion-based political mobilization theory, kiai involvement in elections can be understood as a process of mobilizing religious values and symbols to support particular political objectives. Kiai use preaching networks, religious gatherings, and religious events to communicate their political preferences. This approach is highly effective because communities view kiai not as ordinary political actors, but as moral and spiritual leaders. Therefore, when kiai express support, many community members feel a moral obligation to follow their guidance. However, this practice has generated criticism from academics, activists, and younger generations of pesantren. The main criticism is that the open political involvement of kiai can blur the boundary between the sacred and the profane. When kiai, previously regarded as guardians of the community's morality, participate in political practices that tend to be transactional and pragmatic, their spiritual authority may deteriorate. This is exacerbated by political endorsement practices that are often carried out openly, such as through billboards, joint campaigns, and support-declaration events at pesantren. This

phenomenon demonstrates that kiai involvement in elections exists along a broad spectrum, ranging from normative involvement as moral guides to practical involvement as campaign actors. In practice, some kiai choose neutrality and place greater emphasis on political education for the community, while others choose to actively affiliate with particular parties or candidates. These differences reflect the absence of a single consensus within pesantren communities regarding how kiai should behave in electoral politics. Each pesantren and kiai has its own social, ideological, and pragmatic considerations in determining the direction of its involvement.

In the context of East Java, kiai involvement in politics is also strongly influenced by historical relationships between pesantren and particular political parties, such as PKB and PPP, and in some cases nationalist parties such as PDIP or Gerindra. These affiliations are often determined by cultural and historical factors rather than electoral interests alone. In practice, however, considerations of electability and access to resources are also important factors taken into account by kiai and pesantren administrators. This explains why, in every election, political support among kiai is repositioned differently depending on local and national political dynamics. In addition, kiai involvement in politics also affects the public image of pesantren. On the one hand, such involvement demonstrates that pesantren are active parts of civil society that participate in building democracy. On the other hand, it can generate negative perceptions that pesantren have become instruments of power that have lost their independence and moral integrity. Therefore, it is important for kiai to balance their socio-political and spiritual roles so that pesantren remain centers of value-based education rather than merely instruments of electoral political mobilization. To address this tension, some kiai choose more subtle strategies of political involvement, such as providing criteria for an ideal leader from an Islamic perspective without naming a particular candidate. This strategy enables the community to think critically and choose independently, while remaining within the framework of Islamic values taught by kiai. It also gives pesantren room to remain active in democracy without becoming trapped in pragmatic practical politics.

A study by Romadhon (2008) in Pamekasan shows that kiai with high social sensitivity tend to be more selective in supporting political candidates. They consider personal integrity, track record, vision and mission, as well as commitment to Islam and

ordinary citizens before expressing support. This demonstrates that kiai involvement in politics is not necessarily bad, but should be grounded in good intentions, adequate knowledge, and commitment to Islamic principles. Furthermore, kiai involvement in politics can serve as a countervailing force against the dominance of power that does not favor the people. In some cases, kiai become spokespersons for communities opposing government policies that harm poor communities, the environment, and education. They voice criticism through sermons, religious gatherings, writings, and other religious forums. Such a role is needed in a healthy democratic system, in which power should not operate without moral and social oversight. However, the effectiveness of kiai as agents of change depends heavily on their personal and institutional credibility. When kiai demonstrate integrity and consistency and are not swept into transactional politics, their political involvement can have positive effects. Conversely, if kiai frequently shift their political support, become involved in money politics, or use pesantren for political campaigning, public trust may be lost. In the long term, this can damage the legitimacy of pesantren and weaken the religious role in society. Thus, kiai involvement in politics and elections is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. It reflects the dynamics of relationships between religion and the state, morality and power, and tradition and modernity. The political role of kiai cannot be absolutely prohibited, but should be directed to remain within the framework of Islamic values, democracy, and social ethics. In East Java, where kiai have considerable influence over voter behavior, their involvement should be managed wisely so that it remains a source of enlightenment rather than polarization. When kiai are able to play this role proportionately, they can remain the moral heart of society, capable of guiding politics toward a better and more civilized direction.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that kiai play a highly significant role in local politics in East Java, particularly in the context of the 2024 general and regional elections. Kiai are not only religious figures, but also social leaders who possess strong legitimacy in the eyes of the community. This legitimacy derives from a combination of traditional authority inherited through pesantren institutions and charismatic authority formed through social

interaction, personal morality, and spiritual piety. In the lives of traditional Muslim communities in East Java, kiai serve as centers of moral orientation as well as political references, making them central figures in shaping public opinion and electoral behavior. The closeness between kiai and pesantren institutions constitutes the primary foundation of the socio-political strength of traditional Islam in East Java. Pesantren not only perform religious educational functions, but also serve as centers for consolidating social, economic, and even political networks. The existence of alumni networks, active santri, and local community networks makes pesantren important nodes in mobilizing voter support. Thus, the political role of kiai cannot be separated from the institutional strength of pesantren that sustains their authority and influence in society. Furthermore, kiai play the role of power brokers in local electoral politics. In the context of the 2024 Pilkada, open support provided by kiai for particular candidates significantly influenced community political preferences, especially in areas with strong cultural ties to pesantren. Kiai support is not viewed merely as a personal political opinion, but also as a representation of religious values and morality that are considered binding. However, this phenomenon also generates ambivalence: on the one hand, kiai strengthen political participation among the community; on the other hand, their involvement creates space for patronage practices, co-optation of pesantren, and commercialization of religious authority. Kiai involvement in local politics demonstrates complex and non-uniform dynamics. Some kiai are actively involved in campaigns and formal political structures, while others choose a moral role as advisers to the community without explicit affiliation. Such involvement can have positive effects when conducted with integrity and ethics, but may have negative potential when driven solely by pragmatic interests. Therefore, caution is needed in positioning pesantren and kiai within the electoral democratic sphere so as not to undermine the religious dignity that has been built over centuries. In general, this study shows that the power of kiai in politics derives not merely from campaign strategies or alliances with parties, but from the heritage of moral authority accepted by the community. In Indonesia's pluralistic and competitive electoral democracy, this power should be exercised wisely so that it can become a force for enlightenment rather than merely an instrument for legitimizing power. The future of Indonesian democracy, particularly in areas with strong pesantren bases such as East Java, depends greatly on how kiai and pesantren perform their roles as guardians

of values, protectors of the community, and dignified political guides.

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