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## Public Perception of Kiai Involvement in the 2024 Tulungagung Regent Election, Indonesia

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines public perceptions of kiai involvement in the 2024 Tulungagung Deputy Regent election within the context of local political dynamics. The research aims to understand how society interprets the role of religious leaders in practical politics. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation involving community members familiar with the political process. The findings reveal that public perceptions are divided. On the one hand, kiai are viewed as moral authorities who can provide ethical guidance and legitimacy to political actors. On the other hand, their involvement in practical politics, particularly in controversial campaign activities and programs, has generated criticism and led to a decline in perceived moral authority among some segments of society. The analysis shows that these perceptions are socially constructed through ongoing interactions and are increasingly influenced by digital media, which accelerates the dissemination and reinterpretation of kiai's public image. Furthermore, the study finds a shift in the nature of kiai influence, from dominant moral authority toward a more negotiated and contested position. The implications of this research suggest that the involvement of religious leaders in politics must be carefully managed to maintain public trust, as their legitimacy is no longer solely based on traditional authority but also on public perception shaped in both offline and online spaces.*

**Keyword:** *Kiai, Political Participation, Public Participation*

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## Introduction

In the context of Indonesian Muslim society, the kiai occupies a position that is not only religious, but also social and cultural (Sembiring et al., 2024). Kiai often viewed as authoritative figures possessing moral legitimacy, the ability to interpret religion, and an emotional closeness to the community. In the pesantren tradition, kiai are not merely teachers but also community leaders capable of influencing the mindsets, attitudes, and socio-political choices of their students and the surrounding community (Yani et al., 2022). Therefore, the kiai often serves as a primary reference in various aspects of life, including local politics.

In the context of Indonesian Muslim society, the kiai occupies a position that is not only religious, but also social and cultural. Kiai are often viewed as authoritative figures possessing moral legitimacy, the ability to interpret religion, and an emotional closeness to the community (Silitonga et al., 2025). In the pesantren tradition, kiai are not merely teachers but also community leaders capable of influencing the mindsets, attitudes, and socio-political choices of their students and the surrounding community. Therefore, the kiai often serves as a primary reference in various aspects of life, including local politics (Paputungan et al., 2025).

This phenomenon is also evident in the political dynamics in Tulungagung Regency, particularly in the 2024 Deputy Regent Election. The kiai involved in this local political contest is one of the caretakers of the MIA (Ma'hadul 'Ilmi Wal 'Amal) Islamic Boarding School and serves as Deputy Rais Syuriyah within the Nahdlatul Ulama branch in Tulungagung (Maram et al., 2023). In this contest, the involvement of kiai is no longer implicit but increasingly overt, through political support, mobilization of Islamic boarding school (pesantren) networks, and involvement in specific candidate campaigns. Several kiai with a strong base of santri (Islamic boarding school) and alumni are known to have supported candidate pairs, both directly and through informal networks. This involvement is often rooted in the candidate's historical closeness to the pesantren, affiliation with religious organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama, or pre-established personal relationships (Syarif & Hannan, 2025).

Several previous studies have shown that the presence of kiai as religious and community leaders significantly influences the political perceptions and behavior of the Indonesian people. Research by [Click or tap here to enter text.](#) suggests that kiai utilize patron-client relationships to strengthen their positions both in the development of pesantren and in local political practices, including influencing the political preferences of the community and election participants (Fahmy et al., 2024). This research suggests that public perception of kiai involvement can vary depending on the extent to which they maintain their moral and religious symbolism, maintaining credibility and avoiding being trapped in pragmatic, practical politics. An article by (Putro et al., 2022) shows that the involvement of kiai/ulama in local politics, such as regional elections, has a significant influence on shaping public

mobilization of society.

In the Indonesian context, research on the role of ulama and kyai also shows that the public tends to assess kyai's involvement in politics based on their morality and neutrality (Fikri et al., 2024). Public perception is strongly influenced by their view of the kyai's credibility and independence in determining political stances, which are crucial factors in understanding political dynamics at the local level. Furthermore, research by (Wijaya & Nurchamidah, 2025) demonstrates the importance of identity (religion, kinship, and regionalism) in the political behavior of religious and community leaders, which can serve as a basis for understanding public perceptions of kyai involvement in the 2024 Tulungagung deputy regent election (Baihaqi et al., 2024). Furthermore, developments in information technology and social media also influence how the public forms perceptions of kyai involvement in politics. The rapid and widespread circulation of information allows for the emergence of diverse views, both supportive and critical of the involvement of religious figures (Agustina et al., 2022). Social media has even become a new space for shaping public opinion, significantly influencing the image of a kiai. Thus, public perception is formed not only through direct interaction but also through the construction of reality that develops in the digital space.

Kiai not only serve as religious leaders but also as social actors with significant influence in shaping public opinion and political behavior. In this context, the kiai's position often serves as a bridge between religious values and practical politics. The urgency of this research becomes even more relevant when linked to the dynamics of local democracy, which demand rational and independent public participation (Chalik & Hamdi, 2022). While kiai involvement has the potential to strengthen political participation, it can also create a dependence on religious authority for public political choices. This raises important questions about the extent to which public perception of such involvement is viewed as moral legitimacy in politics or as interference with freedom of choice. Furthermore, this research is crucial in filling the gap in empirical studies that specifically address public perceptions of the role of kiai in local political contestation, particularly in Tulungagung in the 2024 regional elections.

## **Methods**

This study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive approach. The aim of this study was to deeply understand public perceptions of the involvement of religious leaders (kyai) in the 2024 Tulungagung Deputy Regent election. Through this approach, researchers were able to explore the public's views, experiences, and interpretations regarding the involvement of religious leaders in local politics. The research location was Tulungagung Regency, due to its strong Islamic boarding school

dynamics of the community. This location was chosen based on its relevance to the research focus, which sought to examine how the public views the role of kiai in local political contests.

The informants in this study were members of the public who were aware of or closely following the dynamics of the 2024 Tulungagung Deputy Regent election, such as community leaders, residents near Islamic boarding schools, religious study groups, and the general public. Kyai were not used as primary informants in this study. This research focused on public perceptions of the involvement of religious leaders (kyai) in the 2024 Tulungagung Deputy Regent contest, rather than the views or experiences of the kiai as direct actors. Therefore, the data collected was aimed at capturing how the public interprets, assesses, and responds to the involvement of religious leaders in local politics. Furthermore, the exclusion of kiai as informants also aimed to maintain the objectivity of the research perspective. Kiai, as individuals with specific positions, interests, and authority in society, have the potential to provide normative or justificatory views regarding their involvement in politics. Informants were selected using purposive sampling, a deliberate selection of informants based on specific criteria deemed capable of providing information relevant to the research focus. Data collection techniques included in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews were used to elicit public views and assessments regarding the involvement of kiai in political contests. Observations were conducted to directly observe the social conditions of the community and interactions related to the phenomenon. Meanwhile, documentation was used to supplement the data in the form of news, archives, and documents related to the Tulungagung Deputy Regent contest.

The data analysis technique used in this study was qualitative analysis, which encompasses three stages: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by sorting and focusing data relevant to the research objectives. The data was then presented in narrative form for ease of understanding. Conclusions were then drawn to uncover the meaning of public perceptions of the involvement of kyai (Islamic clerics) in the 2024 Tulungagung Deputy Regent contest.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **First Argument: Public Perception of Kyai Involvement in Political Contests**

The public perceives the involvement of kiai in the 2024 Tulungagung Deputy Regent contest differently. Some view kiai involvement as normal and even necessary. Kiai are considered moral figures with religious authority and social closeness to the community, thus their presence in politics is believed to be able to bring ethical values and honesty to government. In this context, kiai are positioned not only as religious figures but also as social leaders trusted to champion the interests of the community (Azharghany et al., 2022).

Research of (I Gusti Agung Ayu Rinka Sari & Gede Crisna Wijaya, 2024) shows that kiai in Indonesia play not only a religious role but also wield extensive influence in the social and political life of society. The religious authority of kiai makes them respected and trusted figures in society, allowing their political views and attitudes to influence people's political choices. This research also explains that political parties often leverage the influence of kiai to increase electability and gain public support, one way being through religious activities such as ulama meetings or ulama forums, which are used as strategies to mobilize political support in the lead-up to elections.

The involvement of Islamic boarding schools (kyai) in politics can have diverse impacts. On the one hand, this involvement can strengthen the position of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) in social life because the kiai's social network expands and they have greater access to power and resources (Zain et al., 2025). This can open up opportunities for Islamic boarding schools to gain support for the development of educational institutions, social activities, and community empowerment programs. However, on the other hand, this research also shows the risks that arise when kiai are involved in practical politics. This involvement can spark debate within the community regarding the kiai's position as a religious figure. Some believe that kiai involvement in politics has the potential to diminish the moral authority and religious prestige inherent in a kiai. When kiai become involved in political competitions fraught with vested interests, the public may perceive that religious and political interests become intertwined (Syamsiar et al., 2025).

However, there are also critical views from some who believe that kiai involvement in practical politics can blur the boundaries between the religious and political spheres. This criticism is further strengthened when linked to the campaign programs of the supported candidate pairs, such as the planned monthly sound horeg (voice-voting). For some members of the public, the program is considered to reflect insufficiently substantive development priorities and inconsistent with the religious values inherent in the figure of the kiai (Zainuddin et al., 2026).

From the perspective of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's social construction theory, this public perception can be understood as the result of a social dialectical process encompassing externalization, objectivation, and internalization. The involvement of kiai in politics constitutes a form of externalization, namely, social actions carried out by actors (kiai) in the public sphere. These actions then undergo objectification when society begins to assign certain meanings to them, such as considering them a form of moral leadership or the politicization of religion (Zahro & Saputri, 2024). Furthermore, through the process of internalization, these meanings shape society's collective perception of the role of kiai in politics.

The differences in perceptions that emerge demonstrate that the social reality regarding "kiai in politics" is not a singular one, but rather socially constructed by society based on individual experiences, values, and contexts. Thus, the position of kiai in political contestation becomes a space rife with interpretation and negotiation of meaning (Istianah & Saehudin, 2023).

### **Second Discussion of the Second Argument: Dynamics of Power Relations, Social Media, and The Construction of The Kiai Image**

Research findings indicate that the influence of kiai in shaping public political preferences has undergone a significant shift amid the development of social media. One crucial moment demonstrating this dynamic was the viral campaign video on TikTok featuring a kiai dancing with dancers (Mutiullah, 2024). This event not only became public consumption but also triggered a rapid and widespread process of meaning production in the digital space. Some members of the public responded with sharp criticism, judging that this action did not reflect the ideal image of a kiai, who has long been constructed as a religious, authoritative figure who distances himself from practices considered profane (Rohman, 2023). This reaction demonstrates that society possesses a stock of knowledge about how a kiai should act. When the reality presented deviates from this construction, dissonance occurs, triggering rejection.

From the perspective of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, this phenomenon can be understood as a process of social construction accelerated by digital media. The viral video has become a new form of objectification of a reality that is "perceived as real" because it is continuously reproduced through netizens' comments, shares, and discourse. Furthermore, through a process of internalization, society reconstructs the meaning of the kiai figure, both through delegitimization and reinterpretation (Umam, 2024). However, when analyzed using Max Weber's perspective, this phenomenon is also closely related to the concept of charismatic authority. Kiai fundamentally possess legitimacy derived from charisma, a personal quality considered special by their followers (Mahyudin, 2024). This authority persists as long as followers continue to believe in and acknowledge these qualities. When actions deemed inconsistent with moral expectations occur, this charismatic legitimacy can erode.

The findings of this study indicate that these two processes are occurring simultaneously. On the one hand, there are indications of a weakening of the kiai's charismatic authority due to the mismatch between their behavior and societal moral expectations (Junaedi et al., 2025). However, on the other hand, there are also efforts to reconstruct meaning by some community groups who view these actions as a form of adaptation to the modern political context. They consider involvement in campaigns with entertainment elements to be a relevant communication strategy for reaching a wider audience,

of disseminating information but also as an arena for contesting meaning. In this space, the image of the kiai is no longer singular and stable, but is constantly negotiated through various competing perspectives. This demonstrates that the relationship between kiai and the public is now more fluid, where legitimacy is no longer solely determined by traditional positions, but also by how their actions and image are constructed, maintained, or even questioned in the digital public sphere.

The involvement of kiai in the 2024 Tulungagung Deputy Regent contest demonstrates a complex and layered pattern. Research shows that this involvement is not limited to political support but also encompasses the production of social meanings that influence broader public perceptions. In the initial stages, kiai serve as sources of symbolic legitimacy (Topan & Hakim, 2023). Their support or closeness to candidate pairs is interpreted as a form of moral approval that can bolster public trust. However, this legitimacy is not absolute. The public continues to evaluate candidates and emerging issues in the political contest.

Involvement then evolved into more active areas, such as attendance at campaign events, delivering political messages in sermons, and even engaging in social media content. At this stage, kiai were no longer mere symbols but also actors directly involved in political dynamics. However, the more intense this involvement, the greater the potential for public resistance (Kiptiyah & Kamila, 2025). This was evident in the response to campaign programs like *sound horeg*, which some considered less relevant to primary needs such as job creation and economic well-being. Furthermore, kiai's involvement in entertainment-based campaign activities also sparked controversy in the public sphere. The viral phenomenon on social media reinforced this dynamic, where kiai's actions became the object of open public scrutiny. This demonstrates the dilemma that kiai's involvement in politics presents: on the one hand, it can strengthen a candidate's legitimacy, but on the other, it also has the potential to undermine the kiai's image and moral authority.

No	Forms of Kiai Involvement	Description of Findings	Public Response	Impact on Kiai's Image
1	Symbolic Legitimacy	Kiai provide support or maintain closeness with candidates as a form of moral endorsement	Generally positive	Strengthens moral authority
2	Politically-Oriented Religious Sermons	Political messages are delivered within religious gatherings	Varied, depending on content and delivery	Indicates early politicization of religious image
3	Participation in Campaign Activities	Kiai attended political campaign events as supporters	Pro and contra responses	Reinforces but also tests legitimacy
4	Support for Candidate Programs	Kiai is associated with certain campaign programs such as <i>sound horeg</i>	Tends to be critical if not aligned with public needs	Decreases trust among some community members
5	Involvement in Social Media	Kiai appears in digital campaign content that can easily go viral	Broad and rapid responses	Makes image more exposed and vulnerable to criticism
6	Participation in Campaign Entertainment	Kiai engaged in entertainment activities during campaigns	Largely criticized by segments of society	Potentially reduces dignity and sacred image
7	Influence on Political Preferences	Kiai influenced public voting choices directly or indirectly	No longer fully dominant	Authority becomes negotiated
8	Public Moral Evaluation	Society evaluates kiai's actions based on moral expectations	Critical and selective	Social legitimacy may strengthen or decline

*Table: Detailed Forms of Kiai Involvement and Public Responses*

## Conclusion

This research shows that public perceptions of the involvement of kiai (Islamic scholars) in the 2024 Tulungagung Deputy Regent Election are diverse and dynamic. Kiai are still viewed as figures with strong moral authority and social closeness to the community, thus their involvement in politics is seen as providing ethical legitimacy for candidates. However, on the other hand, increasingly open involvement in practical politics has drawn criticism, particularly when perceived as inconsistent with religious values and the substantive needs of the community.

The research findings also reveal a shift in kiai authority, from previously dominant and relatively stable to more fluid, open, and negotiated. Public perception is no longer solely determined by the kiai's traditional position, but is instead influenced by social interactions, experiences, and evolving meaning constructions, particularly through social media. In this context, digital media plays a crucial role as an arena for the formation and contestation of kiai images, which can both strengthen

and weaken their legitimacy. Furthermore, kiai involvement in various forms, ranging from symbolic legitimacy to active participation in campaigns, demonstrates their increasingly complex role in local politics. This involvement can have positive impacts in the form of strengthening political participation and access to resources, but it also has the potential to undermine religious authority if not managed wisely.

Thus, this study confirms that the involvement of kiai in politics is a dilemma. A balance is needed between their roles as religious leaders and political actors to maintain public trust. The implications of this research demonstrate the importance of caution in political practices by religious figures, given that their legitimacy now depends not only on traditional authority but also on evolving public perceptions in social and digital spaces.

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**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all informants involved in this study. Each participant was given an adequate explanation regarding the research objectives, procedures, and use of the collected data. Participation was voluntary, and informant identities were kept confidential in accordance with ethical research principles.

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