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Article

Contested Religious Authority and Political Representation: Pesantren and Nahdlatul Ulama in East Java's 2024 Presidential Elections

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Abstract

Pesantren in East Java are embedded in extensive Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)-linked social and religious networks, yet shared religious affiliation does not necessarily produce a unified political position. This article examines how political actors invoked NU and pesantren affiliations and competed to claim representation of these communities in the run-up to Indonesia's 2024 presidential election. It addresses a gap in studies that tend to examine kiai and pesantren networks primarily as channels of political influence, by focusing instead on the plurality of actors and the legitimacy claims they advanced. The study employs a qualitative documentary approach, drawing on national and NU media reports, official organizational statements, and relevant academic literature. Documents were selected according to their temporal relevance, connection to actors' political positions, and traceability to original sources. Thematic analysis was used to identify the actors, representative claims, and sources of legitimacy underpinning them. The findings show that claims to represent NU and pesantren drew on different resources, including organizational positions, family genealogy, pesantren education, party affiliation, and personal reputation. PBNU's declaration of organizational neutrality did not eliminate competing claims; these continued to emerge beyond the formal organizational structure. The article argues that pesantren-related

politics is better understood through the contestation of representation among multiple sources of authority than through the assumption of a homogeneous electoral bloc. The analysis concerns documented elite positions and does not establish how these claims were received by pesantren communities or how their members voted.

Keyword : pesantren; Nahdlatul Ulama; religious authority; representative claims; electoral politics; Indonesia.

Introduction

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia are not merely educational institutions, but rather nodes of socio-religious networks connecting kiasis (traditional Islamic scholars), santris (students), alumni, families, and the surrounding community (Dhofier, 2011). This network renders the kiasis formidable political actors. Their charisma and mass bases are continually courted by political parties and candidates, simultaneously drawing them into the complex tug-of-war of political interests (Hajar, 2009; Rozaki, 2021).

The involvement of pesantren scholars (kiai) in practical politics is by no means a novel phenomenon (Bush & Rickard, 2009; Fealy, 2012). However, such influence does not automatically translate into uniform voting behaviour. Critical assessments of kiai–santri dynamics in electoral politics indicate that the political clout of kiais operates under highly variable conditions (Mahali et al., 2019). Studies in Madura, for instance, demonstrate that religious authority among kiais can be internally divided, notably between senior (kiai tua) and junior scholars (kiai muda) (A'la & Zamzami, 2023). Furthermore, voter behaviour literature suggests that the influence of religious leaders on voter preferences is more circumscribed than commonly assumed (Liddle & Mujani, 2007). The 2018 East Java Gubernatorial Election serves as a clear precedent: two candidates with pesantren backgrounds competed, resulting in a fragmented kiai endorsement landscape (Anshori & Samputra, 2024; Sunaryo & Jatiningsih, 2021).

In Indonesia, traditional pesantren in particular are deeply intertwined with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)—an organisation founded by pesantren scholars in 1926 (Fealy, 2012; van Bruinessen, 1999)—causing pesantren and NU identities to frequently overlap. Leading up to the 2024 Presidential Election, this dynamic manifested in a distinct configuration. Muhaimin Iskandar (vice-presidential candidate alongside Anies Baswedan) serves as the General Chairman of Partai

Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB), a party established in 1998 by prominent NU figures, and is a maternal great-grandson of KH Bisri Syamsuri, one of NU's co-founders (Rama & Rahmat, 2023). Meanwhile, Mahfud MD (vice-presidential candidate alongside Ganjar Pranowo) hails from a Nahdliyin family, was educated in pesantren, and served as a cabinet minister under Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur), the former General Chairman of PBNU (Toakan, 2023; Wiryono & Rastika, 2023). Claims of proximity to NU circles were likewise advanced by the Prabowo–Gibran camp. Nusron Wahid asserted that the majority of East Javanese NU masyayikh (senior scholars) backed the ticket (Yusuf & Faishal, 2023), while the Governor of East Java, Khofifah Indar Parawansa—who also chairs Muslimat NU—declared her explicit support for the pair (Senopati, 2024). Media reports further highlighted allegations that several high-ranking PBNU officials directed support toward this ticket, including the Rais 'Aam of PBNU, K.H. Miftachul Akhyar (Rasdianto, 2024).

These claims of representation were contested in the open arena. The Central Board of Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) explicitly reaffirmed that NU remained neutral toward all candidate tickets and that PKB did not represent NU (Lesmana & Ardiansyah, 2023). However, this institutional stance did not automatically consolidate the positions of figures holding NU legitimacy. Instead, they were dispersed across competing camps, anchored in distinct foundations of affiliation: genealogical lineage and partisan pathways, pesantren backgrounds and Gus Dur's legacy, as well as organizational networks and claimed endorsements from senior scholars (kiai sepuh). Consequently, what was at stake extended beyond securing the votes of the pesantren community; it encompassed the right to project oneself as the authentic representation of the NU and pesantren tradition.

Prior literature demonstrates that the political influence of kiais and pesantren operates through multifaceted mechanisms. At the local level, pesantren alumni networks function as potent political forces integrated with formal networks in regional elections (Hasanudin, 2017), while religious authority is frequently converted into a negotiable resource during political contests, such as through political brokerage (Lubis & Rohmatillah, 2018). This authority itself rests upon specific historical and social conditions (Ayatillah, 2022). Nevertheless, these studies also highlight that such influence is far from uniform. The political choices of kiais are shaped by cultural-ideological and structural-organizational determinants (Nugroho, 2017), authority among kiais remains internally divided (A'la & Zamzami, 2023), and voter behavior

studies indicate that the sway of religious leaders over electoral decisions is more circumscribed than conventional wisdom suggests (Liddle & Mujani, 2007).

Nevertheless, these existing studies generally focus on kiais or pesantren networks merely as conduits of influence, largely concentrating on localized contests featuring single-case studies. What remains underexplored is the situation wherein numerous actors—including political party figures, organizational leaders, and non-kiai public figures alike—simultaneously invoke NU and pesantren legitimacy, each claiming to represent the very same community within a national presidential contest. To analyze this scenario, this article draws upon two theoretical frameworks. First, religious authority in contemporary Muslim societies is dispersed across multiple sources rather than monopolized by a single authority (Eickelman & Piscatori, 2004; Krämer & Schmidtke, 2014). Second, political representation is conceptualized not merely as a fixed status, but as a dynamic claim put forward by actors and subsequently accepted or rejected by their audience (Saward, 2010).

Method

This study adopts a qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to examine representative claims and the political positions of figures holding Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and pesantren legitimacy leading up to the 2024 Presidential Election. The focus centers on the pre-election period—specifically spanning from [start date] to [end date]—meaning this research does not evaluate electoral outcomes nor measure the voting preferences of the pesantren constituency. The scope is restricted to pesantren within the NU network in East Java, while national-level figures are included insofar as their claims were directed toward this community.

Data were collected through document analysis (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003), encompassing national and NU media coverage, official organizational statements, and academic literature. Sources were selected based on three criteria: publication within the research timeframe, inclusion of statements or positions regarding NU and pesantren, and traceability to their original sources. Because certain sources are partisan in nature—such as campaign team statements and organizational media—the credibility and perspective of each document were evaluated via source criticism (Scott, 1990), treating actors' statements as claims rather than established facts.

The unit of analysis comprises the representative claims and political positions of the actors rather than community voting choices. Data were thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using preliminary categories of sources of legitimacy (genealogical, organizational, pesantren-based, partisan, and personal), which remained subject to revision as dictated by the data (Miles et al., 2014). The coded results were organized into a matrix of actors, claims, sources of legitimacy, and dates, then interpreted to identify patterns of authority pluralism and contestation of representation.

The validity of the interpretation was maintained through source triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the separation of facts from interpretation, and the active search for counter-evidence that misaligns with the primary argument, such as signals of consolidation among kiais. The limitations of this study entail a reliance on media reporting, an elite-centric focus, a scarcity of grassroots kiai and pesantren voices, and the absence of actual election outcome data.

Results and Discussion

Pesantren as Socio-Religious Networks and Political Arenas in East Java

East Java occupies a vital position in the politics of pesantren due to two mutually reinforcing factors: its electoral weight and the density of its pesantren network. The province possesses the second-largest permanent voter list (DPT) in Java, comprising approximately 31.4 million voters (KPU Jatim, 2023), alongside the second-highest number of santris (students) in Indonesia—roughly 673,000 individuals distributed across approximately 7,071 pesantren (Kemenag RI, 2024). Consequently, a pesantren does not function as an isolated unit, but rather as an integral part of a broader social structure that spans multiple communities.

The socio-historical roots of this phenomenon run deep. Studies on Sumenep during the colonial era demonstrate that the consolidation of kiai authority at the village level was shaped by ecological conditions that positioned Islam as a binding symbol, compounded by bureaucratic shifts from traditional to colonial administrations. This dynamic resulted in the proliferation of pesantren into remote villages and a high level of societal enthusiasm for Islam-based social movements in the early twentieth century (Ayatillah, 2022). Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) itself was founded in 1926 by pesantren kiais in East Java (Fealy, 2012). Thus, the relationship between pesantren and NU is not a newly forged product

of electoral contestation, but rather the outcome of a historical process that shaped the region's socio-religious network.

This network influences politics through channels that extend far beyond the individual relationship between a kiai and a santri. Local studies reveal that pesantren alumni networks can function as political forces integrated with formal networks in regional elections (Hasanudin, 2017), that a kiai's authority can be bartered as a resource in political contestation—such as through the role of political brokers (Lubis & Rohmatillah, 2018)—and that the political choices of kiais are influenced by cultural-ideological and structural-organizational factors (Nugroho, 2017). Within this framework, pesantren are more accurately conceptualized as nodes within social and institutional networks rather than as a monolithic bloc of voters moving in unison.

Furthermore, the character of this network is not uniform across the province. Regions characterized by a high density of pesantren and strong NU traditions—such as the Tapal Kuda and Madura regions—differ markedly from the Mataraman area, which is historically associated with nationalist and abangan traditions, as well as the urban Arek zone. This diversity indicates that pesantren authority operates through locally differentiated networks, laying the groundwork for subsequent discussions on how various actors wielding NU and pesantren legitimacy compete to claim representation.

Plurality of Figures and Claims to Pesantren Representation

The question of who can speak on behalf of a pesantren is more readily addressed when representation is understood as a claim rather than a fixed position. Saward (2006) defines a representative claim as an assertion that someone represents, or knows what represents, the interests of a particular group. Such a claim involves both a maker and an audience, and the audience may either accept or reject it (Saward, 2006, p. 185). Regarding religious authority, Krämer and Schmidtke (2006, p. 2) emphasize that authority "does not denote a fixed attribute, but is premised on recognition and acquiescence." Armed with these two premises, figures close to pesantren are not interpreted as owners of the pesantren vote. Instead, they are viewed as claim-makers who must demonstrate the grounds of their legitimacy to an audience retaining the power to refuse.

The space for such claims remains open because the structural leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) refuses to monopolize them. On September 2, 2023, PBNU General Chairman Yahya Cholil Staquf stated,

"Let no candidate invoke the name of NU," noting that claims of NU kiais endorsing specific candidates were unfounded (NU Online, 2023). He also reminded the public that "NU does not belong to just one political party" (Bisnis.com, 2023a). On November 21, 2023, he asserted that all candidates were part of NU: "They are all NU anyway" (Suara.com, 2023). This institutional rejection does not signify an absence of claims; rather, PBNU claims the position of a neutral umbrella organization, while individual figures construct their own claims outside of that institutional structure.

Muhaimin Iskandar grounds his claims in party networks and a family pesantren background. Born in Jombang in 1966, he received his early education at the Manbaul Ma'arif Islamic Boarding School—led by his parents—and co-founded the National Awakening Party (PKB) in 1998 alongside senior NU figures (Bisnis.com, 2023b). When questioned regarding NU, he replied, "I have never dragged NU into this," before adding, "but from birth until now, people know that I am NU" (Bisnis.com, 2023a). This response illustrates a claim resting on public recognition rather than organizational mandate.

Mahfud MD builds his claims through a background of pesantren education and strategic visits. He studied at a madrasah belonging to the Al-Mardhiyyah Islamic Boarding School in Madura, followed by the Somber Lagah Islamic Boarding School, prior to pursuing higher education at the Islamic University of Indonesia (UII) (Liputan6, 2023a). Two days prior to Megawati Soekarnoputri announcing him as Ganjar Pranowo's vice-presidential running mate (October 18, 2023), he visited the Langitan Islamic Boarding School in Tuban (Liputan6, 2023a). His NU affiliation was not stated explicitly in that source; rather, the "NU" label attributed to him derived from Gus Yahya's aforementioned statements and from political opponents questioning the size of his following (Bisnis.com, 2023c).

The Prabowo–Gibran camp countered with organizational and programmatic claims. Nusron Wahid of the national campaign team described himself as a cadre with a structured organizational track record (claiming former leadership roles in PMII, Ansor, and PBNU), while challenging opponents: "Are the NU cadres following Pak Mahfud more or less than those following me?" (Bisnis.com, 2023c). On November 26, 2023, Prabowo visited Langitan; according to Nusron, he was received by 68 senior scholars (kiai sepuh) from the North Coast (Pantura) region, framing the meeting with ulama as a longstanding personal habit rather than a purely electoral maneuver (Bisnis.com, 2023d). On the same day,

grassroots NU kiais (kiai kampung) in Sampang declared their support based on proposed policy programs, including the Endowment Fund for Pesantren (Dana Abadi Pesantren) (Antara Jatim, 2023). Notably, the figure of 68 kiais represented a claim put forth by the campaign team without independent verification.

Khofifah Indar Parawansa occupied a highly contested position. As the General Chairperson of Muslimat NU, she stated in July 2023 that Muslimat's "politics is national in scope, unaligned with any single political party" (CNN Indonesia, 2023). Approaching November, both the Gerindra-Democrat bloc (Prabowo's camp) and PDIP (Ganjar's camp) actively sought her alignment, to which she responded, "I am still the governor. Let me work first..." (Liputan6, 2023b). Cited analysts assessed that her gubernatorial office, leadership role in Muslimat, and strong networks exerted substantial influence across East Java (Liputan6, 2023b). Based on available data at the time, she remained unaligned.

Yenny Wahid declared her support for the Ganjar–Mahfud ticket on October 27, 2023, in Jakarta, citing an "affinity of sentiment" and "closeness of heart," and stated that the "lineage of Gus Dur's cadres" backed the ticket (Kontan, 2023). Previously, on September 6, 2023, she had designated Prabowo as being on her "top list" without explicitly declaring a formal endorsement (Kontan, 2023). The foundation of her claim was genealogical and symbolic, anchored by a network of loyal cadres rather than any official structural office within NU.

Table1 . Sources of legitimacy and their empirical form (position as of end-of-2023)

Figure	Dominant source of legitimacy	Empirical form	Position on data limits
Muhaimin Iskandar	Politics, family pesantren	Chairman of PKB; parent-led Islamic boarding schools; "people know I'm NU"	Vice President Anies Baswedan
Mahfud MD	Islamic boarding school, staff	Education at Madura Islamic boarding schools; visits to Langitan; public reputation	Vice Presidential Candidate Ganjar Pranowo
Nusron Wahid	Organizational, political	History of PMII, Ansor, PBNU (own claim); accompanying the visit to Kiai	Prabowo-Gibran campaign team

Khofifah	Organizational, state department	Chairman of NU Muslimat; Governor of East Java	Not yet on sides, fought over by two camps
Yenny Wahid	Genealogy, symbolic	Gus Dur's daughter; "Gus Dur's cadre"	Supporting Ganjar-Mahfud (Oct 27, 2023)
PBNU (Gus Yahya)	Organizational	Official structure; neutrality claims	Not supporting candidates

This table compiles sources of legitimacy based on the claims recorded. The "genealogical, organizational, pesantren, political, personal" categories of your framework are retained. A single figure can occupy more than one category, so the "dominant" column is the researcher's judgment and should be coded with open rules.

Authority Fragmentation and the Plurality of Political Affiliations

The reality that figures wielding Nahdlatul Ulama and pesantren legitimacy are distributed across various contesting camps indicates that religious authority is no longer concentrated around a single axis. This plurality of affiliations demonstrates how pesantren symbols are competitively mobilized by political actors. This section examines the patterns underlying this distribution through three observations.

First, structural neutrality does not preclude claims; rather, it displaces them outside the formal structure. PBNU's rejection of claims made in the name of NU did not prevent different figures from putting forward their own claims. This tension is evident in the case of Muhaimin. On the one hand, a son of one of NU's co-founders stated that Muhaimin could represent 70 percent of Nahdliyin in East Java (Agus Rahmat, 2023), while on the other hand, PBNU asserted that PKB does not represent NU (Lesmana & Ardiansyah, 2023). Two parties equally rooted in the NU tradition—one genealogically and the other organizationally—offered opposing assessments of the exact same claim. Historical proximity to a community does not automatically confer the authority to represent it.

Second, the claims advanced employ varying and unequal forms of evidence. Muhaimin relies on public recognition and party networks; Mahfud on his educational background and visits to pesantren; Nusron Wahid on organizational hierarchy and the number of kiais who received Prabowo; Yenny Wahid on genealogical heritage; and a group of grassroots kiais (kiai kampung) in Sampang on proposed policy programs. Some of these claims are unverifiable, such as the number of kiais present in Langitan, which represented a figure reported by

the campaign team. Within the framework of representative claims, the success of a claim depends on audience reception (Saward, 2006; Krämer & Schmidtke, 2006); however, pre-election data merely record claims rather than their reception. Consequently, this study cannot conclude whose claim succeeded. What can be demonstrated is that all camps deemed pesantren worthy of serving as a source of legitimacy—an interpretation formulated by the researcher rather than a finding reported by the sources.

Third, this kind of plurality is not unprecedented. In the 2018 East Java Gubernatorial Election, two candidates with NU backgrounds competed and kiai endorsements were divided (Kami, 2018; Sunaryo & Jatiningsih, 2021), and differing political stances among NU ulama have long been documented in the organization's history (Fealy, 2012; Bush, 2009). Voter behavior studies likewise indicate that the influence of religious leaders is not uniform (Liddle & Mujani, 2007; Mahali et al., 2019). What distinguished the 2024 contest was the convergence of these diverse foundational sources of legitimacy—genealogical, organizational, pesantren-based, and partisan—within a single presidential contest.

This reading has its limitations. Sources of legitimacy are more accurately construed as mobilized resources rather than as the root causes of political choices. An actor's position within a specific camp is also shaped by party coalition logics, wherein claims of proximity to NU are utilized to justify those positions. Furthermore, the data in this study are limited to elites and media coverage, leaving unaddressed how kiais and the pesantren community themselves perceive and respond to these claims. Positional fragmentation during the pre-election period is thus interpreted as a contest over the representation of the pesantren community, rather than as evidence of the strength or weakness of kiai authority.

From Political Blocs to a Plural Political Ecosystem

The findings regarding the political dynamics of pesantren in East Java ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election challenge the tendency to treat religious communities as a homogeneous electoral bloc. The sheer number of pesantren and the vast social base of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) indeed position the pesantren network as a significant socio-political force. However, shared religious identity does not automatically generate uniformity in political orientation. Yani et al. (2022), in their study on the political orientation of NU kiais, demonstrate the existence of varying orientations encompassing pragmatic tendencies and orientations more

closely grounded in the idealism of piety. These findings reveal that the political involvement of kiais cannot be explained through a single, monolithic pattern of orientation. Consequently, the socio-religious influence of pesantren must be distinguished from the capacity to produce consolidated electoral support.

This plurality of orientations is related to the diverse sources of authority within the pesantren and NU environment. NU as a formal organization, structural elites, kiais leading pesantren, as well as genealogical and alumni networks, represent interacting actors whose political interests are not always identical. Brown (2019) explains that NU possesses organizational mechanisms for consensus-building, but the existence of such mechanisms does not imply that all actors and networks within it invariably share a uniform political orientation. Meanwhile, the study by Wadipalapa and Budiatri (2025) on the 2024 Presidential Election highlights the role of political strategies and NU's religious brokerage at the organizational leadership level. This perspective is vital for understanding NU's involvement in electoral contestation, yet the organization's official position cannot be automatically assumed to represent all kiais, pesantren, and Nahdliyin members. In this context, religious authority stems not only from formal positions but may also rest upon scholarly reputation, genealogical ties, the ownership of pesantren, and social recognition. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital helps explain how reputation and authority commanding social recognition can serve as sources of legitimacy for actors within social and political arenas.

This diversity of sources of authority renders the identity of NU and pesantren not merely a foundation for solidarity, but also an arena for the contestation of representation. When numerous actors possess socio-religious legitimacy to voice the interests of the same community, claims regarding who holds the rightful mandate to represent that community do not always produce political consensus. In the context of the 2024 Presidential Election, differing affiliations among religious and political elites can be read as an indication that the relationship between collective identity and political orientation operates far more complexly than hierarchical mobilization models suggest.

Nevertheless, divergent elite support cannot be directly equated with divergent voting choices among all santris or Nahdliyin members. Data concerning elite affiliations indicate contestation at the level of actors and networks, rather than the electoral preferences of every individual member of the community. This distinction is crucial to prevent analysis

from falling into ecological fallacy—the error of drawing inferences about individual behavior based on characteristics or patterns at the group or regional level.

On this basis, this article proposes understanding pesantren as part of a plural political ecosystem: a relational space where various actors and networks build legitimacy, forge alliances, and compete in representing community interests. This perspective shifts attention away from the deterministic question of where the santris' votes are directed, toward how political authority and representation are negotiated among actors sharing a common religious identity. Consequently, the influence of pesantren in electoral democracy cannot be adequately understood through the assumption of uniform support; rather, it must be analyzed by paying close attention to the diversity of sources of authority and the dynamics of political relations within the community.

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the political dynamics of pesantren in East Java leading up to the 2024 Presidential Election cannot be explained solely through the assumption that shared religious identity and kiai authority will naturally generate a unified political orientation. The analyzed documents and media reports reveal divergent political positions among actors linked to the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) tradition and pesantren. These findings indicate that, at least at the level of documented elites and political networks, religious authority is not centered around a single actor or institution that monopolizes the political representation of the community. The tension between NU and PKB concretely illustrates this issue. PBNU's assertion that the organization did not endorse any candidate pair and that PKB does not automatically represent NU highlights the boundary between historical-organizational proximity and claims of political representation. Simultaneously, the involvement of other figures and networks possessing genealogical, organizational, pesantren-based, partisan, or personal bases of legitimacy demonstrates that the representation of the NU and pesantren community serves as an arena of contestation. Consequently, the dynamics of the pre-2024 election period pertained not only to differing political affiliations, but also to the competition among actors to secure legitimacy in representing the same community. Analytically, this article offers a perspective that views pesantren not as a homogeneous political bloc, but rather as part of a plural political ecosystem. This perspective directs attention toward the distribution of sources of authority and

the processes through which representative claims are formed among actors sharing a common religious identity. This contribution does not negate the role of kiais, pesantren, or religious organizations in electoral politics, but rather shows that their influence must be understood by accounting for the diversity of positions and inter-actor relations. Thus, the analysis of pesantren politics should not stop at questioning the impact of religious authority on the community, but must also examine how political authority and legitimacy are constructed and contested. This study possesses limitations as it relies on documents and media reports, focusing primarily on positions and actor configurations traceable through public records. This research does not measure the voting preferences of santris or pesantren members and cannot ascertain the extent to which elite positioning was accepted or followed by the grassroots community. Therefore, findings concerning the plurality of affiliations and the contestation of representation cannot be generalized as evidence of political choice fragmentation across the entire pesantren community in East Java. Future research can expand upon this study through interviews with kiais, pesantren administrators, santris, and local political actors to trace how representative claims at the elite level are received, negotiated, or rejected within daily pesantren life.

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