



CAMPAIGNS IN REGIONAL HEAD ELECTIONS AND THE SUPPORT OF KYAI AND SANTRI PESANTREN IN INDONESIA



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Abstract

This research examines the significant role of clerics (*kyai*) and *santri* in mobilizing political support during regional head elections (*pilkada*) and general elections in Indonesia, as well as their broader influence on local political dynamics. Based on an extensive review of literature and previous empirical studies, this research identifies that the political engagement of *kyai* and *pesantren* is largely shaped by cultural patterns embedded in practical politics, such as charismatic leadership, patron – client relationships, and communal obedience to religious figures. In addition, this study analyzes the implications of revisions to campaign regulations in *pesantren* following the Constitutional Court Decision Number 65/PUU – XXI/2023. This ruling permits political campaigns to take place in educational institutions and places of worship under specific legal conditions, thereby altering the normative boundaries between religious spaces and political activities. While the decision aims to ensure equality of political participation and freedom of expression, it also raises critical concerns regarding the potential politicization of religious education. By employing Al – Mawardi's theory of political appropriateness and propriety, this research evaluates whether campaigning in *pesantren* aligns with the ethical foundations of Islamic political thought. According to Al – Mawardi, political actions must be guided by moral considerations and the public good (*maslahah*), rather than short – term political interests. The findings suggest that although campaigns in *pesantren* are legally permissible, they are ethically questionable. Consequently, this study argues that political campaigns in *pesantren* should be avoided to preserve the sanctity of religious education and to prevent the encroachment of partisan politics into educational and spiritual domains.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji peran penting para ulama (*kyai*) dan *santri* dalam memobilisasi dukungan politik pada pemilihan kepala daerah (*pilkada*) dan pemilihan umum di Indonesia, serta pengaruhnya yang lebih luas terhadap dinamika politik lokal. Berdasarkan telaah literatur yang mendalam dan studi-studi empiris sebelumnya, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi bahwa keterlibatan politik *kyai* dan *pesantren* sebagian besar dibentuk oleh pola-pola kultural yang melekat dalam praktik politik, seperti kepemimpinan karismatik, relasi patron–klien, dan kepatuhan komunal terhadap figur-figur keagamaan. Selain itu, penelitian ini menganalisis implikasi perubahan regulasi kampanye di *pesantren* pasca Putusan Mahkamah Konstitusi Nomor 65/PUU-XXI/2023. Putusan tersebut memperbolehkan pelaksanaan kampanye politik di lembaga pendidikan dan tempat ibadah dengan persyaratan hukum tertentu, sehingga mengubah batas-batas normatif antara ruang keagamaan dan aktivitas politik. Meskipun putusan ini bertujuan untuk menjamin kesetaraan partisipasi politik dan kebebasan berekspresi, kebijakan tersebut juga memunculkan kekhawatiran serius terkait potensi politisasi pendidikan keagamaan. Dengan menggunakan teori kepatutan dan kelayakan politik Al-Mawardi, penelitian ini mengevaluasi apakah praktik kampanye di *pesantren* selaras dengan landasan etika pemikiran politik Islam. Menurut Al-Mawardi, tindakan politik harus diarahkan oleh pertimbangan moral dan kemaslahatan umum (*maslahah*), bukan oleh kepentingan politik jangka pendek.



Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun kampanye di pesantren diperbolehkan secara hukum, praktik tersebut tetap problematis secara etis. Oleh karena itu, penelitian ini berargumen bahwa kampanye politik di pesantren sebaiknya dihindari demi menjaga kesakralan pendidikan keagamaan serta mencegah masuknya politik partisan ke dalam ranah pendidikan dan spiritual.

INTRDUCTION

The role of the kyai as a pesantren leader has made him a respected figure and a cultural pillar within political parties. Similarly, the role of santri in regional elections has been to build political support for certain candidates.(Syam, 2010) Thus, it is government policy that will determine the course of democracy in Indonesia, by providing policies and restrictions for contestants and their campaign teams during the campaign process.

Based on Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023, election participants are permitted to campaign in government facilities and educational institutions such as schools and campuses. In the decision, the panel of judges stated that the explanation of Article 280 paragraph (1) letter h of Law -Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections, insofar as the phrase "Government facilities, places of worship, and educational institutions may be used if election participants are present without election campaign attributes at the invitation of the party responsible for the government facilities, places of worship, and educational institutions" is contrary to the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia and has no binding legal force. Furthermore, the panel of judges declared that Article 280 paragraph 1 letter h of Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections is contrary to the Constitution and has no binding legal force insofar as it is not interpreted as "excluding government facilities and educational institutions as long as permission is obtained from the person in charge of the place in question and they are present without election campaign attributes." (Muhsonati 2024)

In the context of campaigns in Islamic boarding school areas, campaign rules are strictly regulated based on Law No. 7 of 2017 concerning Elections. Article 280 of this law explicitly prohibits the use of places of worship, including Islamic boarding schools or educational institutions, as campaign locations.(Razi 2025) However, Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023 allows campaigning in educational institutions on the condition that no campaign materials or attributes are brought in. The Constitutional Court's decision aims to limit campaign activities in the world of education so as not to cause and prevent misleading information.(Daipon et al. 2024)

Kyai, as figures of moral and religious authority, often serve as role models for santri in determining their political choices, even though no formal campaigns are conducted in pesantren environments. Thus, even though direct campaigning in Islamic boarding schools is prohibited by Law No. 7 of 2017, cultural political influence

still occurs through moral messages conveyed by kyai, which can influence santri's political preferences without violating formal campaign rules. This occurs because the influence of kyai is also reflected in the voting patterns of santri, where many santri tend to follow the directions and guidance of kyai in determining their political choices, given the role of kyai as religious and moral authority figures. (Muhsonati, 2023)

As in previous research by H. Sadi entitled *Kiai and politics: peeking into the motives of NU (Nahdlatul Ulama) Kiai in the 2009 elections in Glenmore, Banyuwangi Regency*. In this article, H. Sadi argues that the lack of agreement on the importance of Kyai involvement in politics has created differences of opinion among them. Some Kyai believe that the role of Kyai in politics is necessary to fight for Ahlusunnah Wal Jamaah Islam through the corridors of power. However, there are also Kyai who argue that they should not be involved in politics, especially practical politics, because by not engaging in politics, Kyai are freer to spread Islamic teachings without being limited by political party interests. These differences in opinion are caused by differences in the Kyai's understanding and motivation in responding to political dynamics, the Kyai's character in dealing with politics, and their social interactions with their surroundings. (Asriadi, Yusa' Farchan, and Wiyono 2025)

Although there are differing views regarding Kyai's involvement in politics, in reality Kyai have always been present and played a role in every change of era and community issue, so that indirectly they have always been in contact with the world of politics, based on his research in Glenmore District, Banyuwangi. Kyai's involvement in politics is driven by various motives, such as religious doctrine, power, social and economic factors. However, the most dominant motive is pragmatism. (M. Alkaf, Muhammad Said, and Saiful Hakam 2022)

Research by Nurfaizin entitled *NU in Local Political Dynamics: A Case Study of the 2010 Regional Head Elections in Sumenep Regency*. In his research, Nurfaizin argues that, in general, NU plays a significant role in local politics in Sumenep Regency even though structurally NU is not involved in practical politics. NU members, both as candidates and voters, play a direct role in the political constellation of the region. The influence of NU clerics in maintaining social stability and providing guidance to the community, especially during regional head elections, has proven effective in preventing potential conflicts. Despite the significant influence of NU clerics, the people of Sumenep have also shown increased rationality in choosing their leaders. Some voters do not even fully follow the kyai's call to support certain candidates, indicating a shift towards more pragmatic and rational voters. Even so, the cultural power of NU remains a strong foundation for political decision-making in the region. The political education provided by NU culturally, supported by emotional social relationships with the community, creates a holistic and harmonious political environment. The community's positive view of NU's political role is influenced by

the accommodating attitude of NU elites. This shows that even though it is not directly involved in practical politics, NU is still respected and relied upon as a moral political force in Sumenep Regency. (Benyamin and Al-Fatih 2023)

H. Sadi and Nurfaizin's research examined NU clerics in politics in two regions, namely Glenmore Banyuwangi and Sumenep. In his research, H. Sadi stated that there was no agreement among NU clerics regarding involvement in politics. Some *kyai* believe that a political role is important in order to promote the teachings of Ahlusunnah Wal Jamaah Islam through power, while others feel it is better not to be involved in practical politics so that they are freer to spread religious teachings. On the other hand, Nurfaizin's research reveals that although structurally NU is not involved in practical politics, NU members play an important role in local politics in Sumenep Regency. The influence of NU clerics is very significant in maintaining social stability during regional head elections, preventing potential conflicts, and providing guidance to the community. While the influence of clerics remains strong, voters in Sumenep show an increase in rationality and do not fully follow the political directives of clerics, reflecting a shift towards more pragmatic voters. (Lestari, Hakim, and Aminudin 2024)

Overall, both studies highlight the important role of *kyai* in local politics, both in Glenmore and Sumenep. Although there are differences of opinion regarding the necessity of *kyai* involvement in politics, cultural and moral authority remains an important foundation for political decision-making. In the context of Sumenep, even though the community is becoming more rational, positive views of *kyai* remain intact due to their accommodating and harmonious approach in fostering socio-political relations.

The objective of this research is to comprehensively examine the role of *kyai* and *santri* within pesantren in increasing vote acquisition and consolidating political support for regional head candidates in local elections, particularly by analyzing the mechanisms through which religious authority, charismatic leadership, social networks, and long-standing cultural relations influence voter behavior and local political alignments. This study seeks to explore how pesantren function as strategic social institutions in electoral mobilization, as well as how the moral legitimacy of *kyai* and the collective identity of *santri* contribute to shaping political preferences at the grassroots level. Furthermore, this research aims to critically analyze the legal framework governing political campaigns in pesantren and its implications for electoral practices, with specific reference to Law Number 7 of 2017 on General Elections and the Constitutional Court Decision Number 65/PUU-XXI/2023. Through this analysis, the study evaluates the extent to which the permissibility of campaigning in pesantren affects institutional neutrality, ethical boundaries, and the educational and moral functions of pesantren, while also assessing the broader consequences of such regulations for democratic governance and the relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia.

METHODS

This research method is a qualitative literature study that explains the support of Islamic boarding school leaders and students in increasing the support base for the 2024 general and regional elections. This type of research is a literature review that discusses regional election regulations and campaign regulations in Islamic boarding schools. The approach used is a legal regulation that discusses Law No. 7 of 2017 concerning Elections and Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023, and a conceptual approach using political typology theory, appropriateness theory, and propriety. The data collection method used was documentary study, and the data analysis technique used was descriptive analysis.(Nugraha and Mukti 2023)

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The role of Kyai and Santri in increasing votes and support for Regional Head Candidates in Regional Elections

In the context of regional elections, there are often differences of opinion and support for the candidates, giving rise to debates among groups. One such debate concerns the participation of Islamic boarding school students and teachers in politics, with opinions divided. Some consider it normal, while others view it as a violation of the function of Islamic boarding schools as independent educational institutions. The interest of Muslims in political parties is not only due to the parties' ability to defend the interests of Muslims.(Danugroho 2024)

The tendency to support certain candidates in every regional election or general election is normal. There are several factors that influence the political relationship between kyai and santri in elections. First, there is a difference in the level of political understanding between kyai and santri, where kyai and santri tend to view politics based on information obtained from the media and pesantren networks. The mass media often shows bias towards certain candidates. Second, kyai and santri have the same interests in supporting certain candidates. Third, there is a shared principle in practicing politics based on the concept of mabadi khaira ummah. These three factors enable kyai and santri to influence each other's political choices in elections.(Masruri, Sobari, and Tawwakal 2019)

According to Cipta, there are three types of Muslims who view political relations in Islam, namely: the ideological type, the charismatic type, and the rational type. In the Ideological typology, engaging in politics is equivalent to defending Islam, so choosing to engage in politics and obeying politics is also obedience to Islam. The Charismatic typology is where Muslims choose a political party based on the behavior of a figure they admire. And the Rational typology is where Muslims choose a political party purely based on rational views, looking at the party's ability to offer a work program that is in line with the fate of the people.(Perundang-undangan and Mutiasari 2022)

Currently, the majority of Muslims tend to fall into the first and second typologies rather than the third. Therefore, when Muslims see that politics is part of religion, this will trigger the emergence of religious leaders as political figures. Issues related to political interests are no longer handled only by professional politicians, but also by clerics and Islamic boarding school leaders who feel they have greater religious authority and influence over the people they lead. The involvement of Islamic boarding schools in politics essentially reinforces this view. (Aruni and Armanda 2025)

The orientation of the Kyai in entering the political world is based on efforts to uphold *amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahy an al-munkar*. This concept is broadly understood as a form of supervision and evaluation of social and political policies and practices. For the Kyai, this concept is very important because they see that many aspects of the social and political order are not in accordance with religious values, so intervention is needed to bring them into line with religious teachings. (Al 2023)

In the field of politics and government, there are principles and foundations, namely the principles in the Qur'an with the aim of achieving a religious society that believes in One God, and within it there is unity, brotherhood, equality, deliberation, and justice. The Qur'an is known for the phrase "inviting to goodness and rejecting evil." The principles used in the realization of such a society are the principles of implementation, namely a just and democratic government (deliberation) and a dynamic government organization. (Lavan et al. 2021)

The 2024 elections will see the return of Islamic boarding schools' involvement in politics, particularly in the presidential and vice-presidential elections. Surokim Abdussalam, a political observer from Trunojoyo University (Unijoyo) Madura, said that the 2024 presidential election will be an arena for competing for the votes of Islamic boarding school students and institutions. There are many reasons why Islamic boarding schools are attractive in the upcoming presidential election. According to Surokim, Islamic boarding schools reflect the power of Nahdlatul Ulama, which has 110 million active voters throughout Indonesia, most of whom are in East Java. East Java is geopolitically an important part of the national political spectrum, after DKI Jakarta, and ranks second after West Java in terms of the number of voters, with a national vote contribution of 16 percent. (HamdiR and Soros Setiawan Day 2024) This province is also the political base of the Nahdlatul Ulama' clerics, rich in Nahdliyin culture, and is where Nahdlatul Ulama' itself was founded. Surokim stated that 70 percent of voters in East Java are Nahdlatul Ulama members, the majority of whom are santri (Islamic boarding school students), alumni, and kyai (Islamic boarding school leaders). They have stronger political tendencies than voters in Central Java and West Java. Therefore, several presidential and vice presidential candidates who visit East Java tend to pay their respects to the kyai and visit Islamic boarding schools. (Jannah & Jauhari, 2024)

The role and position of kyai in the dynamics of national politics can be understood through two conflicting dimensions. First, as central figures in Islamic educational institutions, kyai are expected to maintain their distance from power. In a multiparty democratic system, this is important to avoid bias that could lead to polarization, so that the kyai's position as a role model is not eroded. Ideally, kyai should stand above all political forces without taking sides. However, there is also a second view that encourages kyai to participate in politics, especially in the context of high politics, so that they can act as guardians of morality, character, and ethics in politics. (Dani & Khoiri, 2020)

The role of kyai in local politics shows a balance between their cultural and moral influence and the dynamics of political change at the community level. Although there are differences of opinion about the importance of involvement in practical politics, the cultural power of Islamic boarding schools as guardians of social values remains strong and respected. At the same time, communities in pesantren environments are also showing progress in understanding politics more pragmatically, prioritizing rational interests in choosing leaders without abandoning their religious and cultural identities. (Haliza Rizqica Fadillah et al. 2024)

Implementation of Campaign Regulations and Their Impact on Islamic Boarding Schools Based on Law No. 7 of 2017 on Elections and Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023

Election campaigns serve as political education for the public and must be conducted responsibly. This responsibility includes avoiding harm or injustice to other election participants. Prohibiting campaigns in educational institutions is not considered a restriction of the fundamental rights of election participants. The Court upheld the provisions of Article 280 paragraph 1 letter h, which prohibits campaigning in government facilities, places of worship, and educational institutions. While emphasizing the exceptions stipulated in Law No. 7 of 2017 as a separate norm. The purpose of combining these exemption provisions is to provide legal certainty in law enforcement against election violations. In the context of scientific activities in the field of education, socialization by election participants should be carried out without campaign attributes. (Santoso et al., 2023)

Islamic boarding schools possess a wealth of social knowledge that can be studied from various scientific perspectives. This influence can be seen in the attention given by various political forces, both political parties and politicians, who often visit influential Islamic boarding schools in various regions to gain political support. Since the reform era, which was marked by democratization and political openness, the political role of santri has become increasingly prominent. Abdurrahman Wahid, a santri leader, successfully became the fifth president of Indonesia, signifying the political awakening among santri. (Muhammad Mutawalli Mukhlis 2024)

Regional head candidates often visit Islamic boarding schools to ask for blessings and to gain the support of thousands of clerics and students. According to Radar Kediri Jawa Pos, East Java gubernatorial candidate Khofifah Indar Parawansa visited the Ploso Kediri Islamic boarding school, specifically the residence of KH Nurul Huda Djazuli. Khofifah was prayed for to become the Governor of East Java for a second term. (Radar Kediri.com) As reported by Kompas TV, the candidate for Governor of Central Java, Ahmad Luthfi, also visited the As-Shodiqiyah Islamic boarding school on the first day of his campaign. Accompanied by the former Governor of Central Java, Bibit Waluyo, Ahmad Luthfi conveyed his vision and mission if he were to be elected as Governor of Central Java. At the end of the campaign, Ahmad Luthfi asked for blessings to lead the people of Central Java. (Kompas TV) Not only the gubernatorial candidate, as reported by Kompas TV, the presidential and vice presidential candidate pair number 1, Anies Baswedan and Muhaimin Iskandar, concluded their campaign tour on the island of Madura in Bangkalan Regency. The final campaign event was held at the Syaikhona Kholil Islamic boarding school in Demangan Bangkalan, where the pair had previously visited the Raudlatul Muta'allimin Al-Aziziyah Islamic boarding school in Bangkalan. (Zahro and Saputri 2024)

Candidates for regional head who will contest in the 2024 regional elections, by visiting religious leaders, have indirectly conducted campaigning as stipulated in Article 1 of Election Law No. 7 of 2017, which states that campaigning is conducted by election candidates and their supporters by presenting their vision and mission. Furthermore, Article 280 paragraph (1) letter h above confirms that every election organizer, participant, and campaign team is prohibited from using government facilities, places of worship, and educational institutions for campaign purposes without exception. (Pinem and Harahap 2025)

However, the ban was revised by Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023, which amended Article 280 paragraph (1) letter h to allow election campaigning in educational institutions and places of worship on the condition that no political party attributes are brought. No violations were found to have been committed by the candidates during the campaign or visit. Candidate pair No. 1, Anis Muhaimin, did not bring any campaign attributes during his visit. East Java gubernatorial candidate Khofifah Indar Parawansa visited to ask for blessings, while Central Java gubernatorial candidate Ahmad Luthfi conducted a social gathering and presented his vision and mission at an Islamic boarding school without bringing any campaign attributes. Therefore, the candidates did not violate the provisions of Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023. (Shara Pova, Melitasia, and Suriyanti 2023)

Based on Ahmadudin Rojab's research entitled Analysis of Constitutional Court Decision Number 65/PUU/XXI/2023 Regarding Campaigning in Educational

Facilities. In his research, Rojab argues that this decision is difficult to implement. Nevertheless, campaigning in educational institutions should be avoided because it relates to human rights guaranteed by the constitution. Campaigning is part of the right to freedom of expression, which is a derogable right, so educational areas should be considered sacred and should not be used as arenas for practical politics. If campaigning must still be carried out, the emphasis must be placed on political education. (Razi 2025). This contradicts Al Mawardi, who said that religion serves as a shield of propriety and decency. According to Al Mawardi, there are six basic principles of propriety and decency: 1) religion as a guide for life; 2) fair and wise leaders; 3) justice creates peace; 4) inner peace brings inner tranquility; 5) Fertile land to meet the needs of life. 6) The availability of facilities and infrastructure. (Shara Pova, Melitasia, and Suriyanti 2023)

Based on the opinion expressed by Al Mawardi, a Muslim scholar, the political appropriateness and propriety of regional head candidates who engage in political maneuvers by visiting Islamic boarding school leaders and students must be guided by: 1) religious teachings that uphold morals and ethics in behavior. 2) Having a fair and wise attitude in dealing with issues. 3) Candidates for regional head who campaign must create peace, without dividing religious communities. 4) Maintain mutual respect and tolerance. 5) Elected candidates for regional head should meet the needs of the community. 6) Leaders must be able to provide the facilities and infrastructure needed by the community. (Syam 2018)

The Indonesian House of Representatives and the Islamic Boarding School Development Association (P3M) reject the use of Islamic boarding schools as political campaign locations, even though the Constitutional Court has allowed educational facilities, including Islamic boarding schools, to be used as campaign locations ahead of the 2024 elections. Educational institutions are said to have to remain neutral from practical politics. According to Dr. H. Tb. Ace Hasan Syadzili, M.Si, educational institutions such as Islamic boarding schools are institutions that should maintain neutrality in the 2024 elections, both in the presidential and legislative elections. He stated that Islamic boarding schools have long been institutions rooted in the community, consistently promoting religious values that are a blessing for all humanity. Therefore, Islamic boarding schools should prioritize national politics, not be used as campaign venues.

Thus, campaign rules in educational environments, particularly Islamic boarding schools, based on Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023, are permitted on the condition that they do not involve political party symbols and campaign symbols, when viewed from Al Mawardi's theory of political propriety and appropriateness. campaigning in Islamic boarding schools involving clerics and students is inappropriate if it has the potential to divide the community, because

Islamic boarding schools are religious institutions that uphold morals and ethics, not tools for political purposes.

CONCLUSION

The role of kyai and santri in local politics shows a balance between their cultural and moral influence and the dynamics of political change at the community level. Although there are differences of opinion about the importance of involvement in practical politics, communities in pesantren environments are also showing progress in understanding politics more pragmatically, prioritizing rational interests in choosing leaders without abandoning their religious and cultural identities.

Campaign Rules and Their Impact on Islamic Boarding Schools Based on Law No. 7 of 2017 on Elections and Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023. Thus, campaign rules in educational environments, especially Islamic boarding schools, are permitted based on Constitutional Court Decision No. 65/PUU-XXI/2023, provided that they do not involve political party symbols or campaign symbols. When viewed from Al Mawardi's theory of political propriety and appropriateness, campaigning in Islamic boarding schools involving clerics and students is inappropriate because Islamic boarding schools are religious institutions that uphold morals and ethics, not tools for politics. As a suggestion, regional head candidates who ask for prayers and support from clerics and students should not engage in political campaigning to avoid dividing religious communities.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Nurul Lailatul was responsible for designing the research framework, writing the introduction and background. Dewi Iriani conducted the literature review and methodology. Aisyah contributed to data analysis, interpretation of findings, and completion of the manuscript. Martha Eri Safira provided revisions to the manuscript structure. Nahrowi ensured compliance with academic standards. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

This article has no conflicts of interest.

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