THE POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT OF KIAI IN THE EYES OF GUS/LORA IN BONDOWOSO, EAST JAVA

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji persepsi Lora dan Gus terkait keterlibatan kiai dan pesantren dalam politik praktis. Dengan menggunakan perspektif teori konstruksi sosial dan teori persepsi, penelitian ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana keterlibatan politik kiai ditafsirkan dalam interaksi sosial sehari-hari serta relasi otoritas keagamaan di masyarakat lokal. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui observasi dan wawancara mendalam untuk memahami perbedaan pandangan yang dibentuk oleh konteks sosial-budaya, pengalaman pribadi, dan dinamika politik. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa persepsi terbagi ke dalam orientasi positif dan negatif. Persepsi positif terdiri atas penerimaan pasif dan dukungan aktif terhadap partisipasi politik kiai, sedangkan persepsi negatif muncul dalam bentuk konfrontatif dan akomodatif. Persepsi-persepsi tersebut dipengaruhi oleh pertimbangan teologis, relasi sosiologis, ikatan emosional, kepentingan ekonomi, serta kompetisi antar-kiai. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa keterlibatan politik kiai menghasilkan integrasi sekaligus disintegrasi sosial, sekaligus membuka partisipasi politik dan melahirkan negosiasi baru otoritas keagamaan dalam politik lokal kontemporer

Kata Kunci: Kiai, Keterlibatan Politik, Gus/Lora dan Persepsi

Abstract

This study examines Lora's and Gus's perceptions of the involvement of kiai and pesantren in practical politics. Drawing on social construction theory and perception theory, the research explores how the political involvement of kiai is interpreted within everyday social interactions and within religious authority relations in local society. The study employs a qualitative approach through observation and in-depth interviews to understand differing viewpoints shaped by socio-cultural context, personal experience, and political dynamics. Findings reveal that perceptions are divided into positive and negative orientations. Positive perceptions consist of passive acceptance and active support for

kiai participation in politics, while negative perceptions appear in confrontational and accommodative forms. Theological considerations, sociological relations, emotional bonds, economic interests, and inter-kiai competition influence these perceptions. The study concludes that political engagement of kiai produces both social integration and disintegration, while simultaneously opening political participation and generating new negotiations of religious authority in contemporary local politics.

INTRODUCTION

The political processes and dynamics that have unfolded in Indonesia over the past decade have created new spaces for kiai to express themselves, particularly in the sphere of political participation. As religious authorities, kiai occupy a significant position in shaping social values and norms, a role that inevitably extends into the political domain. Although historical records, especially during the struggle for Indonesian independence, recognize kiai as key actors in the nationalist movement, the consolidation of power during the New Order regime, characterized by a dominant political structure, substantially narrowed the political space available to kiai. Their political expression became constrained and, in many cases, marginalized to the point of exclusion from formal political systems.

Academic scholarship examining the political role of *kiai* has likewise remained relatively limited when compared to studies emphasizing their socio-cultural roles, such as the works of Clifford Geertz and Zamakhsyari Dhofier.[1] While these scholars addressed patterns of *kiai* leadership within pesantren and Islamic communities, they did not specifically explore the correlation between religious leadership and practical politics. This contrasts with post-Reformasi studies conducted by

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[1] Lihat, Cliffort Geertz The Javanese Kiai,The Changing Role of Cultural Broker, dalam Comparative Studes in Society and History, 250-256; Zamakshari Dhofier,Tradisi Pesantren,(Jakarta: LP3ES,1982)

Ali Maschan Moesa[2], Nur Syam[3], Masdar Hilmy[4], and M. Syaeful Bahar,[5] whose research more explicitly reveals the involvement of *kiai* in Indonesia's socio-political landscape.

The limited academic attention to kiai political participation is closely linked to the political environment of the New Order era, during which many kiai deliberately kept their distance from politics. During this period, pesantren communities often felt uneasy when approached by politicians, particularly those affiliated with the ruling regime. Political association was perceived as disruptive, as linking a pesantren to political interests risked undermining its religious authority and social legitimacy.

Beyond mere discomfort, kiai were fully aware that political alignment, especially affiliation with the New Order regime, could carry serious consequences, including the loss of students and social isolation from other pesantren networks. Under a hegemonic and often repressive political system, the New Order government struggled to gain broad public sympathy, and this negative perception extended to individuals or institutions closely associated with it. Empirical evidence showed that several pesantren experienced declines in both the quantity and quality of students as a result of their kiai's political affiliation with Golkar, the regime's principal political vehicle.

This "political allergy" among *kiai* and pesantren began to change during the Reformasi period. Democratic openness created wider opportunities for political expression, enabling pesantren and *kiai* to engage more openly with political processes. Consequently, their relationship with political power also shifted. Whereas *kiai* previously tended to maintain distance or adopt oppositional positions, many began to approach political

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[2] Ali Maschan *Moesa,Nasionalisme Kiai;Konstruksi Sosial Berbasis Agama* (Joga jakarta: LKiS,2007)

[3] Nur *Syam,Pembangkangan kaum* Tarekat,(Surabaya: LEPKISS,2004)

[4] Masdar Hilmy, Peran *Agama dalam Tranformasi* Politik (Surabaya: Lemlit IAIN SA, 2002)

[5] Moh Syaeful *Bahar,Implikasi Konflik Politik Kiai terhadap Disintegrasi Sosial Masyarakat:Studi pada Pemilu 2004 di Kabupaten Bondowoso,* (Surabaya: Lemlit IAIN SA, 2006)

power more directly. In some cases, *kiai* or their students entered political institutions and became part of governing circles representing pesantren interests.

As a result, scholarly attention has increasingly focused on examining kiai involvement in politics. Nevertheless, existing research on pesantren political elites remains largely centered on the figure of the kiai alone. Studies examining Lora and Gus, the sons and potential successors of kiai, as significant political actors within pesantren remain scarce. Yet, as institutional entities, pesantren leadership does not rest solely on the kiai; it is embedded within broader relational networks involving multiple actors.

Accordingly, this study focuses on differences in perception among *kiai*'s sons (*Lora* and *Gus*) regarding the involvement of pesantren and *kiai* in practical politics. Debates concerning the political engagement of *kiai* and pesantren also occur at the level of each institution. As prospective successors to religious and social leadership, *Gus* and *Lora* inevitably deliberate on how pesantren should be positioned within contemporary social and political systems.

Referring to the analysis of Endang Turmudi, at least three major factors influence patterns of *kiai* leadership[6]. First, the emergence of a younger generation of santri characterized by modern and progressive orientations. This group possesses greater courage and intellectual capacity to critique and evaluate the socio-political behavior of *kiai*, thereby potentially challenging traditional sources of religious legitimacy. Second, the rapid growth of an educated Muslim middle class, which indirectly competes with *kiai* in producing religious authority and legitimacy. Third, the expanding role of the state in providing services and institutional support for Muslim communities in Indonesia.

However, Turmudi's framework has not sufficiently addressed how *Gus* and *Lora* perceive, position themselves, and respond to these transformations within increasingly educated and critical Muslim societies. In fact, the presence of *Gus* and *Lora* remains central to the historical

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[6] Endang Turmudzi,Perselingkuhan Kiai dan Kekuasaan,(Jogjakarta: LKiS, 2003), 3-4

continuity of pesantren leadership. Within pesantren tradition, regardless of individual capability, they are commonly regarded as the legitimate heirs to institutional leadership. Based on this elaboration, the present study seeks specifically to investigate how *Gus* and *Lora* perceive the socio-political roles undertaken by *kiai* and pesantren. It is expected that this research will provide an in-depth understanding of how emerging pesantren elites interpret and negotiate the socio-political positioning of *kiai* and pesantren in contemporary Indonesia.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach rooted in the phenomenological tradition. This design is chosen to capture the "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt) of the informants, specifically how Gus and Lora as emerging religious elites experience and assign meaning to the political involvement of their families and institutions. Following the theoretical framework of Social Construction, the research focuses on the dialectical process of externalization, objectification, and internalization of political reality within the pesantren environment.

The research was conducted in Bondowoso, East Java, a region characterized by a strong santri culture and a complex "Tapal Kuda" (Horseshoe) political landscape. The primary informants consist identified as Gus or Lora (biological sons and potential successors of Kiai) from various pesantren backgrounds, ranging from traditionalist (salaf) to modern-oriented institutions. Informants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they possess direct experience with local political dynamics, such as elections (Pilkada) or party affiliations.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Diskursus Teoretik

To uncover the perceptions of *Gus* or *Lora* regarding the role and political involvement of *kiai*, phenomenology is employed as the theoretical framework in this study. The central assumption of phenomenological theory is to understand consciousness as it is experienced from the first-person point of view. Therefore, the effort pursued through questions developed within this theoretical perspective consistently seeks to

accommodate the subjective viewpoints of the individuals concerned. From this understanding emerges the primary distinction between phenomenology and scientific approaches that emphasize brain and neural processes (neuroscience). While neuroscience stresses results derived from the observer's standpoint and treats consciousness as a biological phenomenon, phenomenology adopts a different position.

Phenomenology views human experience from the perspective of first-person experience. This means that phenomenology does not merely stop at sensory explanations that can easily be captured and described. Rather, it continuously seeks to explain deeper dimensions beyond sensory experience alone. Sensory experience serves only as an entry point and starting position toward achieving conceptual meaning. Such conceptual meaning may take the form of imagination, thought, desire, or specific feelings experienced by subjects as they encounter their personal world.

The concept of meaning constitutes the key to understanding this theory, because meaning represents the essential content of consciousness constructed by human beings. For example, the experiences of a *Lora* and a *Gus* may appear similar—such as accompanying their parents (*kiai*) in social activities—yet the implications of meaning derived from these experiences will differ. Some may interpret the experience as having value A, while others may assign value B. Meaning differentiates one experience from another. An experience becomes part of consciousness precisely because individuals interpret it. Only through the act of meaning-making can human consciousness encounter the world as an organized structure of everything surrounding it. From this perspective emerges the understanding that observable phenomena are reflections of a reality that does not stand independently, since what appears is an object filled with meaning and transcendental significance.

The phenomenology developed by Edmund Husserl establishes a strong distinction from approaches commonly used in the natural sciences. Phenomenology appears to challenge biological–mechanistic explanations of consciousness characteristic of positivistic approaches. One important implication of this difference is that observations or findings produced

through phenomenological inquiry cannot be generalized in the same manner as results typically found in positivistic psychological approaches.

Two principal assumptions underlie this theory.[7] First, every human experience constitutes an expression of consciousness. Second, every form of consciousness is always consciousness *of* something. For example, when an individual thinks about a magnificent building, an image of such a building simultaneously emerges within that person's mind. Husserl refers to this as intentionality, meaning that consciousness is always directed toward something.

Every human action necessarily involves consciousness, and consciousness is always oriented toward a clearly existing and real object. Objects constituted within human consciousness never exist in an empty space; rather, they exist within spaces filled with meaning. The relationship between the conscious subject, the object, and action occurs within a living space of meaning. This *lifeworld* becomes the arena in which human beings interact familiarly in everyday life. Within this lifeworld, individuals obtain meaning and construct their identities.

Through the analysis of the lifeworld emerge the concepts of the subjective, intersubjective, and objective, all of which represent further domains within phenomenological inquiry. The subjective refers to personal experience as lived by individuals; the objective refers to the surrounding world that exists relatively permanently in space and time; and the intersubjective refers to the shared worldview formed by individuals participating in social activities within the lifeworld.

In its development, phenomenology has been applied across increasingly diverse disciplines of analysis. Within sociology, social construction theory represents one theoretical perspective that emerged from the philosophical foundation of phenomenology and is also employed in this study.

Social construction theory can be understood as a continuation of phenomenological approaches and theories, emerging as a counter-

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[7] Malcolm Watrs, Modern Sociological Theory, (London: Sage Publication, 1994).

perspective to the social facts paradigm, particularly that proposed by Émile Durkheim. A major figure associated with this perspective is Max Weber, alongside other influential thinkers such as Husserl and Alfred Schutz. In research aimed at uncovering meaning—such as studies of perception—the use of this theoretical approach becomes highly relevant. Social construction refers to the process through which knowledge and social reality are formed through symbolic interaction. Thus, human perception creates reality. Reality, therefore, can be understood as the product of human creativity through the power of social construction in shaping the social world.

In strengthening this theoretical framework, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann assume that human beings and society are dialectical, dynamic, and plural products that continuously evolve[8]. In the subsequent process, according to Berger, reality is formed in three principal forms: dialectical reality, in which thesis, antithesis, and synthesis interact; symbolic reality; and subjective reality.

The dialectical process unfolds through several stages. The first stage is externalization, namely the effort through which human beings express or project themselves into the world, both through mental and physical activities. The second stage is objectification, a moment within the dialectical process of reality formation in which objective reality becomes bounded and undergoes institutionalization. The third stage is internalization, a process through which individuals define themselves in relation to social institutions or organizations within which they exist[9].

The essence of dialectics in the formation of social reality lies in the understanding that social reality is produced through human actions and interactions. The construction of social reality represents a dialectical process in which human beings simultaneously act as creators and products of their social life. The distinctive human capacity to internalize and

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[8] Robert Wuthnow,Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L.Berger (New York: Routlegde and Keegan paul,1987).

[9] Frans M.Parera,"Menyingkap Misteri Manusia Sebagai Homo Faber", Pengantar dalam Peter L.Berger dan Thomas Luckman, Tafsir Sosial atas Kenyataan, (Jakarta: LP3ES, 1990), xx.

objectify subjective meanings, experiences, and actions within themselves gives rise to this dialectical process.

The dialectical process originates from everyday life realities that are accepted as knowledge guiding individual behavior in daily life, such as values, norms, and sets of rules that eventually function as knowledge directing human social interaction. The foundation of everyday knowledge consists of objectifications derived from subjective processes and meanings through which an intersubjective common-sense world is formed. Intersubjectivity itself emerges from individual experiences due to the relevance of one experience to another, such as habits, customs, manners, and similar social practices. Ultimately, according to Berger, reality is neither scientifically predetermined nor something that exists solely by divine will; rather, reality is formed and socially constructed.

At the level of application, this theory views human beings as entities that continuously grow and develop; therefore, they constantly learn and create in order to sustain their existence. These efforts to maintain existence enable human beings to construct social order. Social order, therefore, represents an intelligent human product arising from the creation of anthropological rules governing collective life.

Human beings and society as objective reality require institutionalization. The institutionalization process begins with repeated externalization, which produces habitualization. Habitualization leads to sedimentation and tradition. These sedimented traditions are subsequently transmitted to later generations. At this stage, institutional order plays an important role, including the traditionalization and inheritance of accumulated experiences.

Society as objective reality also implies the presence of legitimacy. Legitimacy represents a second-order objectification of meaning and constitutes knowledge possessing both cognitive and normative dimensions. Legitimacy functions to render already institutionalized objectifications subjectively reasonable and acceptable.

Several considerations underlie the selection of social construction theory to understand differences in perception between *Lora* and *Gus*

regarding the involvement or socio-political role of *kiai*. First, the reality explored through observation and in-depth interviews concerns social actions manifested in everyday activities, such as active participation in political parties, serving as administrators within Nahdlatul Ulama, acting as religious preachers for political party interests, or delivering religious sermons entirely detached from practical political agendas. Second, this study emphasizes understanding the underlying factors shaping differences in perception between *Lora* and *Gus* concerning the relationship between Islam and politics in general, and between *kiai* and politics in particular.

Third, individual actions are often shaped by the contexts within which those actions occur, and interpretations of such actions are therefore inseparable from their contextual settings. In this regard, social action is understood within the framework of place and time. Fourth, individuals possess freedom in performing actions, even while confronting socio-cultural, religious, and political structures. Differences in perception between *Lora* and *Gus* regarding *kiai* involvement in practical politics represent one manifestation of this individual freedom of will. It is not uncommon for a *Gus* or *Lora* whose parent is politically active to disagree with that political choice and consequently distance themselves from practical politics, or conversely, to follow a similar political path.

Interpreting Perception

The concept of perception originates from psychological approaches.[10] One of the most influential theories in perception studies is attribution theory, developed by the psychologist Fritz Heider. This theory emphasizes that individuals perceive the behavior of others or certain objects as being caused by something, and such causes are attributed to a combination of internal factors within the individual and external factors outside the individual.

Numerous definitions of perception have been formulated by scholars, particularly psychologists. Despite these variations, there is a general consensus that perception constitutes a process through which

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[10] Robert Friedman "All Is Perception" *Symmetry,* 2022, 14, no. 8: 1713. https://doi.org/10.3390/sym14081713

individuals organize events mentally, interpret them, and manage signs or cues arising from their environment. This process begins with sensory experience conducted by a subject. Sensation occurs because stimuli affect the individual, prompting the individual to organize and interpret the stimuli, ultimately producing awareness of what has been perceived through the senses. [11]

In principle, perception represents an effort to interpret the meaning of sensory information through experience related to objects, events, or relationships obtained by drawing conclusions and interpreting messages. As a mode of understanding, perception emerges as a response to stimuli. Complex stimuli enter the brain, are interpreted and assigned meaning through intricate cognitive processes, and ultimately produce perception.

A subject's perception of a particular object is not always accurate, especially when evaluating internal conditions such as feelings, emotions, and personality traits. Two contrasting perspectives exist regarding how individuals process information about others. The first is the learning approach, which tends to generalize information mechanically, while the second is the Gestalt approach, which explains how individuals construct meaningful and enduring impressions. [12]

Fundamentally, perception is influenced by two main factors: internal and external factors. Internal factors, as previously discussed, relate to characteristics inherent within the individual, whereas external factors are primarily associated with stimuli. Stimuli and environmental conditions as external factors interact with the individual as the internal factor, producing perception. For a stimulus to be perceived, it must possess sufficient intensity and surpass the stimulus threshold, that is, the minimum strength required to generate awareness and allow the individual to perceive it.

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[11] LL.Davidof, Introduction to Psychology, (Tokyo: McGraw Hill Int Book Company, 1981)

[12] R Withagen "The Gibsonian movement and Koffka's Principles of Gestalt Psychology". *Theory & Psychology*, (2024) *35*(1), 61-77. https://doi.org/10.1177/09593543241280056 (Original work published 2025)

The Political Involvement of *Kiai*: The Perceptions of *Lora*

The involvement of *kiai* and pesantren in practical politics encompasses diverse dimensions, supported by various motivations and foundational justifications. These range from normative–theological considerations, factual–sociological grounds, to pragmatic–economic motivations. These three foundations frequently emerge as the primary bases articulated by *kiai* in their engagement with practical politics.

Although many additional reasons accompany *kiai* participation in political activities, these three foundations are sufficiently comprehensive to accommodate the variety of existing motivations. Within the research process, several perceptions expressed by *Lora* and *Gus* also point toward these three major explanatory frameworks.

For one *Gus* or *Lora* in Bondowoso, the involvement of himself and his extended family in practical politics, particularly their affiliation with Partai Persatuan Pembangunan (PPP), is understood as a religious calling. PPP has long existed as a political party advocating the interests of Muslims from the New Order period until the present. Its ideological foundation is explicitly Islamic. The party's consistency has been demonstrated through difficult periods, including political marginalization during the New Order era and severe internal conflicts, especially when Nahdlatul Ulama organizationally withdrew. Despite these challenges, PPP continued to exist and remained committed to advocating Muslim interests in Indonesia.

During an interview, the informant explained that joining PPP represented a family political tradition. They wished to remain consistent with this party affiliation. According to the informant, *kiai* choose PPP not merely through rational calculation but through religious considerations. PPP's ideology is clearly Islamic, and the values it promotes are also grounded in Islam. This explanation emphasizes that participation in practical politics and party affiliation cannot be separated from theological foundations. The intention to uphold religious teachings (*lillāhi ta'ālā*) serves as evidence of the strong normative–theological basis underlying such political choices. This research finds that many *Gus* interpret *kiai* involvement in politics as part of a religious vocation. Political engagement

is therefore less concerned with personal gain than with contributions that can be offered to the party and community.

One *Lora* affirmed that *kiai* participation in politics may indeed be interpreted as a religious calling. However, he adopted a more realistic perspective, arguing that today relatively few *kiai* genuinely enter politics for religious purposes alone. According to him, the objective conditions linking *kiai* and politics have changed. In the past, *kiai* engaged in politics as a religious response against the repressive political system of the New Order regime. At present, however, a shift has occurred. From this *Lora*'s perspective, it has become increasingly difficult to justify *kiai* involvement in practical politics purely on normative–theological grounds, since religious considerations no longer appear to dominate political participation.

Beyond normative–theological motivations, another reason identified by *Lora* relates to factual–sociological considerations. These include efforts to maintain existence and sustain sociological bonds, such as preserving pesantren-based primordial ties, maintaining teacher–student relationships, and affirming the social existence of *kiai* who engage in practical politics.

Another factor highlighted is emotional motivation. One *Lora* explained that emotional considerations arise from close personal relationships among *kiai*, which encourage alignment within similar political circles. An example frequently cited is when Abdurrahman Wahid (Gus Dur) declared Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB) as a political vehicle associated with NU. Many NU *kiai* followed the new party largely because of their admiration, affection, and respect for Gus Dur. Another example occurred in the Tapal Kuda region when several *kiai* established Partai Kebangkitan Nasional Ulama (PKNU), influenced by the charismatic authority of KH. Sofyan Miftahul Arifin, whose personal influence attracted numerous other *kiai*.

These explanations suggest that figures such as Gus Dur and KH. Sofyan functioned as emotional anchors capable of binding many *kiai* together politically. Their political choices often influenced other *kiai* to adopt similar affiliations. Emotional bonds behind such alignment vary in

motivation: some arise from genuine admiration and respect, while others stem from concern over potential social sanctions resulting from differing political choices. Consequently, *kiai* or communities adopting political positions different from respected religious leaders risk social marginalization.

Another reason for *kiai* political involvement, according to *Lora* perceptions, relates to institutional relationships among pesantren. Political choices made by a "parent" pesantren are often followed by affiliated or "branch" pesantren. The parent pesantren functions as a patron institution shaping the orientation of its alumni network. An illustrative case in the Tapal Kuda region can be observed among alumni of PP. Salafiyah Syafi'iyah Sukorejo. When its caretaker, KH. R. Fawaid As'ad, shifted political affiliation from PKB to PPP, many *kiai* alumni from Sukorejo followed the same political decision, demonstrating how institutional patronage and educational lineage shape political alignment within pesantren networks.

Implications of Kiai Involvement in Politics

As individuals and as leaders of the Muslim community, the social behavior of *kiai* tends to generate social impacts arising from societal interpretations and reactions. For most members of society, particularly *nahdliyin* communities living in rural areas, the *kiai* represents a leader for both worldly and spiritual life. Obedience to the *kiai* is not only intended for worldly benefit but is also expected to bring rewards in the hereafter. Submission to the *kiai* is understood as submission to the religious commandments of Allah, and therefore is believed to carry spiritual merit.

Within such a social context, the involvement of *kiai* in politics becomes a distinct problem. Political choices are often perceived as religious commands, especially since the participation of *kiai* in politics frequently incorporates religious symbols. Political analysis and political decisions made by *kiai* are not rarely accompanied by fatwas that bind their followers.

The political involvement of *kiai* does not solely produce negative consequences; positive implications also emerge. From the perspective of

the *gus* community, at least two major implications accompany the political choices of *kiai*. First are negative implications, such as social disintegration, declining public trust toward *kiai*, and the weakening bargaining and pressure capacity of *kiai* toward political authorities. Meanwhile, the positive side includes the emergence of pesantren-style political education within society and the opening of political participation access for *nahdliyin* communities.

In such a societal setting, *kiai* involvement in politics again becomes problematic. Political choice is often regarded as a religious mandate, particularly when religious symbols accompany political engagement. Political analysis and political decisions of *kiai* are frequently reinforced by fatwas binding their followers.

The phenomenon of disintegration and social disharmony constitutes the first negative implication found within society. The relationship pattern between *kiai* and followers tends to follow a patron–client model. [13] The position of the *kiai* is highly central in community life. A *kiai* functions not only as a reference in religious matters but also in issues beyond religious specialization. Concerning business opportunities, healing, financial consultation, and even determining wedding dates, the *kiai* remains a central reference. Society believes that *kiai* are chosen individuals endowed with *karomah*, possessing supernatural abilities, capable of transcending time and predicting future events.

This highly central position does not operate on a unified large scale. Each *kiai* tends to possess loyal followers. The loyalty of followers or *santri* differs from one *kiai* to another and remains limited to their own patron *kiai*. Even though followers may respect other *kiai*, loyalty and submission remain directed toward their own patron figure or patron group.

Therefore, it is common for each *kiai* to maintain religious study groups or *majlis dzikir*. Each congregation develops distinct emotional bonds and values. Every *kiai* constructs a particular model of emotional attachment with followers. The strength of emotional ties between different

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[13] Syamsul Ma'arif, Pola Hubungan Patron-Client Kiai dan Santri di Pesantren. Jurnal Ta'dib Volume XV nomor 02 edisi November 2010. IAIN Walisongo

kiai and their respective followers often becomes a trigger of disharmony among followers.

Relationships between one *kiai* and another automatically shape relations among their followers. This condition is intensified by the reality of *kiai* involvement in politics. Political choices made by *kiai* inspire the political choices of followers and *santri*, accompanied by an awareness that alternative political choices are considered incorrect. Consequently, when political fatwas among *kiai* collide, conflicts of understanding at the follower level become unavoidable.

As expressed by one *gus*, once a *kiai* has made a political choice, he must occupy an extreme position rather than a neutral middle ground. He must stand firmly upon a particular ideology. Society consequently becomes fragmented and divided according to the political interests of respective *kiai*.

Disharmony manifests in varying scales and forms, ranging from simple social avoidance to the severance of kinship relations and marriage ties. Conflict escalation among society is strongly influenced by conflicts among *kiai* themselves. When conflicts among *kiai* remain moderate, societal conflict tends to remain limited as well.

The second negative implication of *kiai* involvement in politics is the decline of public trust toward *kiai*. They are no longer viewed as purely moral figures free from worldly interests and conflict. Obedience and submission previously built upon trust begin to erode. In an interview, a *gus* explained that *kiai* who were once highly respected for their knowledge, morality, and social concern have experienced degradation.

Other informants expressed similar views, noting that many religious norms and values associated with *kiai* have weakened due to political involvement. Although not all politically active *kiai* demonstrate this tendency, it is evident in some cases.

In various local political phenomena, particularly regional elections (*Pilkada*), these perspectives become understandable. The democratic system requiring elections and based on the principle of *one man one vote* inevitably generates contestation and competition. In socially mature

communities, such competition fosters mutual respect amid differences. However, for communities unprepared to manage differences, competition becomes a social burden requiring resolution.

Electoral competition becomes an arena for elites possessing social and political bases of power. These bases may include social authority figures such as *kiai* and community leaders, political elites such as party leaders, or individuals and groups possessing economic capital.

Recent trends in national and local political constellations indicate that economic capital has become more dominant than other forms of power. Several major political parties are led by wealthy entrepreneurs who often lack distinguished party cadre backgrounds.

According to one *gus*, this situation constitutes a disaster for NU and the broader Muslim community. It has become increasingly difficult to find *kiai* respected by both rulers and society, particularly those willing to oppose political authority. Many *kiai*, he argued, now prefer invitations to government offices rather than engagement with grassroots religious gatherings.

This situation produces an inferiority position of *kiai* before political authorities. Consequently, the *kiai* fail to perform their ideal role as balancing forces within socio-political life. They lose the moral "sharpness" needed to criticize unjust policies and often have little choice but to support governmental decisions even when contrary to broader societal interests.

Nevertheless, practical political engagement by *kiai* also generates positive outcomes worthy of appreciation. One significant contribution is the opening of political participation channels for *santri* communities. During the New Order regime, *santri* communities—particularly NU members—faced serious limitations in expressing political aspirations. Party choices were largely restricted by state control. Although PPP symbolized Islamic political struggle, internal factionalism frequently marginalized NU political interests.

Following the fall of the New Order, political reflection among NU communities regained momentum. Political participation as citizens

reopened, and *kiai* political engagement sometimes achieved electoral success, including control of executive offices.

Representation of *santri* groups within regional leadership produced positive implications. For example, during the two terms of Bondowoso Regent Lora Amin Said Husni, policies required civil servants within the Bondowoso Regency Government to pay monthly zakat through salary deductions. This policy received support from both *kiai* and *santri* communities. Similar cases occurred in Jember, where Regent MZ Jalal, responding to *kiai* recommendations, issued policies encouraging modest school uniforms covering *aurat*, including long skirts and recommended hijab use for Muslim students.

Expanded political access for *santri* communities is also reflected in their participation across diverse political parties rather than concentration within a single Islamic party. In Bondowoso, *santri* politicians became active in multiple parties such as Golkar, PDIP, and Demokrat.

The increasing number of alumni from PP. Nurul Jadid Probolinggo serving as members of the Bondowoso Regional Parliament after the Reformasi era further demonstrates the political outcomes of *kiai* involvement. As holders of strong social capital, *kiai* naturally become attractive vote getters for political parties seeking electoral support.

Another positive implication is the emergence of political education among *santri* communities. Whereas during the New Order many NU members became politically marginalized, apathetic, and passive, the post–New Order period witnessed revitalized political awareness. Young NU activists established intellectual discussion groups such as Lakpesdam NU, Jaringan Islam Liberal, LKiS in Yogyakarta, Averus in Malang, and ELSAD in Surabaya. NU-affiliated organizations such as PMII, ANSOR, FATAYAT, IPNU, and IPPNU also increasingly functioned as civil society forces providing oversight toward state power.

Forms of Perception among Lora and Gus

As previously explained, differences in perception exist among *Lora* and *Gus* regarding the involvement of *kiai* in politics. These differences emerge due to various factors, including personal experiences, local socio-

political conditions, and observed political behavior of *kiai*. Such variations produce diverse forms of perception.

Confrontational Negative Perception

Some *Lora* and *Gus* perceive the involvement of *kiai* in practical politics as a historical accident. Political *kiai* are viewed not only as degrading their personal dignity but also as injuring the honor of the *kiai* institution itself. Ideally, *kiai* should remain in a neutral middle position, avoiding narrow party primordialism and, in certain cases, avoiding becoming instruments of party or governmental interests. The inferior position of politically engaged *kiai* before political authorities leads many *Lora* and *Gus* to believe that it is time for *kiai* to reorganize themselves and return to their role as protectors of society.

However, social decline and political failure as described above do not immediately generate awareness among *kiai* regarding their limitations. Many *kiai* remain eager to engage in political competition. Public trust is often transformed into political capital. Consequently, when *kiai* fail to fulfill the mandate of public trust within political frameworks, the erosion of public confidence becomes unavoidable. *Kiai* who experience political failure yet fail to recognize such failure give rise to negative perceptions among several *Lora* and *Gus*. These perceptions do not merely remain critical but frequently develop into confrontational attitudes toward the political engagement of *kiai*.

Negative perceptions and confrontational responses expressed by some *Gus* arise from their awareness of the realities surrounding *kiai* in their respective regions. One *lora* informant in Bondowoso, for example, highlighted the phenomenon of *kiai* kissing the hand of a regent (*bupati*) as an illustration of symbolic subordination. Participation in practical politics forces *kiai* to become immersed in party political rules.

As members of particular political parties, *kiai* often have limited options other than complying with party regulations. The vertically structured nature of political parties also shapes hierarchical relationships between *kiai* and party officials who occupy higher structural positions. In

many cases, *kiai* must accept subordinate roles under professional politicians.

The political "defeat" of *kiai*, as conveyed by informants, is not solely caused by the limitations of *kiai* as political actors but also by shifts in voter consciousness and behavior. Previously, society could be easily mobilized through religious bonds, including political fatwas and similar mechanisms. Today, however, such forms of mobilization are increasingly abandoned as society adopts a more realistic outlook toward political phenomena.

Unfulfilled political promises, programs that deviate from political contracts, and the arrogance of political elites have generated public fatigue. As a result, communities increasingly prioritize short-term tangible benefits. In regional elections (*Pilkada*), voters no longer focus primarily on ideology, party affiliation, supporting *kiai*, or candidate profiles. Instead, political bargaining tends to occur through direct programmatic exchanges prior to elections, such as village road paving, mosque construction, and other immediately visible development initiatives.

Accommodative Negative Perception

Another perception among *Lora* and *Gus* toward the political involvement of *kiai* is a negative perception that is not accompanied by confrontational action but tends to be accommodative. This means that although *Lora* and *Gus* disagree with the political behavior of *kiai*, they do not possess sufficient courage to openly express their disagreement. They choose silence and, in certain unavoidable situations, follow the political direction determined by the *kiai*.

This perception appears in a more cautious attitude. Even when unfavorable conditions arise, one *lora* emphasized the importance of avoiding impulsive reactions, including toward the phenomenon of politically engaged *kiai*. Although they internally reject and negatively perceive such political behavior, this group never openly demonstrates opposition.

One *lora* stated that remaining silent regarding the phenomenon of *kiai* politics represents a safe choice both personally and organizationally.

Amid the political euphoria experienced by many *kiai*, he preferred not to directly oppose the dominant trend of *kiai* political engagement. Although Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in Bondowoso as an organization formally does not participate in practical politics, several elite *kiai* within the local NU leadership have nonetheless become instruments of particular political party interests.

The involvement of *kiai* in politics may produce benefits for the Muslim community and the NU organization; however, its potential harms are still perceived as greater. One lora identified four major reasons explaining *kiai* attraction toward politics.

First is the call of conscience (*li'la kalimatillah*). *Kiai* motivated by moral responsibility as guardians of society and religion are relatively few. These figures are considered free from economic and power interests, and their political participation is viewed as purely oriented toward Islam and the Muslim community.

Second is emotional attachment, particularly teacher–student relationships. Although not directly linked to religious idealism, obedience to a teacher's political choice is associated with spiritual expectations, especially the pursuit of *barokah* (blessing). This motivation still preserves normative limits, allowing *kiai* to maintain institutional dignity and honor.

Third is economic motivation, which is frequently found within the reality of *kiai* politics. Not all economic considerations are interpreted negatively. Efforts to strengthen pesantren infrastructure remain normatively acceptable; however, many cases involve personal or group interests. This tendency becomes a concern among several *Gus*, as economic interests may cause some *kiai* to neglect their moral position as community role models.

Fourth is conflict among *kiai* themselves. Such conflicts often originate from competition for influence, political differences, historical family tensions, or contemporary disputes. Efforts to protect family reputation or pesantren prestige frequently intensify rivalry. In local elections, if one *kiai* supports a particular candidate, another *kiai* often deliberately supports a different candidate. Competition for influence

frequently mobilizes followers' emotions, contributing to social disharmony and disintegration within communities.

Active Positive Perception

Active positive perception refers to favorable views of *Lora* and *Gus* toward *kiai* political engagement accompanied by supportive behavior. Among the informants, one *Gus* expressed the strongest alignment with this perspective. He not only permitted *kiai* participation in politics but also argued that capable *kiai* should leave the pesantren environment and engage directly in political structures to improve social conditions through structural approaches.

Nevertheless, he emphasized clear boundaries regarding which *kiai* are suitable for practical politics. The primary criteria include communication skills, intellectual capacity, and broader social insight. *Kiai* whose expertise is limited to religious teaching and preaching are advised to avoid political engagement, since forced participation may harm not only the individual *kiai* but also the institutional authority of *kiai* leadership and NU politics more broadly. Conversely, *kiai* possessing sufficient qualifications may legitimately participate in practical politics.

Positive implications also constitute the strongest justification for this supportive perception. Although limited in number, *kiai* occupying public positions, such as ministers, governors, regents, or regional legislative leaders, are believed to generate positive impacts for Muslim communities, particularly for NU constituencies.

Passive Positive Perception

Passive positive perception represents favorable evaluations of *kiai* political engagement without direct involvement in practical politics. *Gus* and *Lora* holding this view express appreciation and sympathy toward politically active *kiai*, yet refrain from offering explicit political support.

According to several *Gus*, the legitimacy of *kiai* political engagement depends not solely on personal capability but also on two important considerations: societal necessity and institutional readiness of the pesantren.

The first consideration concerns societal needs. Political involvement becomes justified when objective social conditions require *kiai* intervention. Experiences from local political constellations demonstrate that regional policies and local regulations do not always benefit society, particularly pesantren communities. Certain policies may threaten local moral values or even encourage harmful social behavior. Under such circumstances, political engagement becomes a moral obligation: *kiai* must enter political competition, gain political power, and produce policies beneficial to society rather than remaining passive observers.

The second consideration relates to the internal condition of pesantren institutions. When a pesantren possesses a well-established and stable organizational system, *kiai* participation in politics is considered legitimate because educational activities and institutional programs will not be disrupted.

An illustrative example is the late KH. Abdul Haq Zaini. His political involvement did not disturb educational activities at PP. Nurul Jadid Probolinggo; in fact, student enrollment continued to increase. Political conflict between KH. Abdul Haq Zaini and the Regent of Probolinggo, H. Hasan Aminuddin, reportedly resulted in governmental policies that created administrative difficulties for the Nurul Jadid community.

Such political consequences are regarded as common risks. However, political pressure and isolation imposed by local authorities, combined with KH. Abdul Haq Zaini's firm adherence to his political principles, intensified the conflict. Government assistance to PP. Nurul Jadid became difficult to obtain. While weaker pesantren institutions might suffer severe consequences under such conditions, pesantren with strong internal systems can sustain their existence independently of governmental support.

Political pressure and isolation ultimately generated sympathy and solidarity among alumni and supporters of PP. Nurul Jadid. Emotional bonds that had previously weakened became strengthened again, as the perception of political injustice experienced by KH. Abdul Haq Zaini

mobilized collective loyalty and support from the broader pesantren network

CONCLUSION

The findings demonstrate that *Lora* and *Gus* hold diverse perceptions regarding the involvement of *kiai* and pesantren in practical politics. Broadly speaking, these perceptions can be classified into two contradictory orientations: positive perception and negative perception. Positive perception refers to viewpoints that support the political engagement of *kiai*, whereas negative perception reflects perspectives that question or reject such involvement. Beyond evaluating whether *kiai* should participate in politics, *Lora* and *Gus* also develop positive and negative assessments toward the models and approaches adopted by politically engaged *kiai*. Some *Lora* and *Gus* criticize the political style of *kiai*, thereby generating negative perceptions, while others accept or even support these political approaches, producing positive perceptions.

These differences give rise to several forms of perception among *Lora* and *Gus* concerning *kiai* participation in practical politics. Positive perceptions are divided into passive positive perception and active positive perception. Passive positive perception refers to favorable views toward *kiai* political involvement without political endorsement. In this position, *Lora* and *Gus* do not problematize *kiai* participation in politics and regard it as a normal social phenomenon, yet they refrain from direct political engagement or open support for *kiai* political activities.

In contrast, active positive perception refers to viewpoints in which *Lora* and *Gus* not only evaluate *kiai* political engagement positively but also provide concrete support for such participation. On the other hand, negative perceptions toward *kiai* political involvement also manifest in two forms: confrontational negative perception and accommodative negative perception. Confrontational negative perception refers to critical evaluations accompanied by concrete actions opposing *kiai* participation in practical politics. Meanwhile, accommodative negative perception reflects critical views that are not followed by active resistance; instead, *Lora* and *Gus* tend to tolerate the situation and, at certain moments, even adapt themselves to the political rhythm established by the *kiai*

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