

HEGEMONY, PERSONALITY, AND NETWORK: KYAI VERSUS KYAI IN SUMENEP LOCAL ELECTION 2024

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ABSTRACT

The local political contest in Sumenep in 2024 is not just an ordinary electoral competition, but rather a field of tug-of-war of hegemony between charismatic figures who are both kyais. This phenomenon suggests that local political dynamics are not solely influenced by the political party machine but are also driven by three primary pillars: religious hegemony, charismatic personality, and interconnected socio-political networks. In this context, kyais become the epicenter that is difficult to change by an additional power, where kyais' standing is not merely a political power but also determines triumph through social power with the santri network and alumni. This article discusses how kyai personalities are formed and contested within the arena of local control. Kyai, who is usually used as a spiritual role model, is now involved as a strategic actor in the electoral political space. With a qualitative and quantitative approach, and data collected from interviews, observations, and documentation, these findings demonstrate that the personal charisma of the kyai is not isolated but is also strengthened by social networks, *pesantren* relationships, and pragmatic political affiliations. The Sumenep Election reveals a symbolic battle between moral authority, socio-religious values, and the power of patronage networks.

Keywords: Hegemony, Personality, Network, Kyai, Local Politics, Sumenep Election.

INTRODUCTION

This article explains the phenomenon of kyai versus kyai in the 2024 Sumenep Local Election by highlighting three interconnected dimensions: hegemony, personality, and network, which are owned by each kyai. Kyai's involvement in politics is motivated by the belief that the relationship between the state and religion is a mutually beneficial symbiosis. They are viewing both as two sides of the same coin, but they needed each other (Ilham, 2020). This phenomenon occurs in areas that have relatively strong traditional community ties between Islamic boarding schools and the community, such as in Sumenep, Madura. Furthermore, traditions about *Buppa'* and *Babu'* (parents), *Guruh* (teachers), and *Ratoh* (government) are components that can describe how central the role of the kyai is regarding their position in Madurese society. This phenomenon describes the hierarchy of respect in Madurese society, which starts with the parent, followed by the teacher or kyai, and then the government (Madani, 2023). This position indirectly reinforces the hegemony of the kyai, whose influence extends not only to spiritual and cultural aspects but also to the political orientation of the Madurese community, including Sumenep.

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Kyai hegemony in Sumenep stemmed from the legitimization of moral and spiritual authority, which was built up over time through an Islamic boarding school and the santri network. Two perspectives reveal kyai influence of kyais on the political context among Islamic boarding schools. First, there are many santri who are following orders from the kyais to determine a political stance; therefore, this shows how the kyais have a significant influence on the Islamic boarding school community. Second, there is some perspective which emphasizes that talking to kyais does not necessarily mean following kyais' orders in politics; therefore, this shows the dynamics and various perspectives among santri about the independence of thinking and politics (Sumantri, 2020)

On the other hand, Kyai's personality takes considerable control over legitimate political influence on Madurese society. In this case, a kyai is a figure who has a strategic and central position in society. The status shapes Kyai's role in Sumenep society as both an educated individual and a figure rich in knowledge and resources. In his book, Abdul Chalik (2017) also describes two important factors that can strengthen the kyai's role. First, a kyai who is known as a figure with extensive knowledge, especially in the field of Islamic religious studies. Due to his intelligence, the kyai becomes a reference center and is often trusted by the community, both by those who regularly attend his lectures and by the students who live in an Islamic boarding school. Second, Kyais often come from wealthy families, while some Kyais start in a state of struggle. However, this strong family background gives the kyai significant influence in society. The charismatic kyai figure is often the primary reference for the community, thus having a significant influence on the community's political choices, even exceeding rational considerations such as the candidate's program or vision and mission.

Furthermore, the social networks owned by the kyais in the form of alumni networks of Islamic boarding schools, networks between Islamic boarding schools, and social relations with other community figures also become strategic tools in uniting political forces and forming social coalitions that support each candidate. Santri's role in local politics not only reveals the power of the religious network but also illustrates changes in the thinking patterns and aspirations of the younger generation, who are increasingly critical of public policy. This network can be utilized strategically to support the regional head candidates of Sumenep in 2024. Alumni spread across various sectors, including government, society, and the business world, can provide both moral and material support. At the same time, students who are still active in Islamic boarding schools become effective mobilization agents at the grassroots level (Hasanudin, 2017).

The three aspects, such as hegemony, personality, and network, that are inherent in the figure of the kyai have been the focus of several previous studies. The journal, written by Agus Hiplunudin, originates from the Ancient Greek language, where hegemony is derived from *eugonomia* (hegemonic), meaning "leading." In this case, hegemony is interpreted not as a relationship of domination through power, but as a relationship of agreement through political and ideological leadership (Hiplunudin, 2024). Gramsci identified two key elements in the various understandings of hegemony

itself: first, the relationship between rulers and power, as well as the dynamics of ruling and being ruled. Gramsci argued that one of the things that can form power is the presence of religious elements. This case can be found in many Madurese societies that consider religious relevance, where power is often assumed to form automatically. In this case, the power would be gained by a religious leader, commonly known as a kyai in Madurese society. All the more so if we consider the character of Madurese society, which has high loyalty to kyais; thus, kyais have full power to influence the political preferences of Madurese society. Second, Gramsci demonstrates that hegemony is not formed through violence or oppression by another class. However, instead, it is formed through a process of agreement that must be carried out in various ways, one of which is through institutions (Topan, 2024).

On the other hand, personality can be seen as a combination of traits that form a person's distinctive character; these traits tend to remain consistent over time and across contexts (Alzeer, 2023). In this discussion, personality is a crucial element because it can help describe how individuals think and behave in the political sphere. Laswell (1993), as cited in Samsul Arifin and Mokhammad Baharun (2022), describes political personality as a shift from the private sphere to the public sphere. The researchers viewed kyais as religious figures whose personalities are shaped by religious experiences and local culture, shifting into the political sphere to influence policy and build support from society. In addition, the kyai network in Indonesia has a firm foundation in social, cultural, and political dynamics, rooted in Islamic boarding schools as centers of Islamic education, which can influence public opinion and provide political legitimacy (Sinarsari et al., 2025). A political network is a strategic relationship that a candidate builds before facing political contestation. According to Robert D. Putnam, political networks are not just ordinary relationships, but rather an important part of social capital that strengthens a candidate's position and influence in the political arena (Taekab et al, 2025).

Referring to research conducted by Abdul Chalik (2025), he explained that kyais are positioned as local elites with strategic influence, who can direct the community's political preferences. The powerful influence of the kyai can extend beyond that of a political party. The power of the kyai comes primarily from the authority inherent in him. The sources of authority that demonstrate the power of the kyai include charisma, economic influence, and support from a network of Islamic boarding schools, religious orders, and ulama organizations. Therefore, the kyai is using the capital he has to influence all his followers. The newness of this article highlights the contention between kyais versus kyais in the local political arena, with a focus on hegemony, personality, and networks that they established during the 2024 Sumenep election. While kyais have often been positioned as a unified bloc supporting a particular candidate, this research highlights the existence of divergent political support among kyais in determining political direction.

The Sumenep election 2024 is showing an interesting dynamic between the kyais and the Islamic boarding school. The researchers observed the emergence of two strong camps that both played important roles in the political contestation in Sumenep Regency.

Some appear directly as candidates, while others are in the ranks of supporters and are divided between two candidate pairs. Not only are they passive supporters, but the kyais also employ different strategies and approaches in embracing the community. With the spiritual and social influence, they wield, the kyais attempt to shape the community's voice to elect the candidate they consider most capable of bringing about change in Sumenep Regency.

RESEARCH METHOD

This article is the result of research based on observation, interviews, and literature studies, in which researchers are involved in collecting data to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the results in the field. This research employs a descriptive qualitative method, allowing findings in the field to be presented in a systematic and word-based language.

At least, there are 239 Islamic boarding schools in Sumenep (Topan et al., 2024). This research focuses on three Islamic boarding schools that have a close relationship with the candidates for regent and deputy regent of Sumenep in 2024. These Islamic boarding schools include the Annuqayyah Islamic Boarding School in Guluk-guluk District, the Aswaja Islamic Boarding School in Ambunten District, and the At-Taufiqiah Islamic Boarding School in Bluto District. In addition, these three Islamic boarding schools are considered quite influential due to the number of students and alumni, the caliber of their teachers, and their fairly extensive network with the outside world. Annuqayyah Islamic boarding school is located in the Guluk-guluk district, which is on the western side of Sumenep. This Islamic boarding school has a relationship with regent candidate number 01, namely Kyai Ali Fikri (also known as KAF), because he is the leader of the Islamic boarding school. Next, Aswaja Islamic Boarding School in Ambunten District, which is located on the north side of Sumenep, has a strong relationship with the deputy regent candidate, namely Kyai Muh. Unais Ali Hisyam (also called KAH) because he is the leader of the Islamic boarding school. Moreover, lastly, At-Taufiqiah Islamic Boarding School in Bluto District, located on the south side of Sumenep, has a relationship with the deputy regent candidate number 02, namely Kyai Imam Hisyam (also known as KIH), as he is the leader of the Islamic boarding school.

The analysis ranking in this study involves several actors, including students, alumni associations, and kyais. The analysis is also strengthened by comparisons from various sources to enrich the data, such as prospective candidates, successful teams, governments, or communities, which are concluded at the end.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Kyai, Santri, and Alumni Network in Regional Head Election

The 2024 Sumenep election will become a significant competition, not only involving conventional political aspects, but also touching on a strong cultural dimension, namely Islamic boarding schools and kyais. Kyai's stance not only provides religious

education or serves as a social mediator in society, but also involves being a contestant. This phenomenon demonstrates that kyais' involvement in Sumenep politics is a part of the electoral dynamic, although the kyais do not always win, but sometimes dominate. In previous years, figures such as Kyai Ramdan Siraj and Kyai Busyro Karim demonstrated that ulama have a strong electoral appeal, even among women like Nyai Dewi Khalifah. This phenomenon continues through the emergence of KAF, KAH, and KIM.

The KAF-KAH pair is a kyai and a leader of an Islamic boarding school. This pair is supported by the PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan) and several smaller parties, including the Gelora Party, the Ummat Party, the Garuda Party, the Perindo Party, the Labor Party, the PSI, and the PKN (Kabar Madura, 2024). This pair is up against forces that are both Kyai and have different backgrounds. Achmad Fauzi, the incumbent, relies not only on his political experience but also on his maturity in facing the political challenges of Sumenep. His leadership has enabled him to manage and navigate various layers of government procedures while maintaining his closeness to the community, which is a primary key in every policy that will be implemented. Achmad Fauzi is partnering with KH. Imam Hasyim (KIH) as his deputy, who is the caretaker of the Islamic boarding school (Imami, 2024). This pair is supported by the PDI-P, PKB, Gerindra, NasDem, PKS, Hanura, PAN, PBB, and Demokrat parties (Nita, 2024).

Some important research describes a difference in pattern and method by kyai, involving santri, alumni, and society to support him. Some package the process of influencing students by kyais in a structured way, where the process is carried out in an organized and well-planned manner. In other parts, there are Islamic boarding schools that rely more on individual awareness, where students or alumni move independently with whole initiative and personal understanding. Each of these approaches brings a different nuance in shaping the character and independence of students in politics. At-Taufiqiyah Islamic Boarding School encourages santri to make informed political choices in a structured manner. The kyai's invitation to students is carried out in an organized manner through alumni networks to remote villages to strengthen and maintain their voices. In an interview, KIH said:

“This Islamic boarding school is influencing santri political choices because the kyai is a politician, so his santri must understand political issues. In every election, whether it is a presidential election or a regional election, we involve santri in participating and advocating for the same causes that leaders have been advocating for. The santri are welcome to be involved in politics, but their politics should be in line and in tune with the leader of the Islamic boarding school here.” (Interview, 2024)

In the following section, Annuqayah Islamic boarding school has a different approach. The active involvement of students in politics can be seen from how they are allowed to exercise their right to vote without being forced to support kyais who have close ties with the Islamic boarding school. Although there is no specific pressure

influencing santri political choice, the alumni still move to support KAF getting a recommendation. The alumni have more movement into the central level (Dewan Pimpinan Pusat). Their initiative has evolved through the assessment of incumbent leadership and the development of hopes within the alumni circle.

In the following section, the leader of Aswaja Islamic boarding school (KAH) describes how pesantren does not push the santri towards a specific and structured political choice. The result of the interview with some alumni and other stakeholders describes a different pattern from another pesantren:

“For us, there is no *dawuh* from the leader and no order or doctrine to advocate for the kyai because we are alumni and santri of the kyai. We, along with other alumni friends, are choosing to give support without being asked, without warning by kyai. We never forget where we come from, because we are those who needed mentorship and education from Kyai. Therefore, our advocate for Regional Election 2024 are a part of gratitude and appreciation, not because of anything order” (Interview, 2024)

The support from santri and alumni for kyai is not just because they comply with a teacher, but also because the vision and mission offered are aimed at bringing about change. The patterns implemented are different from one another but substantively lead to efforts to maintain good relations between the kyai and stakeholders after the election.

Various media are used to foster connectedness, ranging from routine meetings, *istighosah* gatherings, and ulama forums to build a strategic network that connects pesantren, alumni, and societal figures across every region. The support from charismatic ulama figures, such as Kyai Afifuddin Muhajir (Faruk, 2024), is strong evidence that the kyai network is capable of expanding its political influence even beyond the boundaries of Sumenep. Kyai Afifuddin is a board member of Pengurus Besar Nahdlatul Ulama (PBNU) and a leading intellectual figure in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Moreover, the largest *istighosah* in Lembung Barat village, Lenteng district, Sumenep, which involves various kyais and alumni from Islamic boarding schools (harianjatim.com, 2024), has become a symbol of collective power that can mobilize broader support. Meanwhile, the tradition of routine *istighosah* in Guluk-guluk District every Thursday night (Dzunnurain, 2024) serves as a vital consolidation point, strengthening solidarity and coordination within the kyai political network. Thus, this network map illustrates how the kyai, as a key actor, combines spiritual and political power to significantly influence the election dynamics in Sumenep.

However, the influence of the kyai network in the Sumenep Election does not only favor one axis. The candidate from number 02 also received strong support from several charismatic clerics who serve as role models for the community in various parts of Sumenep. Names such as Kyai Muhammad Mawardi from the Al Ibrohimi Basoka Rubaru Islamic Boarding School, Kyai Rofiq Zaini from Kalabaan Guluk-guluk, Kyai A. Suyuthi from the Nurul Jamal Cempaka Pasongsongan Islamic Boarding School, Kyai

Ali Rifki from PP Al Ittihad Lenteng, to Kyai Qusyairi Zaini from PP Hidayatul Ulum Ganding appeared as central figures in mobilizing support in Islamic boarding school bases. This support was further strengthened by the presence of other notable figures, including Kyai Suaidi As'ad, Kyai Ali Murtadho, Kyai Abdul Hamid Ali Munir, Kyai Baharuddin, Kyai Mahally, and Habib Abdurrahman Baroqbah, each of whom brought their charisma and influence to the table. The support of Kyais and Habib is not only an arena for declaring attitudes, but also a space for alternative political consolidation, which marks how divided the power of the Kyais is in this contestation (Hazmi, 2024).

The power of the Madurese kyais' network is quite popular in the national political world. The candidate's network not only targets a kyai but also businessmen (financiers), bureaucrats, military, and *blater*. We can see, for example, in the 2019 and 2024 elections in Sampang, where the presence of *Blater* became a dominant figure in the Sampang Election (Haqqullah, 2025). Another example, such as that carried out by the Village Head Alliance (AKD) in Bangkalan in the 2024 Region Election (taberita, 2024), shows that local political contestation in Madura is an arena for collaboration between strategic groups. In Pamekasan, this area has local figures, such as *bejing* (another name for local criminal figures), who are influential and play a significant role in Pilkades (Pemilihan Kepala Desa/Village Head Election) affairs. However, for election affairs, the position of a kyai remains the primary one (Asmawati, 2021). This is the power wielded by the kyais who are contesting in the 2024 Sumenep Election, where political support is built through a combination of spiritual influence, financial strength, and social closeness to the grassroots community.

The map and network of kyai power in Madura are not only a representation of the world of Islamic boarding schools and religious traditions, but also an important part of the local political power structure, such that kyais in Madura often dominate the political field during regional head election contests. The power of kyais does not only come from their moral authority as caretakers of Islamic boarding schools, but also from the roles they hold, such as administrators of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), community leaders, controllers of Islamic mass organizations, and administrators or active cadres of political parties.

With such extensive work patterns, social capital, and networks, the involvement of kyais in practical politics shifts their focus from spiritual leaders to pragmatic leaders who play a significant role in the local political arena (Abdullah, 2024). In Madura in general, kyais are not only seen as spiritual leaders but also as symbols of religious greatness and role models in everyday life, with extensive networks. This kyai network is formed through cultural relations between affiliated Islamic boarding schools, creating a complex and dynamic power map.

***Blater* and Capitalist Power in Kyai Political Network**

In Madura's contested politics, *Blater* is known as a local figure who is respected for his social and economic power, but also feared for his role in directing people's

political preferences through intimidation practices that threaten the sustainability of democratic principles (Haris, 2024). The historicity of *blaterism* often refers to the figure of a hero as a strong person in rural society, usually known for invulnerability, pencak silat, or martial arts, which enables this *blater* figure to easily gather a large number of followers. Since the pre-colonial era, the brave organization has been the ruler's primary tool. Even a king is often attributed to the figure of a brave one, although to become a king, he must first have a revelation of the palace as a symbol of legitimacy. In practice, the political power of a ruler is often measured by their capacity, as reflected in the number of followers they have. Observing the history of power in the past provides an illustration that the power of kings in upholding their power also often involves the brave. Moreover, in the context of competition for power (Rozaki, 2009).

In line with the concept above, the historical traces of a brave who was a tool of power in the past continue in the form of the power of *blater* who play a role in the Madurese power structure. Although *blater* are often seen as a symbol of informal power that spreads throughout Madura, their influence in Sumenep is not as strong as in other areas of Madura. This is reflected in various literatures that highlight the dominance of *blater* in western Madura, such as Sampang and Bangkalan, without highlighting *blater* as a typical figure in eastern Madura, namely Sumenep and Pamekasan (Ni'am, 2025). The absence of *blater* as a center of power in Sumenep does not mean the total absence of their role, but instead indicates a difference in the pattern of power relations that is more controlled by other actors, such as kyais and formal political elites, who are influenced by religious power and capital.

Amid the weakening dominance of *blater* in Sumenep, the power of capitalist has emerged as a key actor filling the void. One example that emerged was the name of Said Abdullah, an elite member of the PDIP party and also a member of the DPR, who was often mentioned by the public over the past decade, including in Sumenep (Dzunnurain, 2024). However, interestingly, the 2024 Sumenep Election also revealed a different phenomenon, where most of the campaign financing for candidate pair number 01, Ali Fikri and Unais Ali Hisyam, originated from community support. The community voluntarily donated funds, provided a venue for the campaign, and assisted with various logistical aspects, allowing this candidate pair to spend almost no money themselves during the campaign (Fahrur Rozi, 2024).

On the other hand, the role of the *blater* still plays a significant role in mobilizing support from the Madurese community. The *blater* actively launches various campaign strategies, with one of the main strategies being to involve family members or relatives in each hamlet to deliberate with local figures. After the meeting, the hamlet *blater* continues to fight to gain the community's sympathy. In an advanced industrial society, this group comprises various elites, each with distinct social functions and organized in different ways. These elites are responsible for the material and moral welfare of various groups (Ainillah, 2016). *Blater* never acts alone, they carry out their political work collectively and in a planned manner. In the field, they face two major forces, so

relationships between elites are built to avoid these threats. First, the police. *Blater* often collaborates with some pragmatic officers, but there is always a threat from other police who still uphold the idealism of their profession. Second, the rulers (funders). For the rulers who have “bought” the role and power of *blater* in the political arena, results and victory are everything, regardless of the methods used by *blater*. If the results are not as desired, it can still be accepted, as long as the *blater* has worked optimally without betrayal. Behind the scenes of politics, *blater* is a strategic tool that plays between pragmatic and idealistic forces, risking everything for victory (Raditya, 2011).

Religious Narratives in Madura Political Hegemony

In the Madurese society who is religious, santri culture still rooted and developed until this day which is driven by three important elements that strengthen each other: Islamic boarding schools as a representation of Islamic educational institutions, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) which represents the Muslim majority, and a kyai who symbolizes an Islamic leader. These three things have become the characteristics and central elements of Islam and politics in Madura (Pribadi, 2013). This phenomenon continues to evolve in conjunction with changes in Indonesia’s social and political situation following independence. Kyai not only became a bridge between pure Islamic teachings and local traditions, but also served as a connector between the central government and rural communities within the new socio-political landscape. This change emerged as the villagers needed to grasp the concept of the nation-state. The modern state requires citizens to participate in politics, including through political parties, so many kyais participated in supporting traditional Islamic parties, such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) (Wahid, 2012).

In a longer historical perspective, the group of kyais in their struggle and thinking cannot be separated from Indonesian history itself, especially in the battle to gain independence from Dutch colonialism. In the colonial period, the kyai, ulama, religious teachers, and individuals who held a hajj title became essential actors in resisting colonial policies by establishing a spiritual community. During the Old Order era, kyais and politics could not be separated from the Islamic organization Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), which was once a political party and achieved satisfactory results in the 1955 elections. During the New Order era, authoritarianism and centralism limited the role of the kyais in practical politics. However, the reform era that followed 1998 brought freedom of speech and more open political dynamics, encouraging the establishment of numerous political parties. The 1999 to 2024 elections witnessed an increase in the number of political parties involved, as well as an increase in public interest, including kyais to participate in practical politics (Topan, 2024).

The long trail had reached a crucial point long before the Reformation took place, including in the Sumenep area in the 1950s. NU’s dominance in the local elections at that time was a real fact, demonstrating the strength of the network of kyais and traditional authorities in shaping community politics. Of the 30 legislative seats to fill the

Transitional Regional Government Council, 19 seats were won by NU, 7 by Masyumi, and 3 by the Indonesian National Party (PNI). NU's victory in Sumenep that year demonstrated that the power of traditionalism in the villages had not been displaced by the state's modernization project, which was centered in the city (Ihsan, 2024). This inequality between the center and the periphery persisted for a long time, resulting in a tug-of-war between development and attachment to socio-religious roots in Sumenep.

This reality is increasingly reflected in local political contests in Madura, particularly in Sumenep, where kyais (Islamic scholars) remain essential figures at the grassroots level. In Madura's social context, the presence of a kyai as a regional head candidate is not an aberration but part of a long-established social structure. Madurese society's submission to religious elements makes the position of ulama, especially kyai, a strategic actor in local politics. The advantages possessed by ulama, such as networking, charisma, and the ability to mobilize the masses, make them primary patrons for political elites seeking electoral support. On the other hand, political elites serve as clients for ulama, supporting Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and their students (A'la et al.; 2018). This relationship demonstrates how religious narratives not only influence political structures but also strengthen the structure of political hegemony in Madura.

In the 2024 Sumenep regional elections, the position of kyais in society is no longer limited to religious functions, but has begun to expand into strategic spaces within local political dynamics. The KAF-KAH pair are kyais with deep religious knowledge and experience leading Islamic boarding schools. They not only understand the nation's future but also uphold moral and spiritual principles in every step they take. The second pair, Achmad Fauzi, is the regent candidate and KIH as his deputy. This demonstrates how kyai continue to be involved as pillars of political legitimacy, enabling the formation of a religious narrative in Madura politics, especially in Sumenep.

The Unshakeable Power of Charisma and Network

The power of charisma and religious networks in Madura is utilized not only to guide the people but also to influence opinion, sway votes, and foster almost unwavering political loyalty. One reason is that the direct participation of the kyais in the regional election process is challenging to avoid. This is because they represent a local potential that can contribute or add color to regional politics. With their charisma and influential roles, Kyais can create a conducive political climate and create a more participatory society. This is also based on the fact that the relationship between kyais and students does not end with the education at the Islamic boarding school, but continues throughout (Subiyakto, 2011). Therefore, a kyai is an agent of change capable of bridging the desires of the government with the interests of the community.

In the traditional relationship, the kyai and his students are bound by a pattern of patronage. The kyai acts as a patron, a protector, and a role model respected for his knowledge and spirituality. The community, especially the students and sympathizers of the Islamic boarding school, becomes loyal clients who adhere to the kyai's direction and

decisions. The students' loyalty to the kyai within the Islamic boarding school environment grows for a reason. The kyai is generally perceived by the community as an integrative figure, representing a tradition of knowledge and leadership. With a depth of religious knowledge and a focus on virtuous behavior worthy of emulation by students and the community, the kyai is not only respected but also serves as a role model (Misbah, 2019). This pattern of patronage is easily established because a kyai owns most Islamic boarding schools. Furthermore, Islamic boarding schools also unite the parents of the students with the kyai. Parents feel an emotional bond and indebtedness to the kyai because their children can study at the pesantren (Ma'arif, 2010). This condition can strengthen the position of the kyai in the public sphere, where every attitude, decision, and political affiliation is often followed collectively by his followers.

Beyond the patron-client relationships, the concept of *taretan* in Madurese society is also an unshakable force in Madurese politics. In the Madurese language, *taretan* means brother, but it extends beyond blood ties. *Taretan* reflects strong social loyalty between individuals within a social group, whether connected to extended families, Islamic boarding school networks, or political networks. Despite its noble values, the *taretan* culture, which upholds solidarity and loyalty, can be a double-edged sword in the context of elections. When political battles pit two opposing sides or opposing *taretan* groups against each other, emotional tensions become higher in more individualistic areas. Furthermore, the Madurese social structure, still strongly influenced by local patronage, including religious leaders, community leaders, and heads of extended families, strengthens tarikat ties in electoral politics. These informal leaders often serve as the central axis of support for specific candidates, and their communities will collectively follow political decisions (Fawaidi, 2025). When competition arises between these figures, it not only occurs at the elite level but also extends to the grassroots level, dividing society into two or more camps to maintain the honor of their group.

Kyai Versus Kyai in Local Political Tradition

Kyai versus kyai in local politics of Sumenep is a political inevitability when domination and hegemony are sustained across time. Local political power combined with substantial social capital makes the contest between kyais and kyais inevitable. In the last two decades, the political space has always presented kyais from pesantren as the central figure. As we can see, since the regional election in 2005, when Kyai Ramdhan Siraj had a tight contest with Kyai Afif Hasan and two other candidates. Kyai Ramdhan, whom PPP supported, ultimately won the regional election. In the two regional elections of 2010 and 2016, Kyai Busyro Karim, a political figure with a background in Islamic boarding schools, once again won, defeating other local figures, some of whom also had a background in Islamic boarding schools. Meanwhile, in the 2021 regional elections, Kyai Ali Fikri also faced off against Nyai Dewi Khalifah, a popular female leader of an Islamic boarding school in Sumenep. The contest between Kyai and Kyai will continue in the 2024 regional elections.

Kyais have substantial capital in politics, in addition to social capital, as leaders of an Islamic boarding school. Some kyais, who are more popular, are leaders or members of a political party's board. Kyai Busyro, Kyai Ramdhan, Kyai Imam Hasyim, and Kyai Ali Fikri are kyais affiliated with the PKB (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa) and the PPP (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan). Meanwhile, Nyai Dewi Khalifah is a leader of Hanura (Partai Hati Nurani Rakyat) that has ideological similarities with nationalist parties. Other parties, especially nationalist parties, are less prominent than the Islamic parties. Although the name of PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) was quite dominant in the last period, this cannot be separated from the name of Said Abdullah, a key politician who added color to the Sumenep Election.

Kyai versus kyai is not interpreted negatively, but rather reflects the pervasive dominance of socio-political power across various spectrums, including local politics. Furthermore, the "moral" proposition remains relatively strong in the Sumenep political landscape. That offer also followed the politics and ethics of santri, which are very strong, and is called '*esto*' (meaning to listen and obey the rules of the teacher and kyai). *Estô* embodies the concept of selfless devotion as a form of respect and gratitude, characterized by a profound spiritual dimension. The loyalty of society is not only manifested in physical actions, but also by dedication and spiritual sacrifice that strengthens the bond between the individual, the kyai, and God.

CONCLUSION

Kyai in Madura local politics, specifically in Sumenep, is a portrait of strong social power since before and after the Reformation. The domination of Islamic parties in the legislature is a reflection of how Islamic political life is deeply embedded in the very fabric of society. Similarly, the presence of pesantren figures across all nationalist parties reflects the extent to which no political space is left untouched by pesantren influence at every level of party structure. Not only at the legislative level, but also at the executive level, Kyais have been quite dominant for the past two decades. The breath of the Sumenep Pendopo feels incomplete without the presence of a kyai as the prominent leader.

Kyai versus kyai is not present because the kyai wants to compete with other kyais, or because one kyai wants to obstruct another kyai, or because one kyai is hostile to another kyai. Kyai versus kyai in Sumenep is actually because there is no other force that can match the power of the kyai, especially in terms of personality, authority, and social capital of the voting masses. If there were other forces, it would be tough to remove the power of the kyai, even if only behind the scenes (backstage).

Kyais contesting in local politics is not a competition between kyais and Pesantren, but a space to confirm who maintains hegemony, the power of personal charisma, and networks effectively. Those who can properly maintain the three variables as capital are the ones who can become political locomotives at the local level. In reality, nurturing these three crucial elements in Sumenep has been dynamic over time. No single

figure has dominated the past two decades in regional elections. The power of kyais (Islamic clerics) and pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) changes and shifts in response to the dynamics and ability to nurture their constituents. There is no guarantee that the current figures in power at pesantren will maintain and continue their positions in the next term. Similarly, the current ouster of those who have been displaced does not mean there is no opportunity to attain supreme power.

In the context of local politics in Sumenep, the battery of kyais and pesantren is like a nuclear energy source that does not quickly decay or run out, despite changing times. The presence of *Blater* as another local figure has not entirely displaced the kyai as the dominant political force. Kyais and pesantrens, especially in Sumenep, continue to maintain their political hegemony while preserving their dignity, ensuring that their charisma and networks remain vibrant.

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