

## Multidimensional Sources of Political Legitimacy Among *Kyai* in Tapal Kuda Area

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze and map the multidimensional sources of political legitimacy among *Kyai* (Islamic clerics) in Indonesia by employing a qualitative approach and a case study method. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with *Kyai* directly involved in political contests, as well as through observation of their socio-political activities. The findings reveal that the political legitimacy of *Kyai* is not singular but is constructed through the interaction of four main dimensions: (1) religious and moral legitimacy, (2) institutional legitimacy derived from *pesantren* ownership, (3) legitimacy obtained through political and economic networks, and (4) communicative legitimacy in the digital sphere. The first two dimensions align with Max Weber's theory of legitimacy, charismatic, and traditional types while the latter two represent new forms of legitimacy that are not accommodated within the Weberian framework. Based on these findings, this study formulates a new theoretical model called the Adaptive Political Legitimacy of *Kyai* Theory, which integrates classical legitimacy with instrumental and communicative dimensions. This theory explains that the political legitimacy of *Kyai* in Indonesia is adaptive to social, economic, and technological changes, positioning *Kyai* not only as spiritual leaders but also as strategic actors in shaping the political consciousness of the Muslim community. This study contributes theoretically to the development of the concept of political legitimacy within the context of Indonesian Islam and provides practical insights for understanding the evolving role of *Kyai* in the increasingly complex and digitally connected modern era.

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis dan memetakan sumber-sumber multidimensional dari legitimasi politik *Kyai* di Indonesia dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dan metode studi kasus. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan para *Kyai* yang terlibat langsung dalam kontestasi politik serta observasi terhadap aktivitas sosial-politik mereka. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa legitimasi politik *Kyai* tidak bersifat tunggal, melainkan terbentuk melalui interaksi empat dimensi utama: (1) legitimasi religius dan moral, (2) legitimasi kelembagaan *pesantren*, (3) legitimasi melalui jaringan politik dan ekonomi, serta (4) legitimasi komunikatif di ruang digital. Dua dimensi pertama selaras dengan teori legitimasi Max Weber, yaitu tipe karismatik dan tradisional, sedangkan dua dimensi terakhir menunjukkan bentuk legitimasi baru yang belum terakomodasi dalam kerangka Weberian. Dari hasil tersebut, penelitian ini merumuskan teori baru yang disebut Teori Legitimasi Politis Adaptif *Kyai* (Adaptive Political Legitimacy of *Kyai* Theory), yang menggabungkan legitimasi klasik dengan dimensi instrumental dan komunikatif. Teori ini menjelaskan bahwa legitimasi politik *Kyai* di Indonesia bersifat adaptif terhadap perubahan sosial, ekonomi, dan teknologi, di mana *Kyai* berperan sebagai pemimpin spiritual sekaligus aktor strategis dalam membentuk kesadaran



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politik umat. Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi teoretis terhadap pengembangan konsep legitimasi politik dalam konteks Islam Indonesia, serta menjadi rujukan praktis bagi pemahaman peran *Kyai* di era modern yang semakin kompleks dan terhubung secara digital.

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**Keywords** *Kyai*; Political Legitimacy; *Pesantren*; Multidimensional Legitimacy.

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## Introduction

The phenomenon of the involvement of Islamic boarding school *Kyai* (Islamic boarding school) in the political arena in Indonesia is an interesting social reality to study. As religious figures who lead Islamic boarding schools, *Kyai* wield extensive influence not only in the realms of education and spirituality, but also in the social and political spheres.<sup>1</sup> In various regions, *Kyai* are often sought as references in determining the direction of political support within the community, particularly in the lead-up to general elections. This phenomenon demonstrates that the *Kyai*'s position extends beyond mere religious figures or religious leaders, but also as political actors with legitimacy in the eyes of the community.<sup>2</sup> However, the *Kyai*'s political legitimacy is often understood to stem solely from public trust in their religious capacity, whereas sociologically, legitimacy can be built through various interrelated sources.<sup>3</sup> This provides an important basis for further exploring the dimensions of the *Kyai*'s political legitimacy in Indonesia<sup>4</sup>.

The dual role of *Kyai* as both religious leaders and political actors has brought about changes in local and national political dynamics.<sup>5</sup> The existence of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as a social and cultural base further strengthens the *Kyai*'s position in shaping public opinion and mobilizing political support.<sup>6</sup> Numerous studies have shown that *Kyai* often mediate between the interests of grassroots communities and the political elite, making them central figures in the democratic process in Indonesia.<sup>7</sup> However, the question that arises is whether the *Kyai*'s political legitimacy stems solely from public trust, or whether other factors contribute to their authority. Understanding this is crucial to avoid becoming trapped in a single perspective that emphasizes charismatic aspects alone.

The relevance of this study becomes even more apparent when considering the electoral political phenomenon occurring in Indonesia, where *Kyai* are often the determining factor in the victory

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<sup>1</sup> Jens Koehrsen, "Muslims and Climate Change: How Islam, Muslim Organizations, and Religious Leaders Influence Climate Change Perceptions and Mitigation Activities," *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 12, no. 3 (2021): 702-714.

<sup>2</sup> Raufan Syiddik and Zainal Efendi Hsb, "LEGITIMASI ULAMA DALAM KONTEKS POLITIK STUDI KASUS: PADANG LAWAS UTARA," *Al-Muhajirin: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 2, no. 1 (2025): 65-78.

<sup>3</sup> Christian Davenport et al., "The Consequences of Contention: Understanding the Aftereffects of Political Conflict and Violence," *Annual Review of Political Science* 22, no. 1 (2019): 361-377.

<sup>4</sup> Ardhana Januar Mahardhani et al., "The *Kyai*'s Position in Rural Local Democracy Based on Patronage Politics at Tapal Kuda," *Muslim Heritage* 8, no. 1 (2023): 115-132.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad Nurkhin et al., "Accountability of Pondok Pesantren; a Systematic Literature Review," *Cogent Business & Management* 11, no. 1 (2024): 233-250.

<sup>6</sup> Balya Ziaulhaq Achmadin et al., "Deconstructing the *Kiai* and Santri Relationship: A Critical Review of Power and Cultural Dynamics," *El Harakah: Jurnal Budaya Islam* 26, no. 2 (2024): 367-392.

<sup>7</sup> Moh Bashori Alwi Almanduri and Andi Faisal Bakti, "The Dialectics of Ma'ruf Amin Political Communication in 2019 Presidential Elections: Influence on Voting Perspective," *Al-Balagh: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi* 7, no. 2 (2022): 243-274.

of certain candidates or *Kyai* who are directly involved in political contests.<sup>8</sup> In his theory of political legitimacy, Max Weber identified three types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, in Indonesia, *Kyai* legitimacy is more often associated with the *Kyai*'s inherent religious charisma.<sup>10</sup> However, this approach tends to be reductive because it ignores other dimensions such as social capital, economic networks, and strategic relationships with power.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, a multidimensional framework is needed that can comprehensively map the sources of political legitimacy of *Kyai* in Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) in Indonesia. On the other hand, developments have also influenced the pattern of political legitimacy of *Kyai* in Islamic boarding schools.<sup>12</sup> The modernization of Islamic boarding schools, the expansion of social media, and the increasing political participation of *santri* (students) have created new dynamics in shaping public perception of *Kyai*. For example, some *Kyai* gain legitimacy through ownership of large educational institutions, control of economic networks, and close ties to national political figures. This phenomenon demonstrates that the sources of legitimacy for *Kyai* are no longer monolithic, but rather divided into various interacting dimensions. Unfortunately, previous research has rarely explored this aspect in depth, thus addressing this gap is the focus of this study.

This research is limited to mapping the sources of political legitimacy of Islamic boarding school *Kyai* (Islamic boarding schools) in Indonesia using a multidimensional approach. This study does not aim to assess whether the *Kyai*'s political involvement is positive or negative, but rather to explore the factors that shape and sustain their political authority. To date, studies on the political legitimacy of *Kyai* have tended to focus on specific aspects such as religious charisma or political networks. However, economic, social, and symbolic dimensions also play significant roles in shaping this legitimacy.

Various studies have examined the role of *Kyai* (Islamic scholars) in Indonesian politics, particularly within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), the social and cultural foundation of Muslim society. Siregar (2013) emphasized that *Kyai* serve not only as spiritual leaders but also as socio-political actors with charismatic leadership capable of mobilizing the masses through their *pesantren* networks and symbolic capital.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, Maulana (2024) points to a new phenomenon in which *Kyai* combine traditional approaches with the use of digital technology to reach the younger generation and

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<sup>8</sup> Abdul Chalik, "New Trajectory of *Kyai*'s Political Participation in Contemporary Indonesia Rises, Challenges, and Opportunities," *Indonesian Journal of Political Studies (IJPS)* 2, no. 2 (2022): 197-216.

<sup>9</sup> A Almhairat, "Bureaucracy Theory Revisited: Max Weber's Ideal Type and Its Contemporary Relevance in Organizational Science," *Australian Academic & Educational Services (AAES), Business and Administrative Studies* 2, no. 3 (2025): 16-27.

<sup>10</sup> Dodi Suryana and Tito Handoko, "Islamic Commodification in Representation of Political Development in Indonesia: A Systematic Literature Review," *Hayula: Indonesian Journal of Multidisciplinary Islamic Studies* 7, no. 1 (2023): 51-76.

<sup>11</sup> Yunita Yunita et al., "Analisis Peran Modal Sosial Dalam Mendorong Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Untuk Pembangunan Inklusif Berkelanjutan," *Jurnal Intelek Dan Cendekiawan Nusantara* 2, no. 3 (2025): 1786-1797.

<sup>12</sup> Zainuddin Zainuddin, "Kiai Dan Politik: Implikasi Dan Masa Depan Lembaga Pendidikan Islam Di Sumatera Selatan," *Briliant: Jurnal Riset Dan Konseptual* 4, no. 3 (2019): 331-40.

<sup>13</sup> Ferry Muhammadsyah Siregar, "RELIGIOUS LEADER AND CHARISMATIC LEADERSHIP IN INDONESIA: THE ROLE OF KYAI IN PESANTREN IN JAVA," *Jurnal Kawistara* 3, no. 2 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.22146/kawistara.3977>.

expand their political legitimacy.<sup>14</sup> While these studies have contributed significantly, most remain partial, tending to focus on one dimension of legitimacy, such as religious charisma or political networks alone. Therefore, a comprehensive study that maps the sources of *Kyai's* political legitimacy multidimensionally is needed.

Studies on the political legitimacy of *Kyai* have tended to be dominated by a monolithic approach, viewing their political authority solely through the lens of religious charisma or leadership within the *pesantren* community.<sup>15</sup> This perspective fails to address the more complex contemporary socio-political realities, where the role of *Kyai* is shaped not only by a religious basis but also by the interaction of various capitals such as social, economic, and symbolic capital. In the dynamic development of technology and social mobility, *Kyai* are no longer merely traditional leaders but also political actors capable of utilizing modern networks to expand their influence.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, this study offers a novelty by examining the political legitimacy of *Kyai* through a multidimensional framework that combines religious, social, economic, and symbolic aspects, which is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the construction of *Kyai* political legitimacy in Indonesia.

This study aims to analyze and map the sources of political legitimacy of *Kyai* in Indonesia from a multidimensional perspective. This approach was chosen to understand how various factors, including religious, social, economic, and symbolic, play a role in shaping the *Kyai's* political authority in a dynamic society. In the contemporary socio-political context, *Kyai* serve not only as spiritual leaders but also as strategic actors capable of influencing political direction, particularly within Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) communities and the wider community. This study also examines how *Kyai* utilize these assets simultaneously to maintain their political legitimacy amidst social, cultural, and technological changes. Thus, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the construction of *Kyai's* political legitimacy in Indonesian political reality.

Based on these objectives, the main problem formulation in this study is: "How do multidimensional sources shape and support the political legitimacy of *Kyai* in the Indonesian socio-political context?" This question is important to answer because the political legitimacy of *Kyai* cannot be fully explained only using existing classical theoretical frameworks. According to Max Weber, for example, he proposed three types of legitimacy: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal, which have been widely used to interpret political authority. However, in the world of politics in Indonesia, the political legitimacy of *Kyai* shows more complex characteristics.

On the other hand, *Kyai* indeed obtain traditional legitimacy through the legacy of Islamic boarding schools and genealogical networks of knowledge; on the other hand, they also exude charismatic legitimacy through religious charisma inherent in spiritual and moral capacity. However, the legitimacy of *Kyai* does not stop at the Weberian framework, because their political practice is also supported by social capital in the form of networks of alumni students and sympathizers, economic capital through the management of Islamic boarding schools and educational assets, and symbolic

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<sup>14</sup> Ariya Maulana, "Pengaruh Strategis Kyai dalam Mendukung Kemenangan PKB pada Pemilu Legislatif 2024 di Kendal," *Journal of Education, Humaniora and Social Sciences (JEHSS)* 7, no. 2 (2024): 623–33, <https://doi.org/10.34007/jehss.v7i2.2429>.

<sup>15</sup> Balya Ziaulhaq Achmadin et al., "Dismantling the Relationship between Kiai and Santri: A Critical Review of the Social and Cultural Dynamics of Pesantren in East Java," *Journal of Research and Thought on Islamic Education (JRTIE) Prodi PAI IAIN Pontianak* ISSN 7, no. 2 (2024): 153–85.

<sup>16</sup> Bustanul Arifin et al., "Mubadalah in the Transformation of Identity Politics in Indonesia: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journal of Islamic Mubadalah*, 2024, 62–78.

capital derived from the image of Islamic boarding schools as centers of community moral values.

Thus, this study serves to emphasize that classical political legitimacy theory is not fully capable of representing the dynamics of the political authority of *Kyai* in Indonesia. The presence of new dimensions, such as ownership of educational institutions, the use of digital technology, and interaction with modern power structures, demonstrates that *Kyai* legitimacy is better understood through a multidimensional approach that combines religious, social, economic, and symbolic factors. This distinction is important because it demonstrates the uniqueness of *Kyai* political behavior that does not fully align with Western conceptual frameworks. Therefore, theoretical efforts are needed to adapt or even reformulate the concept of political legitimacy to be more contextual to the realities of Islamic politics in Indonesia.

## Discussion

### 1. Religious and Moral Legitimacy as the Main Foundation

In the context of this research, religious and moral legitimacy is understood as the public's recognition and acceptance of the *Kyai's* authority based on their inherent spiritual capacity, personal integrity, and moral exemplarity. In practice, this legitimacy is evident in the public's adherence to the *Kyai's* directives, both in religious and political matters. This authority is built through the *Kyai's* consistency in practicing religious teachings, maintaining behavior in line with sharia norms, and demonstrating concern for the community's interests. Thus, religious and moral legitimacy can be said to be the foundation that gives the *Kyai's* voice value in political contests, regardless of the support of other social or economic capital.

An interview with KH. N (Initial name), a religious teacher (*Kyai*) who once ran for regency-level legislative office, revealed that moral legitimacy was the initial foundation that gave him confidence to enter politics. He stated, "Students and the community have trusted me for a long time, not because I wanted to enter politics, but because they saw my consistency in teaching and guiding them. When I decided to run, support flowed without me asking, because they believed my choice was for the common good." From this statement, the researcher interpreted that KH. A's political legitimacy was built on long-standing moral integrity and religious consistency. This led the community to view his participation in political contests as an extension of his leadership at the Islamic boarding school. Meanwhile, an interview with NS, a caretaker of an Islamic boarding school who has never run for office but is often sought by his congregation for political guidance, provided a different perspective. He stated, "I'm not a candidate, but when people ask who is worthy of being elected, I provide my views based on the candidate's morals and commitment to the community. Oddly enough, that guidance often becomes unanimous in the community." From this data, researchers interpret that religious and moral legitimacy does not always manifest itself in direct involvement in practical politics. Even without running for office, *Kyai* can still influence political direction because the public trusts their moral and religious views.

Researchers' observations during the regional head elections in one district showed that many people preferred to seek guidance from religious leaders (*Kyai*) before making their political choices. During routine religious study groups, for example, researchers noted that congregants would ask the *Kyai* for his views on certain candidates, and the *Kyai's* responses were immediately echoed by the majority of the congregation. This phenomenon indicates that moral legitimacy is a highly effective social mechanism for mobilizing political support. These observations reinforce interview findings that religious and moral legitimacy are not merely symbolic but actually function as political

instruments that determine the direction of collective voice.

Based on interviews and field observations, it can be confirmed that religious and moral legitimacy are the primary sources supporting the involvement of *Kyai* in politics. Both *Kyai* who directly run for office and those who simply provide guidance derive political legitimacy from public trust in their religious integrity and authority. In other words, the public judges *Kyai* not only by their formal political capacity but also by their religious consistency, moral integrity, and reputation as religious figures.

These findings reveal a pattern that religious and moral legitimacy is universal among *Kyai*, both those actively competing in the political arena and those who merely provide guidance. This legitimacy stems from the *Kyai*'s long track record of educating, guiding, and maintaining public morality. Another pattern is that society tends to view the *Kyai*'s political direction as a manifestation of religious values, making this legitimacy stronger than legitimacy based solely on economics or popularity. Thus, religious and moral legitimacy can be viewed as the primary foundation that distinguishes the political behavior of *Kyai* from that of politicians in general

## 2. Ownership of Islamic Boarding Schools as Institutional Capital

In this study, ownership of Islamic boarding schools is understood as a source of political legitimacy in the form of institutional capital. Islamic boarding schools function not only as Islamic educational institutions but also as social, economic, and cultural centers of the community. *Kyai* who own Islamic boarding schools gain additional legitimacy because they serve as a forum that binds the loyalty of students, alumni, guardians, and the surrounding community. The larger and more established the Islamic boarding school, the broader the network of political support that can be mobilized. Conversely, *Kyai* who own small Islamic boarding schools still gain institutional legitimacy, but within a more limited scope, according to the capacity of the Islamic boarding school they lead.

An interview with GH, the caretaker of a large Islamic boarding school and the elected regent, explained, "From the beginning, I intended to serve through the Islamic boarding school, educating children and guiding the community. When I was later encouraged to participate in politics, it was not because of personal ambition, but because the community saw the dedication of the Islamic boarding school and hoped that those values could be carried into a wider sphere. And with thousands of alumni spread across various regions, when I ran for regional elections, support came from them without me asking. The alumni felt a moral responsibility to strengthen my struggle, because they considered my victory also a victory for the Islamic boarding school." From this statement, the researcher interpreted that ownership of a large Islamic boarding school confers strong political legitimacy through a broad alumni network and historically established institutional loyalty. An interview with DI, the caretaker of a small Islamic boarding school in a village who is running for the legislature, revealed a different perspective. He stated, "My Islamic boarding school is not large, there are only a few dozen students. But the local community trusts me because they see the educational activities I carry out. Although the scale of support is not broad, the village community's voice is very solid because they feel close to this Islamic boarding school." Researchers interpret that even though the scale of Islamic boarding schools is small, they remain an effective source of political legitimacy, especially at the local level, due to the social closeness and emotional ties between the *Kyai*, *santri*, and the surrounding community.

Researchers' observations in one district indicate that political visits to Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) are a strategy frequently used by candidates to gain legitimacy. At a memorial

service at a large Islamic boarding school, researchers noted that candidates who attended and received a welcome from the *Kyai* (Islamic cleric) gained widespread sympathy from the congregation. Conversely, at a smaller Islamic boarding school, researchers observed how local community support for the *Kyai* automatically shifted to the candidate recommended by the *Kyai*. These findings reinforce the idea that Islamic boarding schools, both large and small, serve as institutions that provide collective legitimacy to *Kyai* and other political candidates associated with the *pesantren*.

Interviews and observations confirm that ownership of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) is a significant institutional asset in building the political legitimacy of *Kyai* (Islamic clerics). Larger *pesantren* provide broad legitimacy through their alumni networks, student guardians, and established institutional image. Smaller *pesantren* also provide political legitimacy, albeit with limited reach, but their close relationship with the local community ensures solid and loyal support. *Kyai*-managed *pesantren*, both large and small, continue to serve as institutions that channel and strengthen political legitimacy.

The overall data demonstrates a pattern that Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) function as institutions that reinforce political legitimacy, varying in scale and influence. Larger *pesantren* channels legitimacy through extensive alumni networks and strong institutional symbols, while smaller ones provide local but solid legitimacy. Whether large or small, *pesantren* serve as a distinguishing factor, giving *Kyai* (Islamic religious leaders) stronger political legitimacy than other politicians without institutional support. Thus, ownership of an Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*) has proven to be a strategic instrument for strengthening the political legitimacy of *Kyai* in Indonesia.

### 3. Political and Economic Network

In this study, the expansion of legitimacy through political and economic networks is understood as a process whereby *Kyai* gain additional authority due to their connections with political elites, political parties, and businesspeople, as well as their access to economic resources. Political networks provide legitimacy because the public perceives *Kyai* as close to power, enabling them to champion their aspirations. Meanwhile, economic networks strengthen legitimacy because *Kyai* are seen as capable of providing tangible benefits, whether through the economic empowerment of Islamic boarding schools, social assistance, or financial support for community activities. Thus, the political legitimacy of *Kyai* stems not only from their religious charisma but also from their capacity to build strategic networks in the political and economic spheres.

KH. F, a *Kyai* close to political party figures at the national level, said, "Many officials visit Islamic boarding schools, and the community sees this as a positive thing. They believe that if I have access to the government, it will be easier to fight for the interests of the Islamic boarding school and the community." Researchers interpret that the legitimacy of this *Kyai* is broadened by his political network, where the community sees the *Kyai* not only as a spiritual leader but also as a bridge between the needs of the community and the power structure. KH. N, a boarding school caretaker who developed a productive business unit, explained, "We have cooperatives and small businesses that help students and the surrounding community. From there, trust arises, because they feel that the Islamic boarding school not only educates but also helps their economic life." Researchers interpret that the legitimacy of the *Kyai* is strengthened by the economic role of the Islamic boarding school. Public support arises because the Islamic boarding school is considered to make a real contribution to improving welfare, so the *Kyai* is seen as relevant not only in religious aspects but also in economic matters.

Researchers' observations show that political and social activities in Islamic boarding schools are often supported by economic networks and political connections. For example, at major Islamic holidays, political figures and businesspeople attend to offer support. Their presence at Islamic boarding schools is not merely symbolic but also strengthens the *Kyai's* standing in the eyes of the community. Researchers note that the community places more trust in *Kyai* with extensive connections because they are perceived as capable of providing tangible benefits, both in the form of political access and economic support.

Based on interviews and observations, it can be confirmed that the legitimacy of *Kyai* is extended through political and economic networks. Political networks convey the image of *Kyai* as capable of championing the interests of the people within power structures, while economic networks provide tangible evidence of their contribution to societal welfare. Thus, the legitimacy of *Kyai* stems not only from their charisma or their Islamic boarding school (*pesantren*), but also from their capacity to forge strategic connections that directly impact society.

From the overall data, a pattern emerges that the legitimacy of *Kyai* is strengthened when supported by political and economic networks. Political networks extend the *Kyai's* authority to the realm of government and political parties, while economic networks extend authority to the realm of social welfare. The two complement each other, so that *Kyai* are seen not only as religious leaders but also as strategic actors capable of connecting community needs with political access and economic resources. This pattern distinguishes the legitimacy of *Kyai* from other political actors, as their authority rests on a combination of religious charisma, institutional capital, and political-economic networks.

#### 4. Adapting Legitimacy in the Digital Era and the Challenges of Modernity

In the context of this research, the adaptation of legitimacy in the digital era is understood as the *Kyai's* strategy in using social media and information technology to strengthen their image and mobilize political support. Digital media plays a crucial role because people now access political information extensively online. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and WhatsApp serve not only as a means of preaching but also as a medium for program socialization, political campaigns, and the dissemination of moral messages linked to national politics. Thus, the *Kyai's* legitimacy is expanded because their digital presence reaches a wider audience, including young voters who are active on social media.

KH. A, (initial name) a young cleric who once supported a regional head candidate, explained, "While socialization used to be conducted through religious study groups, now many members of the congregation learn information through social media. My sermons are uploaded to YouTube and Instagram, and from there, people can understand my political views. Even many young people who initially didn't attend religious study groups become interested because they see them online." Researchers interpret social media as an effective political campaign medium because it expands the reach of clerics' legitimacy to a more diverse segment of society. KH. NN, a cleric who frequently shares political views, said, "Someone uploaded a video of me supporting a particular candidate, but then cut it out, making it seem like I was taking an excessively biased view. That initially caused misunderstandings. However, with explanations through the official Islamic boarding school channels, people finally understood the real intent." Researchers interpret the digital space as a strategic arena but also vulnerable to disinformation. The clerics' ability to respond to digital issues determines the sustainability of their legitimacy.

Researchers' observations during the regional election campaign period revealed that social

media became the primary means of outreach for *Kyai* (Islamic scholars) and Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*). Short videos containing religious sermons delivered by *Kyai* (Islamic scholars) interspersed with political messages were frequently circulated widely on WhatsApp and Facebook. Researchers noted that the public responded more quickly to political messages through digital platforms than through conventional campaigns. Furthermore, researchers also observed a discourse competition in the digital space, where *Kyai* competed with other public figures who were more aggressive in utilizing technology.

Interviews and observations confirm that digital media plays a crucial role in strengthening the political legitimacy of *Kyai*, particularly in the realm of political campaigns and outreach. *Kyai*'s presence in the digital space expands their reach, increases their relevance to the younger generation, and accelerates the process of mobilizing support. However, challenges such as disinformation and digital political polarization also pose new challenges to their legitimacy.

The overall data reveal a pattern that the legitimacy of *Kyai* in the digital era is ambivalent: on the one hand, social media strengthens their position in political campaigns with a broad reach, especially among young voters; on the other, the digital space presents risks of message distortion, information manipulation, and opinion attacks. This pattern suggests that the legitimacy of *Kyai* is now supported not only by religious traditions and the institution of Islamic boarding schools, but also by their ability to manage their image, political messages, and communication in the competitive digital space.

The findings of this study indicate that the sources of political legitimacy of *Kyai* in Indonesia are complex and multidimensional, going beyond Max Weber's classic typology, which only classifies legitimacy into three types: traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal.<sup>17</sup> Weber explained that traditional legitimacy stems from belief in an inherited order that is carried out from generation to generation; charismatic legitimacy stems from the extraordinary personal qualities of leaders believed to possess spiritual powers; while rational-legal legitimacy is based on legal norms and formal bureaucratic structures.<sup>18</sup> In the modern political context, Weber's theory often serves as the basis for analyses of authority, but this study finds that the political reality of *Kyai* in Indonesia cannot be fully explained through this framework.<sup>19</sup> The four field findings demonstrate a unique interaction between morality, Islamic boarding school institutions, socio-economic networks, and digital adaptation that creates new forms of legitimacy.

The first finding indicates that religious and moral legitimacy are the primary foundations of a *Kyai*'s political authority. In Weber's typology, this relates to charismatic legitimacy, where a leader's authority is based on personal and spiritual qualities deemed exceptional.<sup>20</sup> However, unlike Weber's concept, which emphasizes individual charisma, the *Kyai*'s charisma is collective and based on social

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<sup>17</sup> Mohammad Kamaludin, *Pergeseran Otoritas Kiai: Dampak Dan Makna Dalam Perspektif Sosial* (Jakad Media Publishing, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Toby Huff, "Max Weber, Islam, and Rationalization: A Comparative View," *Historická Sociologie* 11, no. 1 (2019): 117–28.

<sup>19</sup> Effendi Chairi, "Ketiadaan Otoritas Terpusat Dalam Fenomena Kontemporer Di Indonesia:: Kritik Terhadap Teori Otoritas Max Weber," *SANGKÉP: Jurnal Kajian Sosial Keagamaan* 2, no. 2 (2019): 197–215.

<sup>20</sup> Silvia Safa'Atun Nisa et al., "LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION PATTERNS IN EDUCATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS: INTEGRATION OF MAX WEBER'S AUTHORITY THEORY IN THE GLOBALIZATION ERA," *Jurnal Pendidikan Integratif* 6, no. 2 (2025).

morality.<sup>21</sup> The community places trust not only because of the *Kyai*'s personal prowess, but also because of his consistently demonstrated moral consistency, integrity, and social contributions.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the *Kyai*'s charismatic legitimacy is not spontaneous but institutionalized within the value structure of the *pesantren* and local Islamic culture.<sup>23</sup> This demonstrates the transformation from personal charisma to collective moral charisma, making the *Kyai*'s legitimacy more resilient to social and political change.

The second finding regarding *pesantren* ownership aligns with Weber's traditional legitimacy, namely authority derived from established traditions and social structures.<sup>24</sup> As a hereditary institution, *pesantren* provide a strong institutional legitimacy for the *Kyai*.<sup>25</sup> However, this legitimacy not only maintains tradition but also embodies the modern functional value of *pesantren* as centers of education, economics, and social life. Thus, *pesantren* function not only as traditional symbols but also as modern institutions adaptive to contemporary political and social needs.<sup>26</sup> In this context, Weber's traditional legitimacy experiences an expansion of meaning, becoming traditional-progressive legitimacy, as *pesantren* combine traditional values with evolving social rationality.<sup>27</sup>

The third finding reveals legitimacy born from political and economic networks. Weber did not view social and economic networks as sources of legitimacy, but merely as administrative instruments within rational-legal legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> In the context of *Kyai*, these networks actually become a source of authority in their own right. The *Kyai*'s relationships with political elites, businesspeople, and the bureaucracy strengthen their legitimacy because they are perceived as having the ability to champion the public interest.<sup>29</sup> This demonstrates the emergence of a form of instrumental legitimacy, namely legitimacy derived from the ability of religious actors to manage strategic networks to provide concrete

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<sup>21</sup> Anisa Zain Azzahra and Lalu Nauval Ahsan Thofhani, "Transformasi Kharisma Kiai Dalam Masyarakat Berbasis Informasi: Studi Di Desa Adimulya, Kabupaten Cilacap," *Mukaddimah: Jurnal Studi Islam* 10, no. 1 (2025): 58–80.

<sup>22</sup> Mohammad Bilutfikal Khofi and Mufasirul Furqon, "Strategi Kepemimpinan Kiai Dalam Mengembangkan Pondok Pesantren," *INCARE, International Journal of Educational Resources* 5, no. 3 (2024): 265–88.

<sup>23</sup> Wahyudi Abdul Wahab and M Hasbi Umar, "The Leadership Vision of Charismatic Kyai in the Implementation of Religious Moderation Values in Al-Baqiyatush Shalihah Islamic Boarding School, Jambi Province," *International Journal of Islamic Education, Research and Multiculturalism (IJIERM)* 6, no. 2 (2024): 399–424.

<sup>24</sup> Hadi Latif and Silfia Hanani, "Pemikiran Otoritas Max Weber Dalam Pengambilan Keputusan Di Sekolah: Studi Kasus Di Pondok Pesantren Tarbiyah Islamiyah Gobah V Surau," *Tadbiruna* 4, no. 2 (2025): 242–52.

<sup>25</sup> Esi Ratna Sari et al., "Praktek Kepemimpinan Pendidikan Islam Di Lembaga Pendidikan Pesantren," *Invention: Journal Research and Education Studies*, 2025, 567–80.

<sup>26</sup> Harmathilda Harmathilda et al., "Transformasi Pendidikan Pesantren Di Era Modern: Antara Tradisi Dan Inovasi," *Karimiyah* 4, no. 1 (2024): 33–50.

<sup>27</sup> Hesty Widiastuty et al., "RECONSTRUCTING RATIONALIZATION IN ISLAMIC EDUCATION: A Systematic Literature Review of Max Weber's Bureaucracy Theory," *Edukasi Islami: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 14, no. 02 (2025): 379–400.

<sup>28</sup> Nisa et al., "KEPEMIMPINAN DAN POLA KOMUNIKASI DALAM ORGANISASI PENDIDIKAN: INTEGRASI TEORI OTORITAS MAX WEBER DI ERA GLOBALISASI."

<sup>29</sup> Yanto Bashri, "Kiai in Indonesian Social-Political Changes," *Journal of Nahdlatul Ulama Studies* 2, no. 1 (2021): 67–88.

benefits to society.<sup>30</sup> This legitimacy differs from Weber's rational-legal legitimacy because it is not based on formal rules, but on the *Kyai's* social effectiveness and adaptive capacity in managing power and economic networks morally and socially.

The fourth finding shows that the legitimacy of *Kyai* is now also formed in the digital space. The presence of *Kyai* on social media, YouTube, and other digital platforms expands their influence and forms what researchers call communicative legitimacy, a new form of legitimacy that stems from the ability of religious actors to build credibility, interaction, and trust in the digital public sphere.<sup>31</sup> Weber did not discuss the modern communication space, as the context was still an industrial society in the early 20th century. In the Indonesian digital context, legitimacy no longer stems from tradition or rational-legal structures, but rather from symbolic interactions and digital credibility that influence public perception. Thus, communicative legitimacy becomes a new dimension that complements the moral and institutional legitimacy of *Kyai*.

From the four findings above, this study concludes that the two forms of Religious and Moral legitimacy and Islamic Boarding School Ownership are in line with Weber's theory (charismatic and traditional). However, the other two dimensions, namely Political and Economic Networks and Digital Adaptation, are not included in the Weberian framework. Therefore, this study proposes a new theory called the Adaptive Political Legitimacy of *Kyai Theory*. This theory combines two Weberian dimensions (charismatic and traditional) with two new dimensions (instrumental and communicative). This model shows that *Kyai* gain political authority not only through the inheritance of tradition and spiritual charisma, but also through adaptive abilities in managing socio-economic networks and digital communication spaces. The theoretical implication is that Weber's theory needs to be expanded to accommodate the dynamics of religious politics in the Islamic world, especially in Indonesia, where the sources of legitimacy are not single and formal, but multi-layered and based on social, economic, and modern technological contexts. This new theory offers a more contextual approach to understanding religion-based political authority in the contemporary era where spirituality, institutions, networks, and technology interact to form unique and dynamic patterns of legitimacy.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that the political legitimacy of *Kyai* in Indonesia is multidimensional and adaptive, and cannot be explained solely through Max Weber's classical typology of traditional, charismatic, and rational-legal legitimacy. The results indicate that only two forms of Weberian legitimacy remain relevant: charismatic legitimacy, reflected in religious and moral dimensions, and traditional legitimacy, manifested in the ownership of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) as institutional capital. These two forms form the historical and spiritual foundations for the *Kyai's* political authority within the Islamic boarding school community and the Indonesian Muslim community.

However, two other findings legitimacy through political and economic networks and adaptation to digital space point to new dimensions not found in the Weberian framework. Political-

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<sup>30</sup> Putra Muhammad Umar Maya et al., "Pemberdayaan Ekonomi Perempuan Melalui Kewirausahaan: Tinjauan Sistematis Atas Hambatan Struktural, Kendala Partisipatif, Dan Dukungan Sosial," *Jurnal Manajemen Dan Akuntansi Medan* 7, no. 2 (2025): 424–35.

<sup>31</sup> Arief Rachman et al., "Transformation of Religious Authority in the Digital Era: A Post-Normal Times Analysis by Ziauddin Sardar on the Phenomenon of Social Media Da'wah," *Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah* 45, no. 1 (2025): 107–22.

economic networks provide *Kyai* with instrumental capabilities in championing the social interests of the community and expanding political influence through relationships with power elites and economic actors. Meanwhile, *Kyai*'s involvement in digital media fosters communicative legitimacy, namely legitimacy derived from moral credibility and the ability to manage messages in the digital public sphere. These two forms of legitimacy mark a major shift in the contemporary religious political landscape of Indonesia.

Thus, this study offers the Adaptive Political Legitimacy of *Kyai Theory* as a new framework that combines Weber's classical dimensions (charismatic and traditional) with contemporary dimensions (instrumental and communicative). This theory explains that the legitimacy of *Kyai* is dynamic, rooted in spirituality and tradition, but continues to transform according to modern social, economic, and technological contexts. This theory also broadens the horizon of Weberian analysis by positioning religious actors not merely as spiritual figures, but also as socio-political agents who are adaptive to changing times.

The theoretical implication of this research is the need to reformulate the concept of political legitimacy to better contextualize it with the socio-religious realities of the Islamic world, particularly in Indonesia. Meanwhile, the practical implication suggests that strengthening the role of *Kyai* in the public sphere should maintain moral integrity and a spiritual basis, while simultaneously adapting to the demands of a modern society that is increasingly connected economically and digitally. Thus, the political legitimacy of *Kyai* in Indonesia is not only a reflection of traditional heritage but also a manifestation of the process of adapting Islamic values to the ever-evolving socio-political space.

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