

Religion and Politics in Indonesia: The Role of *Kyai* in the 2024 Election, Case Study on Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB)

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study investigates the impact of religious leaders' authority on Indonesian society. In this case, religious leaders possess exceptional and reliable religious expertise and a significant impact on society. The Indonesian populace formerly referred to them as *Kyai*. This study primarily examines the impact of the *Kyai* on the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB) party following the Ijtima' Ulama Nusantara gathering. This gathering serves as a strategic maneuver by PKB to secure victory in the upcoming 2024 general election. This study examines the impact of the religious leaders' authority within the PKB party leading up to the 2024 general election. The author contends that religious leaders in Indonesia wield authority that extends beyond religious matters and encompasses all aspects of Indonesian culture, including politics. The author also aims to assert that the party utilizes the influence of the *kyai* to enhance its electability and garner support from the community. It has been demonstrated, among other ways, through the Ijtima' Ulama Nusantara event hosted by the PKB party to secure victory in the 2024 general election. This study utilized a descriptive-analytic methodology. This study gathered written data from multiple literary works and crucial information or news from the media. This study employed Clifford Geertz's theory on religious experts as cultural brokers.

Keywords: Religious Leaders' Authority, PKB, Ijtima' Ulama Nusantara, 2024 General Election, Clifford Geertz

INTRODUCTION

There are two perspectives regarding the correlation between religion and political behavior, as stated by Hammond (1979).¹ It is contended that religious affiliation and the actions of members with unique beliefs and attitudes have a shaping impact on political behavior. The opposite viewpoint posits that the political inclination of any societal group does not always stem from its religious convictions, and any connection between the two is seen as "spurious." Researchers who hold the first perspective have considered religious allegiance while analyzing political engagement. Religious allegiance and affiliation are considered influential characteristics that impact the political behavior of society. This approach also implies that belonging to a religious community gives individuals a sense of identity that sets them apart from other groups. It is because being part of a religious group can provide members with certain norms and values that shape a unique group culture. In democratic nations, individuals can express their religious objectives through politics, as the system permits political parties to serve as

platforms for people to voice their many interests, including those related to religion. Therefore, a religious political party serves as a method of connecting religious principles with the practical circumstances encountered by followers. Believers express their religious beliefs and establish guidelines for their everyday lives through a celebration known as a party.

This study aims to further explore the concept of the dual authority of the *kyai* as religious figures in Indonesia. This study highlights the enduring influence of the *kyai* as a prominent religious figure in Indonesia. Furthermore, this authority pertains to matters of religion as well as other societal concerns, such as politics. This study will provide evidence to support the idea by presenting the actual situation within the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (PKB) party immediately following the Ijtima 'Ulama Nusantara event, which serves as a venue for the assembly of religious scholars. PKB is taking this action as part of its preparations for the upcoming 2024 general election. In the initial segment of this study, we shall examine the historical background of the PKB party. It is crucial to address this section in order to ascertain the nature of the PKB party. Moreover, this study will examine the dual jurisdiction of the *kyai*, specifically as both a religious authority and a political counselor. This study will examine the impact of the *kyai*'s influence within the PKB party during the 2024 general election, particularly following the Ijtima 'Ulama Nusantara event.

According to certain scholars, the role of the *kyai* as a religious figure in society is seen to be dual. In addition to their role as the leader of the pesantren, the *kyai*'s authority extends to all aspects of communal life, including religious ceremonies, socioeconomics, and politics, where they hold significant influence. A study conducted by Falikul Isbah found that *kyai* serve as community consultants. Isbah argues that the power of the *kyai* extends beyond spiritual, moral, and religious domains, including politics. In this scenario, the *kyai* acquires moral authority to spread Islamic doctrines inside society.²

Research studies that highlight the *kyai*'s charismatic leadership and authority beyond their religious position may be traced. Initial research was undertaken on *kyai* by (e.g., Binder, 1960; Dhofier, 1999; Geertz, 1960; Horikoshi, 1976; Jay, 1969; Noer, 1973; Wahid, 1974). Given their current authority, the *kyai* has the ability to exercise leadership, which is then met with complete loyalty from their followers. The *kyai*'s distinctive position is inseparable from the impact of his life trajectory, which has rendered him a learned intellectual; he possesses the proficiency to impart Islamic knowledge to his disciples. The *kyai* assumes the role of the exclusive instructor, particularly inside Islamic residential institutions. The wealth possessed by the *kyai* also grants it a position of prominence.³

Kyai has been actively engaged in politics and governance for a considerable time. The *kyai* not only serves as a religious figure but also plays a crucial role in shaping the social structure of society. It is a frequent occurrence for *kyai* to engage in politics and secure jobs directly within the administration. *Kyai* derives significant credibility from the community in providing guidance to individuals in matters of political affairs. This scenario exemplifies the crucial role played by the *kyai* in influencing individuals to adopt specific political ambitions. If this is the case, the *kyai*'s presence encompasses not only a religious role but also a position of political prominence (Bush & Fealy, 2014; Turmudi, 2008).

Within the political sphere, *kyai* have a crucial role not only in delineating political party boundaries but also in shaping the political process and influencing the outcomes. The power of *kyai* extends beyond external party matters, as they also have a significant impact on deciding the party's objectives.⁴ From the inception of the election until the period of reform, *Kyai* had an active role in politics, including in the functional domain, actively seeking support.⁵ The position of the *kyai*, who are utilized or selected to fulfill the desires of their constituents, becomes ambiguous. As the *kyai* joined the social groups, the party machine increased its efforts to acquire support. The preference for the *kyai* by the

is an inherent phenomenon, as the *kyai* hold a prominent social status and possess the ability to shape individuals' perspectives and decisions.⁶ Furthermore, it is important to note that the *kyai* resides and actively engages with the individuals that constitute his disciples.

The community regards the *kyai's* authority as influential in offering guidance on diverse communal issues.⁷ In rural locations, a *kyai* serves as a religious authority for Muslims, providing guidance on Islamic beliefs and practices.⁸ The effect of *kyai* in Indonesian Islamic society is firmly ingrained due to their emergence as patrons.

The *kyai* have integrated into the upper echelons of society's social, political, and economic framework. The community's reliance on the *kyai* is substantial due to their significant role as influential benefactors in society.⁹ As a proponent of Islam, *kyai* extends his influence beyond the geographical borders of his residence and, in his *pesantren*, he possesses the authority to make judgments that have the potential to alter the trajectory of socio-political affairs in Indonesia. *Kyai*, in their role as Islamic religious consultants, also have the ability to serve as political advisers, influencing socio-political orientations.¹⁰ The *kyai's* opinions and directives have a complete impact, particularly when combined with the power of the teacher-student (*kyai-santri*) psychological bond, which is both profound and moving. This impact is further magnified when we consider the large number of *pesantren* alums distributed over Indonesia.

Kyai of this nature serve as informal leaders of society. Within the framework of nationalism and statehood, the *kyai* play a crucial role in supplementing the deficiencies and capabilities within the government hierarchy, spanning from the village to the highest levels. It is not surprising that numerous government officials seek the advice or assistance of the *kyai* during elections. Furthermore, *kyai*, *pesantren*, and *jamiyah* are in charge of encountering difficulties. If the *kyai* encounters any challenges in its activities, it will request the assistance of officials to resolve them. This interaction demonstrates the manifestation of power dynamics within the *kyai* community, as individuals tend to exploit one another for personal gain. It is crucial to conduct a thorough study of the *kyai's* ongoing connection with power in order to understand the underlying principles that have been established in this interaction, both in relation to government officials and Muslims in Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive-analytic methodology. The "descriptive" part was employed to investigate the impact of religious leaders' power on Indonesian society, while the analytics was utilized to assess the impact of the *Kyai* on the PKB party following the *Ijtima' Ulama Nusantara*. The author collected data from several relevant sources, such as books, journals, and other academic publications. In addition, the author gathered material in the form of information or news from other media sources. The author provides a comprehensive depiction of the acquired facts in order to achieve a holistic understanding of the subject under investigation. Subsequently, the author scrutinized the data. The data were collected from written literature sources pertaining to the subject of investigation, including religious authorities, the PKB party, and other relevant themes. The data might exist in various forms, such as written papers, photographs, or electronic and mass media.

DISCUSSION

Based on the party's founding history, the PKB emerged as a tangible expression of the political desires of the *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) members. The forces that characterized politics after Suharto's downfall are inseparable from PKB. The *Nahdlatul Ulama* Board of Directors, as the leading Islamic

institution, approves numerous proposals aimed at establishing a political party based on Islamic principles. The decision to establish the PKB Party was made on July 23, 1998, and it was officially established in the mansion of PBNU leader K.H Abdurahman Wahid in Ciganjur, South Jakarta.¹¹

PKB is among the numerous parties that emerged following the downfall of the New Order regime, which held absolute authority for over three decades. It is widely recognized that the authoritarian rule of the New Order has greatly diminished the political power of the people by restricting the number of political parties to three: *Partai Persatuan Pembangunan* (PPP), *Partai Golongan Karya* (Golkar), and *Partai Demokrasi Indonesia* (PDI). The objective is to ensure the government's ability to carefully choose and closely oversee any political involvement of the populace. Paradoxically, the obstruction in political involvement expanded, planted the seeds of opposition, and erupted in mid-May 1998. Consequently, following the downfall of the New Order dictatorship, the populace's political capacity and ambitions materialized in the establishment of novel political parties comprising diverse factions.¹²

PKB was established on June 3, 1998, when PBNU created the Team of Five. This team was responsible for addressing the desires of NU members who sought a political party that would cater to the goals of Nahdliyin members. Following a series of meetings and gatherings, the Team of Five and the Assistant Team successfully finished their responsibilities and submitted the finalized plan for the establishment of the political party. The political party was subsequently designated as the National Awakening Party, including an image of the Indonesian archipelago encompassed by a nine-pointed star, serving as the distinguishing emblem of NU.

In the political context, ideology refers to a belief system that both explains and justifies a current or desired political structure. It also provides a strategy in the form of procedures, designs, instructions, ideas, norms, and beliefs. These beliefs and values serve as the foundation for shaping attitudes towards political events and problems, as well as guiding political behavior. The fundamental ideology of PKB is rooted in Pancasila. At the same time, its core principles revolve around the promotion of truth and integrity, the preservation of justice, the cultivation of unity, the fostering of brotherhood, and the adherence to Islamic values in accordance with *ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah*.

The establishment of PKB aims to fulfill the aspirations of Indonesian independence as stated in the preamble of the 1945 Constitution. Its objectives are to foster a fair and prosperous society, both physically and spiritually, and to establish a democratic, transparent, ethical, and morally upright political system.

Based on the aforementioned ideals and objectives, PKB is an inclusive political party that welcomes individuals from other ideological backgrounds and affiliations. It is not exclusively affiliated with the NU community. Nevertheless, the frequent expression of PKB initiators indicates that PKB is the political party representing the NU community. It is necessary to differentiate between PKB and NU. PKB is a political party that is exclusively involved in the activities of the NU community. Simultaneously, NU is a social organization that encompasses a broader range of activities than political parties.¹³

PKB, driven by the ulema, is anticipated to eliminate the injustice and arbitrariness perpetuated by state authorities. All members of Nahdliyin are optimistic that PKB will bring substantial transformations to Nahdliyin members, as this political party is the product of the intellectual minds of the ulemas who possess virtuous ideologies. Ultimately, religious and moral ideals consistently have influence over individuals. PKB strives to be inclusive, allowing party membership and orientation for all Indonesian people, not just NU members. Furthermore, the PKB platform is organized with a focus on achieving a balance between regionalism and nationalism. The two are regarded as mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory.¹⁴

The openness of PKB's struggle is seen in the detailed account of the launched struggle by PKB. 1. In the Political Sector, PKB asserts that Pancasila is the ultimate embodiment of the Indonesian nation. PKB unequivocally condemns and opposes any attempts to undermine the unity and camaraderie of the Indonesian nation. In order to enhance the quality of individuals' lives, PKB endeavors to ensure that every aspect of social and governmental structures embodies the utmost level of individual autonomy. 2. Within the Economic Sector, PKB acknowledges the absence of a strictly capitalist or socialist economic structure. However, it is undeniable that a market-based economic system cannot be obstructed any longer. The PKB aims to promote welfare, prosperity, and social justice by implementing a market economic system that encourages widespread community participation and is founded on individual capabilities and cooperation among community members to optimize their various contributions. The party ensures the preservation of individual property ownership (*hifzu al-mal*). The state is encouraged to ensure equitable business possibilities for all economic actors without any discrimination. However, special emphasis is placed on empowering players in small and home companies and industries. Staircases, particularly in remote regions. 3. In the field of law, PKB aims to construct a state that is founded on the principles of law (resistance) rather than a state that is founded on the exercise of power. The party advocates for the state to ensure the preservation of the rule of law in order to establish fairness and legal predictability. The party advocates for the implementation of a proficient and effective legal system.

1. The *Kyai's* Dual Authority: A Confluence of Religious Leadership and Political Counsel

The presence of different types of power is inherently intertwined with the impact of tradition in molding culture. According to Clifford Geertz, religious experts serve as intermediaries between different cultures. This situation arises due to the significant impact that religious authorities have had on cultural movements, enabling them to participate actively in political activities. This position asserts that the involvement of religious individuals who solely offer prayers and guidance directly impacts political negotiations.¹⁵ According to Peter L. Berger, religion serves as a sacred framework that can enhance the political influence of all human endeavors.¹⁶ Furthermore, according to Geertz, the *kyais* possess exclusive authority to exercise power within the *pesantren*. Furthermore, he possesses influence within the societal framework, where such influence holds significant worth. This viewpoint aligns with Gaventa's explanation: the conduct of this religious person falls within the realm of power dynamics. A *kyai* is revered not only inside his *pesantren* but also by the local population due to his position as an informal leader.

The *kyai* holds a prominent social status, which is determined by two elements. The *kyai* is a local authority that possesses a higher level of religious knowledge compared to the average community, and the villagers seek to learn from them. Furthermore, the majority of *kyai* originate from families of considerable wealth, and only a select few can impart Islamic teachings from the beginning.¹⁷

In Javanese civilization, the term "*kyai*" has a religious significance or is associated with exceptional good fortune. The term "*kyai*" was formerly used to refer to individuals who were recognized for their extensive knowledge and unwavering commitment to serving the community. He displays genuine and altruistic dedication. The term "*kyai*" is not solely associated with religion, such as "*ustaz*" or "*sheiks*." It also encompasses the social aspect of religion. *Kyai* are consistently seen as authoritative figures within the community, as their statements are considered to be fatwas that are adhered to by their *santri*.

The relationship between the *kyai* and his community is founded upon reciprocal expectations. Community members typically anticipate the *kyai* to offer them spiritual, moral, and religious counsel, as well as to demonstrate authoritative leadership that safeguards their authority. As a result, society holds the *kyai* in high regard, allowing them to wield moral influence and disseminate Islamic doctrines. Furthermore, the *kyai* also establish communication with external representatives on behalf of their community and rally the community to provide support for the *kyai's* advocacy efforts. In addition to serving as the leader of a *pesantren*, a *kyai* can also fulfill several duties in society, including engaging in ceremonial Islam, promoting Islamic *da'wah*, participating in politics, and contributing to the economy. Etymologically, scholars are individuals who possess extensive knowledge in religious sciences (*ulum al diniyah*) and are granted unique privileges and recognition within society. The *ulama* holds a privileged position as it is responsible for implementing *fiqh* law in society while also educating people in religious sciences and safeguarding the orthodox religious practices of its followers. Subsequently, this leads to the development of a communal culture focused on the *ulama*, as they are responsible for determining the veracity of the *ulama's* teachings. This ensures the preservation of the patrimonial power possessed by the *ulama*.¹⁹

The *ulama*, regarded as social prophets, serve as a defense mechanism against the infiltration of external influences into society, thereby protecting religious morality and ethics. Etymologically, the term "ulema" refers to an individual who possesses extensive knowledge in the field of religious sciences (*ulum al diniyah*) and is granted unique privileges and recognition within society. The *ulama* holds a privileged position as it is responsible for implementing *fiqh* law in society while also imparting religious knowledge and safeguarding the orthodox practices of its followers. Subsequently, this leads to a culture of communal adherence to the *ulama*, as they regard the *ulama's* teachings as the ultimate truth, resulting in the emergence of the *ulama's* inherited authority. The given text is incomplete and does not provide enough information to rewrite it in a straightforward and precise manner.²⁰ The *ulama*, being regarded as social prophets, serve as a barrier against the infiltration of alien influences into society, thereby protecting religious morality and ethics.

The acts of religious leaders play a significant influence in identifying the sources of power for political parties in securing the candidates who participate in the post-conflict municipal election. The relationship between political actors and voters is mostly based on the rewards gained and the authority associated with the position held.²¹

The majority of the authority wielded by religious leaders indicates that their behavior is highly political. Gramsci's analysis of hegemony during the Bolshevik Revolution emphasizes the crucial role of political struggle in exerting control over power and establishing social classes.²² The behavior of these religious personalities is evident in their activities both before and after the election. Religious leaders can influence the political landscape by prioritizing religious studies, which aligns with Gaventa's concept of power dynamics. The public readily embraces the politics of the lectures' values due to their perceived accessibility. According to Gramsci's perspective on hegemony, religious experts are regarded as intellectuals who play a crucial role in generating power.

Religion and politics are two values that may appear incompatible, but both serve a social function as mechanisms of interaction throughout society. Religion serves as a framework for individuals to lead a life guided by principles, ethics, and societal standards. Politics is inherently associated with the exercise of power and the formulation of policy. For instance, what occurred in a nation with a predominantly Muslim population? Religious authorities, often known as *ulama*, play a crucial role in closely monitoring and analyzing political developments. Nevertheless, the function of religious

authorities throughout that period varied significantly compared to the Islamic governance of several centuries prior. However, it is essential to acknowledge that religious leaders play a crucial role as the moral pillar in society. As a result, the role of this religious person holds significant political influence. His role is expected to lend credibility to the government's plans.

Religious individuals or scholars within the current societal structure wield significant influence.²³ Religious leaders, in contrast to instructors, possess Islamic boarding schools, so they distinguish themselves formally or informally. When conducting post-conflict local elections, the impact of this religious figure is taken into account in the field of practice. The capacity of religious leaders to serve as regional leaders has been observed not only in the present era but also in the past. In post-conflict local elections, this religious figure or *kyai* serves as a guiding authority for the public and students in making their decisions. In addition, political parties are also enabled by a prevailing source of personal authority. During elections or post-conflict local elections, political elites commonly seek the influence of religious leaders or *kyai* to inquire about their support. It refers to the exercise of political influence by religious leaders. There are two justifications for selecting a religious person in politics. Initially, religious leaders possess characteristics that garner respect from the community, so solidifying their positions. Furthermore, religious figures typically originate from and reside among privileged social strata or affluent groups.²⁴

In addition, it is not unusual for religious leaders to collaborate in order to safeguard the stability of the government, undermine its legitimacy, and spearhead uprisings.²⁵ An alternative viewpoint argues that the *Kyai*, serving as the patron of the community, wields significant influence in shaping the support for general elections. Furthermore, the *Kyai's* status as the local elite enables them to lead the *pesantren*. *Kyais*, being religious figures, also serve as agents of political socialization. Therefore, they cannot be dissociated from political concerns. It is well-recognized that political socialization is a lifelong process that begins in early childhood and involves families, schools, and religious leaders.

2. The Impact of the *Kyai's* on the PKB Party following the Ijtima 'Ulama Nusantara Event

The *kyai's* ability to fulfill their duty in the political setting is determined by the size and reach of their network. PKB considers this matter not only from the standpoint of political pragmatism but also takes into account socio-historical factors, including ideological influences. The *kyai* of the *pesantren* serves not only as the leader of the *pesantren* but also as a promoter and political representative for the PKB.²⁶ The *kyai's* involvement in politics within NU extends beyond being a cultural mediator or intermediary. In the realm of politics, *kyai* also serve as political intermediaries. He assumes the role of an agent in executing political actions. Even within the PKB, there are a significant number of *kyai* who also engage in political activities.²⁷

The Ijtima Ulama Nusantara has reached a consensus on certain matters. One of the mandates is to appoint Muhaimin Iskandar, the General Chair of PKB, as the national leader in 2024. The mandate is outlined in point three of the guidelines of the Ijtima Ulama Nusantara. The Ijtima Ulama Nusantara, formerly known as PKB, took place on 13-14 January 2023 at the Millenium Hotel in Jakarta.

Furthermore, the Ijtima not only granted the mandate but also conferred authority upon Muhaimin Iskandar (Cak Imin) to make decisions pertaining to PKB. The entire agreement's provisions were adopted as a recommendation by the Ijtima Ulama Nusantara to establish it as a forum for scholars, including both *kyai* and *nyai*, who are concerned with national politics. Engage in extensive communication with the *syuro* assembly, including supporting the *syuro* assembly in conducting

activities such as the Ijtima Ulama Nusantara, in order to disseminate all policies and achievements of PKB throughout society effectively.

The Ijtima Ulama Nusantara has granted complete authority to the General Chairperson of the DPP PKB to persist in advocating for Gus Muhaimin as a prominent national figure for the upcoming 2024 term. In addition to granting Gus Muhaimin the authority to make strategic decisions for the benefit of PKB, Ijtima Ulama Nusantara has also urged all PKB leaders and members to enhance their dedication to the nation by displaying the Garuda Pancasila symbol on the residences of PKB members and supporters. Furthermore, they are encouraged to advocate for fair management of national resources through various means, such as promoting transparency in the handling of state finances, preventing the rise of new oligarchs, formulating policies regarding savings, and preventing wasteful expenditure of state funds. Additionally, they are advised to prepare for an upcoming economic crisis. They are advocating for transparent and equitable elections, ensuring the autonomy of election organizers, and combating corruption in politics. Furthermore, urging religious leaders, particularly those affiliated with NU, to address and eliminate sexual violence in educational institutions, especially religious ones. Additionally, striving to provide comprehensive support and rehabilitation services for victims of violence by facilitating access to assistance and recovery facilities. The Ijtima Ulama Nusantara also advocates for the augmentation of women's participation in several economic and social domains, including the political sphere. The *kyai* and *nyai* moms participating in the Ijtima Ulama Nusantara will serve as advocates in supervising the matter of gender equality and addressing instances of abuse against women and children.

Furthermore, the Ijtima Ulama Nusantara appointed all *ulama*, including *kyai* and *nyai*, as national advocates for PKB and Muhaimin. In addition, they engage in amicable visits and extensive communication with various groups, including NU officials, Jamiyyah Thoriqoh, traditional leaders, and other leaders from broad and varied communities. PKB will be hosting an Ijtima Ulama on January 13-14, 2023. This gathering is being organized to guarantee the implementation of the party's agenda and deliberate on the challenges pertaining to leadership that will arise in the 2024 elections.

Ijtima Ulama serves as a gathering of prominent PKB members, a political party that sprang from the Nahdlatul Ulama organization. PKB has generated numerous individuals who have made significant contributions during its journey. The Ijtima Ulama Nusantara was convened to ensure that the activities and initiatives of the PKB were consistently monitored and guided by the *ulama*. Additionally, it aimed to reinforce the connection between the *ulama's* contributions and their impact on national affairs and social matters. Furthermore, the Ijtima Ulama Nusantara is anticipated to align the PKB's political endeavor with the means to achieve the noble aspirations of the Nahdlatul Ulama founding organization. The PKB's mission of struggle and political agenda is to enhance the unity and cohesion of the *ulama*.



Figure 1 Group photo of kyai and PKB party elites after the meeting

CONCLUSION

The effect of Kyai's authority as a religious figure in Indonesia extends beyond matters pertaining to religion. Furthermore, the kyai exerts a substantial impact on the neighboring community, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and political matters. In Indonesian society, the authority of religious leaders has a significant influence not only on matters of religion but also on non-religious subjects. Moreover, scholars comprehend this enduring phenomenon as the dual authority of the kyai in Indonesia. This investigation reaffirms the continued occurrence of this phenomenon in the present day. The significance of the kyai's authority in the realm of politics remains a prominent aspect of societal reality. The PKB party is cognizant of this fact. PKB, a party with significant historical connections to kyai, conducted a crucial meeting with kyai (ijtima 'ulama Nusantara) to strategize for securing victory in the 2024 general election.

ENDNOTES

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