Negotiating *Santri* Identity in Electoral Politics: Political Image Construction in the 2024 Indonesian Election

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Abstract

This article aims to describe the construction of the political identity of the santri community in the context of the 2024 General Election, highlighting the increasing visibility and influence of santri figures in Indonesia's political landscape. This research adopts a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, using snowball and purposive sampling techniques to select santri political figures who participated in the 2024 legislative elections. The validity of the data was ensured through source triangulation, and analysis was conducted using an interactive model involving data reduction, presentation, and verification. The findings reveal that santri political figures construct and display their identity—rooted in pesantren affiliation, kinship ties, and organizational networks—as strategic representations to gain political legitimacy. The research identifies three dominant identity patterns: traditional pesantren-based santri, Muslim intellectuals with academic backgrounds, and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)-affiliated santri activists. These identities are performed through campaign activities, media engagement, and symbolic religious attributes. These findings contribute to the expanding discourse on religion and politics in Indonesia, particularly the strategic role of religious identity in political branding. The study offers practical insights for political practitioners and enriches scholarly understanding of identity construction within Islamic communities. Its originality lies in mapping santri political identity construction during a contemporary national election, an area underexplored in previous studies.

Keywords: political identity; *santri* figures; Muslim intellectuals; 2024 election; political branding.

Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mendeskripsikan konstruksi identitas politik komunitas santri dalam konteks Pemilihan Umum 2024, dengan menyoroti meningkatnya visibilitas dan pengaruh figur santri dalam lanskap politik Indonesia. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi, dengan teknik purposive dan snowball sampling untuk memilih figur politik santri yang berpartisipasi dalam pemilihan legislatif 2024. Validitas data dijaga melalui triangulasi sumber, dan analisis dilakukan dengan model interaktif yang mencakup reduksi data, penyajian, dan verifikasi. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa figur politik santri membentuk dan menampilkan identitas mereka—yang berakar pada afiliasi pesantren, ikatan kekerabatan, dan jaringan organisasi—sebagai representasi strategis untuk memperoleh legitimasi politik. Penelitian ini mengidentifikasi tiga pola utama identitas: santri tradisional berbasis pesantren, intelektual Muslim dengan latar akademik, dan aktivis santri yang berafiliasi dengan Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). Identitas-identitas ini ditampilkan melalui aktivitas kampanye, keterlibatan media, serta atribut simbolik keagamaan. Temuan ini memberikan kontribusi terhadap wacana yang berkembang mengenai hubungan antara agama dan politik di Indonesia, khususnya peran strategis identitas religius dalam pencitraan politik. Studi ini menawarkan wawasan praktis bagi pelaku politik dan memperkaya kajian akademik mengenai konstruksi identitas dalam komunitas Islam. Keaslian penelitian terletak pada pemetaan konstruksi identitas politik santri dalam pemilu nasional kontemporer, sebuah bidang yang masih jarang dijelajahi dalam studi sebelumnya.

Kata Kunci: identitas politik; figur santri; intelektual Muslim; pemilu 2024; pencitraan politik.

INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a democratic country that adopts a republican system of government, where national leaders are elected directly through general elections (Antlöv & Cederroth, 2021; Kusdarini et al., 2022). Since the Reformation era, Indonesia has undergone seven presidential transitions, one of which was Abdurrahman Wahid, a prominent figure from the *santri* community (Fernando et al., 2023). The involvement of *santri* in politics is not a new phenomenon; it has existed since the founding of Nahdlatul Ulama in 1926, which carried the spirit of preserving traditional Islam within the colonial government system (Goncing, 2015). Through the *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools), *santri* are formed as a religious community that internalizes Islamic knowledge and moral values as a foundation for social engagement (Ni'am, 2015; Setyawan & Nugroho, 2022). In this context, *pesantren* serve as a center for the formation of collective *santri* identity, which eventually expanded into the political arena.

The involvement of *santri* in politics became increasingly visible during the 2024 General Election. In Kediri, East Java, rows of campaign billboards belonging to legislative candidates—who are caretakers and sons of the caretakers of the Lirboyo Islamic Boarding School—were prominently displayed along the main roads (CNN Indonesia, 2024). This serves as a concrete example of how *santri* figures, through their *pesantren* affiliation, directly entered formal political arenas and leveraged their religious networks as social and electoral capital. Additionally, in the Banten regional election, *kiai* (Islamic clerics) played a significant role as political intermediaries, influencing the political choices of their communities (Mufti, 2023). As religious leaders and community figures, *kiai* hold significant authority in mobilizing political support.

Quantitatively, the relationship between religious identity and voting behavior is also supported by various surveys. Wahyu and Sa'id (2020) found that over 50% of respondents stated they would only vote for candidates who share their religion. This preference is evident from the village level to the presidential level, highlighting the strong influence of religious affiliation in shaping voters' political orientation. In this context, *santri* as religious symbols become a strategic entity in political contestation.

This phenomenon becomes even more relevant with the rise of Muhaimin Iskandar (Cak Imin), chairman of PKB and a well-known *santri* figure, who was officially declared as the vice-presidential candidate accompanying Anies Baswedan in September 2023. Cak Imin is considered a political representation of *santri* identity, actively performing his religious and cultural background to build political image (BBC News, 2023). He utilizes the title *"Gus"* (son of a *kiai*), *pesantren* networks, and digital platforms such as his Instagram account @cakiminow to engage with younger generations. His inclusion in a major political coalition signifies the growing influence of *santri* in national elite politics.

All these developments indicate that *santri* identity is no longer merely symbolic but has become a representational strategy to attain political power. *Santri* now appear not only as voters but also as political actors with strategic influence and bargaining power (Kioupkiolis, 2018; Prajoko et al., 2024). In the context of political oligarchy—where resources and access to power are concentrated—the involvement of *santri* raises critical questions: are they merely legitimizing elite politics, or are they capable of becoming active agents who shape state policy directions? This phenomenon is important to examine academically to understand the relationship between religious identity, power structures, and electoral political contestation in contemporary Indonesian democracy (Laksana & Abduh, 2023).

Previous studies on *santri* and politics can be grouped into three main categories. First, studies on voter preference based on religion and social identity, which show that religious similarity and emotional closeness significantly influence political choices (Sobari, 2023; Wahyu & Sa'id, 2020). These studies emphasize how religious affiliation builds a loyal and strategic political support base. Second, studies on

the political communication strategies of *santri* figures, such as Jeffri's (2021) research on Amran Mahmud and Mujab and Irfansyah's (2020) analysis of K.H. Ma'ruf Amin, highlight how *santri* leaders manage their identity in polarized political environments.

Third, studies on the transformation of *santri* identity within power structures, such as Abidin (2019), show that *santri* no longer merely represent religious values but have transitioned into the political elite. In this frame, *santri* identity is redefined as a strategy to expand political influence and overcome historical marginalization.

However, previous studies have not specifically examined how *santri* political identity is constructed within the context of the 2024 election, especially in relation to Giddens's theory of structure and agency, and the dynamics of contemporary political oligarchy. This research aims to fill that gap.

This study aims to explain the construction of *santri* political identity in the context of the 2024 General Election, focusing on how *santri* figures represent themselves through attributes, narratives, and political communication strategies. Specifically, it explores how *santri* agency operates within political spaces shaped by structural forces such as political parties and state institutions.

This research argues that *santri* political identity is dynamically constructed through the interaction between structure (*pesantren* culture, political parties, and oligarchic power) and agency (the initiatives of *santri* political figures), as explained by Anthony Giddens's structuration theory (A. Giddens, 2020). The initial hypothesis is that the success of *santri* figures in politics is not solely determined by religious capital, but also by their ability to strategically frame their identity within existing power structures—leveraging political resources and digital communication to build a relevant image in contemporary electoral contexts.

RESEARCH METHODS

The unit of analysis in this study is political figures from the *santri* community who participated in the 2024 General Election. The research focuses on how their political identity is constructed and represented in the public sphere, both through formal political activities and digital communication. These figures come from various political parties, including *pesantren*-based parties such as PKB and PPP, as well as more general parties like Nasdem and PDI-P, enabling a comparative reading of *santri* identity representation within the context of electoral politics.

This study employs a qualitative approach with a descriptive design (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The choice of this approach is based on the goal of deeply understanding the socio-political phenomenon, particularly the construction of *santri*-based political identity in the context of elections. The qualitative method allows the researcher to explore symbolic dynamics, representation, and the strategies of *santri* figures comprehensively, as well as to capture the meanings that emerge from the interaction between political structures and individual agency.

This research uses two types of data sources: primary and secondary. Primary data were obtained through in-depth interviews and direct observation of informants who are political figures from the *santri* community. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected through documentation studies and literature review, including news articles, academic publications, opinion pieces, books, previous research, conference proceedings, and relevant and credible digital content from social media. In addition, digital observation was carried out on the political activities of national *santri* figures such as Muhaimin Iskandar, Mahfud MD, Yenny Wahid, and Khofifah Indar Parawansa.

Data collection was conducted through three main techniques: in-depth interviews, digital observation, and literature review. Interviews were conducted with four *santri* political figures running

for legislative office, namely: (1) Khotimah from PP Darus Saadah Lirap, Kebumen; (2) Ahmad Haujaki Al Amkani (Gus Zeki), son of the Acting Regent of Kebumen, affiliated with PKB; (3) Ahmad Athoillah (Mas Ayik), a legislative candidate from East Java representing PKB with a background in Al-Falah Islamic Boarding School, Kediri; and (4) Fuad Muhammad (Gus Mpung), a DPRD candidate from Jombang representing the Nasdem Party. The selection of informants was carried out using purposive and snowball sampling techniques based on their involvement in electoral politics and their affiliation with *pesantren*. In addition to interviews, virtual observations were conducted on the digital activities of these four figures via social media, as part of a netnographic approach to capture the expression of political identity online.

The data obtained were analyzed using an interactive model of data analysis, which involves three main stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification (Miles & Huberman, 2013). This model was chosen because it allows a continuous and iterative process of analysis from the beginning to the end of the research. To ensure data validity, source triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from interviews, digital observations, and secondary data. This triangulation process is essential to ensure that the research findings are valid and scientifically accountable.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Santri Political Figures in the 2024 Election

Talking about the political identity built and formed by political figures affiliated with *santri,* this reminds us of how the role of Islamic boarding schools developed in Indonesia. Based on secondary initial data obtained from Mahfud MD's speech as Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, the role of *santri* in government, some of which can be seen from revolutionary and evolutionary aspects, significant forms of change occur quickly and slowly. The revolutionary role of *santri* can be seen in the struggle for Indonesian independence. *Santri* were at the forefront of the war against the colonizers, and can also be identified through the post-independence tradition built by these *santri* (Irawan, 2023). However, the other side of this struggle and contribution in fact at that time did not immediately provide a strategic position for *santri* to be able to obtain seats in government. This may be due to limitations in the context of formal education, which then views *santri* as not immediately receiving adequate general knowledge, both in the fields of political science, technology, state administration, and so on. The assumption is that the knowledge that is built and received by these students is only assessed as limited to religious knowledge and sharia matters so that when they enter the field of politics and government, they will be seen as less competent and do not meet standards. This is indirectly strengthened by the assumption that people who are able to enjoy formal general education are categorized as priyayi, and not students (Burhani, 2017). Thus, in terms of quantity, it can be said that students at that time were indeed lacking in terms of ownership of educational certificates or did not have an educational background that was considered adequate.

In contrast to the context during the colonial era, *santri* are considered to have begun to develop and spread their wings to participate in Indonesian politics. This can be seen through the emergence of several religious figures, ustaz, or other figures based on *pesantren* education, who then became involved in government, and were even able to occupy existing parliamentary seats. In addition, several *santri* figures with high abilities and educational backgrounds have also begun to emerge. To name a few, Munawir Sjadzali and Mahfud MD, both of whom have received the title of Professor in the 90s. Both examples of these figures can be said to have played a major role and contributed to politics and government in Indonesia (Matanasi, 2018). In addition, related to the identity that was built, it can be said

that these two political figures, apart from being *santri*-based and close to religion, they also show an academic side as part of their identity.

Talking about the political identity of these *santri* figures, the image or image that appears on the figures actually also depends on the situation that surrounds them. At a certain level, each individual will tend to understand their respective roles as part of the identity that appears, expectations of the hopes that underlie the social role that is carried out, and how the existence of the community that is followed also influences it. At this level, the concept of identity built by individuals is actually not only tied to themselves, but also related to the interactions carried out with their environment (Haynes, 2020). Likewise, political figures who have affiliations from *santri,* they also help to bring up an image of themselves based on the environment and community that has been built previously, that *santri* must have certain aspects, which are expected to show distinction with other political figures. In addition, each *santri*-based political figure will show their own ways and strategies of communicating in representing their identity. Including how they utilize existing media optimally, to be able to build personal political branding and be able to support the depiction of political identity that is formed in the midst of society (public).

Based on a number of national political figures based on *santri,* such as Muhaimin Iskandar, Mahfud MD, Yenny Wahid, and Khofifah Indar Parawansa, these four figures were chosen purposively to represent how the image and depiction of *santri* is presented in the political realm in Indonesia (Mujani, 2023). With a number of backgrounds, each of these national political figures based on *santri* has their own specifications on how they present their identity as *santri* who are involved in politics. Based on secondary data searches, the explanation of the selected national political figures based on *santri* is as follows:

The first figure is Muhaimin Iskandar who was born on September 24, 1966 with the full name Abdul Muhaimin Iskandar. This figure is better known as Cak Imin, an Indonesian politician who has been the General Chair of PKB since 2005. Having studied at UGM and UI, and received an Honorary Doctorate from UNAIR, Cak Imin then continued one of his political careers by becoming Minister of Manpower and Transmigration in 2009. Briefly, Cak Imin began his political career as an activist for PMII, KNPI, and LKiS, a party administrator, a member of the council, and became a Minister. Currently, he is running as a vice presidential candidate to accompany Presidential Candidate Anies Baswedan (Erianto, 2024).

The second political figure is Mohammad Mahfud Mahmodin or often referred to as Mahfud MD. This figure was born on May 13, 1957, and works as an academic, judge, and politician in government. Mahfud MD is identified as a Muslim intellectual because he started his academic career as a Lecturer at UII, and then became a Professor of Constitutional Law at UII. Mahfud MD has served as the Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs (MENKOPOLHUKAM) since October 23, 2019, and is the first civilian political figure to hold the position. Currently, he is running as a Vice Presidential Candidate to accompany Presidential Candidate Ganjar Pranowo who is supported by the coalition led by the PDI-P Party. Mahfud MD's political career began as a member of the DPR, Minister of Defense, and then served as Chief Justice and Judge at the Constitutional Court in 2008-2013. During college, Mahfud MD was active as an activist for the Indonesian Islamic Students and HMI (Rumbo, 2024).

Yenny Wahid is the third figure chosen in this study. Her full name is Zannuba Ariffah Chafsoh, born on October 29, 1974, and is known primarily as a female politician, NU activist, and Director of the Wahid Institute. Yenny is the founder of the National Sovereignty Party, which later merged with the New Indonesia Party and became the New Indonesia National Sovereignty Party (PKBIB). As the daughter of Abdurrahman Wahid (Gusdur), Yenny Wahid has moderate Islamic thoughts, appreciates pluralism, and is a call for peace. Yenny has an educational background from Trisakti University (Visual Communication Design), and then continued her studies at Harvard University to study Public Administration. One of her

achievements was being named one of the recipients of the Young Global Leader award from the World Economic Forum, and she is a member of the Global Council on Faith (Tirto.id, 2023).

The fourth figure is Khofifah Indar Parawansa. In addition to receiving regular Higher Education from FISIP Unair for Strata I and FISIP UI for Strata II, Khofifah also attended the Surabaya Islamic Da'wah College in 1984-1989. Khofifah was born in Surabaya with the real name Khofifah Tegistha on May 19, 1965. She has been from PKB since 1999, and was previously in the PPP in 1992-1999. Khofifah's career can be seen through her experience as the General Chairperson of Muslimat NU for 4 periods, a member of the DPR for several periods, Minister of Social Affairs, and Governor of East Java (Parandaru, 2024).

In addition to several of the above *santri* political figures, referring directly to primary data on informants in this study, one of the informants, namely Khotimah, a *santri*-based political figure, declared herself as a legislative candidate for the upcoming election. It can be said that Khotimah had previously been a member of the legislature in Kebumen Regency, and then in the upcoming 2024 election, she will again run as part of her supporting party. Initially, Khotimah admitted that she did not know how to gain votes for herself. This was because her role in politics was believed to be a form of her devotion to her husband, Imam Sibawaih, who had previously entered the world of politics. In this context, Khotimah admitted that she was encouraged by her husband to also enter the world of politics. The efforts she made to support the political skills and knowledge that she had to have were by discussing with her husband and fellow movement activists, especially approaching the time when she was declared legitimate to be part of a political party. Khotimah also said that her experience in the world of politics (political education) was obtained from her life experiences since she was a student, until she finally became the wife of Imam Sibawaih. In this case, by becoming the wife of Imam Sibawaih who is the great Kiai of the Daru Saadah Islamic Boarding School, Khotimah's next position is to become a Nyai at the same Islamic Boarding School. Through this explanation, it can be concluded briefly that Khotimah's position is actually inseparable from the influence and personal branding of her husband, Kiai Imam Sibawaih, which then made her a figure who is also respected in the community which in fact surrounds the Daru Saadah Islamic Boarding School.

Khotimah admitted to joining PKB since 2014. It is known that PKB is a political party that has an image as a supporter of a number of political figures who come from the *santri* affiliation. One of the most famous is KH. Abdurrahman Wahid (Gusdur), or who has recently been widely discussed in the political contestation ahead of the Presidential Election, Muhaimin Iskandar, the Vice Presidential Candidate who was nominated to be the running mate of Presidential Candidate Anies Baswedan. Khotimah's involvement in the political contestation was actually considered to have paid off because her party had succeeded in becoming part of the political institution and then nominated herself as a legislative member who would compete in the 2024 political contestation. Moreover, based on secondary searches through online documentation data, Khotimah had even been registered as a legislative member in Kebumen Regency, before she re-nominated herself to become a legislative candidate in the upcoming 2024 Election.

Khotimah, who is also the wife of a Kiai, indirectly brings up her image and identity as a political figure who is close to Islamic boarding schools. Although Khotimah later admitted that she did not carry out the traditions as a Nyai in general should, but at a certain level, without realizing it, the social capital that Khotimah has can actually be used to gain votes from her voters. Khotimah said that her family did not come from Islamic boarding schools, and did not even have an Islamic boarding school. According to her, Khotimah came from an ordinary family in Alian District, Kebumen and she herself had never lived and received direct education in an Islamic boarding school for a long time. The religious education she received was only around her habit of "nyantri kalong" in a small Islamic boarding school in her village. In addition, she stated that she only gained a little knowledge of fiqh when *"nyantri kalong",* such as in

safinatun najah and sulam safinah. Khotimah's joining the PKB was stated by her as part of the spirit of the movement that she had to continue when she had previously participated in the PMII student movement.

The next political figure is Ahmad Haujaki Al Amkani or familiarly called Gus Zeki. Zeki's position as a Gus indirectly indicates his social strata which indeed acts as a son of a Kiai or owner of a *pesantren*. In this case, Gus Zeki's role as part of a political figure can be seen as going well. Guz Zeki stated that he actually did not have a formal political education. He only studied at the *pesantren* through a number of materials from the Turats Book, namely Ilmu Mantiq and Ilmu Kalam. Moreover, Gus Zeki admitted that he did not study formal education at the university level that was directly related to political science or government. Gus Zeki tends to have a stronger educational history and experience in the field of religion because he is indeed the son of a Kiai and was raised in a *pesantren* environment that is close to religious culture (Kebumen Ekspres, 2024).

Based on secondary data searches, Gus Zeki is classified as a young politician because he is only 30 years old. The experience he had in the field of religion was stated by him as a reinforcement of his intention to learn about politics and play a role in the world of politics directly. His desire to enter the world of politics was based on his devotion to his parents. Moreover, he considered that the obstacle of the lack of formal political education could be overcome through non-formal political education that he could obtain directly through his father who was once the Acting Regent of Kebumen, KH. Yazid Mahfudz.

At a glance, Gus Zeki does not use much social media or other media that can support the campaign process or political marketing. For him, the scope of the *pesantren* that is thick in him can be brought up as one of the weapons that he can use to support mass acquisition. In addition, Gus Zeki is known as a young *kiai* who has a fairly massive thoriqot congregation base in the Kebumen area. Although this was not conveyed directly, based on the investigation, Gus Zeki's political career and activities are quite good because he has currently become a member of the legislature DPRD in Kebumen Regency for the period until 2024.

Slightly different from Khotimah and Gus Zeki. Ahmad Athoillah or often called Ayik or Mas Ayik, he has a distribution of images that tend to be different from Khotimah and Zeki. In addition to studying at an Islamic boarding school, Ayik has a fairly interesting educational background because he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in International Relations from the Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta, and then continued his postgraduate education in the Political Science Department, Airlangga University (UNAIR) Surabaya. Ayik's potential is considered quite brilliant because he does have a fairly adequate basis of thought in playing a role in the world of politics. Ayik admitted that his main support in politics is the figure of KH. Abdurrahman Wahid as one of the great figures in NU and PKB. In addition, Ayik also said that before studying at university, he often had discussions with his friends in Yogyakarta.

> "But for the sake of, the basis is the Sharia. But that's what it is, yes we try as much as we can, that's in the Regional Regulation. I often tell my friends there are resais, there are activities with the youth in the Islamic Boarding School environment, never be apathetic towards politics. So we have to have, in fact, the more children of Islamic Boarding Schools, Islamic Boarding Schools, yes from boarding schools take anything, any major, later if they want to go into politics, then politics. Politics, yes in my opinion, politics and whatever it is a tool, yes" (Ayik or Ahmad Athoillah, Interview, 2024)

Ayik has a history of being active in the NU-based youth organization, IPNU in the East Java region. Simply put, Ayik's figure in political contestation is seen as focusing his political targets or segmentation on the youth realm. In this case, Ayik admitted that he was indeed competing with several political figures in the East Java area. However, the youth and millennial segmentation was deliberately taken as an object that was considered more contemporary and close to technological developments. Therefore, Ayik also

used a number of facilities in digital media, one of which was the Instagram account @gusathoillah, to package his image as a political figure who was close to young people and familiar with media digitalization. Thus, his party could easily utilize the political content that they wanted to convey to their target segmentation, namely millennials, even generation Z.

Similar to Fuad Muhammad, who is one of the legislative candidates in Electoral District 1, Jombang Regency, East Java. Both are targeting young people, especially through the use of social media. However, in terms of age, Fuad Muhammad is considered new to the political scene and is relatively young. Supported by the Nasdem Party, which is considered not to be a party that is identical to the *santri* or based on Islamic boarding schools, Fuad Muhammad can be said to be quite confident in packaging his image through the social media used. Moreover, he also tries to maximize a number of contents through the official Instagram account @fuad_hanan and the supporting Instagram account @sahabat.fuadmuhammad.jbg which then becomes an extension of the political activities and activities carried out by Fuad Muhammad. Being an interesting side of Fuad Muhammad, before he entered the world of politics, his mother, Hj. Mu'linah Shohib, had already advanced in the political scene and was also supported by the Nasdem Party.

Through the above exposure and description, it can be said that several political figures based on *santri* who have been mapped basically have similar tendencies, although they also experience a shift in identity regarding what is presented in the community. For example, both targeting the younger generation and also utilizing existing social media, Ayik and Fuad Muhammad are seen as having different ways of packaging their identities. However, Ayik has a stronger political qualification side compared to Fuad Muhammad. Apart from the realm of political education that he received formally, Ayik is more mature in age and may have more experience than Fuad. Although later both of them did compete in different realms and different levels, Ayik advanced at the provincial level and Fuad advanced at the regional level.

A different explanation when the figure of Fuad Muhammad with a background that is closer to young people, not only millennials, but also generation Z, is considered quite successful in utilizing his Instagram social media. In addition to having the backing of his family (his mother) who is also a political figure and cadre in the same party, by carrying Fuad Muhammad from a political party that is not based on *santri,* this could be a positive side to create a broader environment, that *santri* do not only have to be stuck in a homogeneous environment, but can also penetrate a wider, more heterogeneous, even more plural environment. This base is seen as being able to be a weapon for Fuad Muhammad because he is also known as a young man with a movement base and is indeed close to activists in PMII so that to mix and gather masses from new voters with NU backgrounds (and/or NU students), this may be easier for Fuad Muhammad.

Another interesting fact is that the background of the *santri* family and Islamic boarding school becomes a real consideration in playing a role in politics. Both Khotimah, Ayik, Zeki, and Fuad Muhammad, all of them are political figures who do not purely appear as political actors. Of all of them, Ayik's figure can be considered as a political figure affiliated with academics compared to others, because he is familiar with the world of politics based on his experience and the academic political realms that he has been through, such as having many discussions with political figures, being active in organizations, studying in a department close to political science and government, to having experience as an expert staff for a number of central political figures.

Another meaning regarding the political figures of Khotimah, Zeki, and Fuad Muhammad, in this case, can be said to have a given political identity. They are active as political actors because of their family

background which already has a political and mass base. For example, Khotimah who is inseparable from the political figure of her husband, Imam Sibawaih; Zeki who is the second son of the former Acting Regent, Kiai Yazid; or Fuad Muhammad who identified himself as a youth movement and son of Hj. Mu'linah Shohib, a politician and Chair of the Jombang Nasdem Party DPD. Simply put, the political identity they have is enough to provide a clear sign that these *santri* political figures cannot be separated from the political power of those closest to them, and this context is seen as being able to influence the acquisition of votes that they want to achieve later when they run as legislative candidates in the upcoming election.

Looking at Hecht's opinion Hecht (1993) which emphasizes that the context of individual identity can actually be expanded by the interactions that are carried out. This understanding complements other views and leads to what is called social identity. Indirectly, the picture of a person's social identity will be related to the social role they have, as well as how a person carries out their social function in society. Practically, this can be seen through the actions taken by the person, the behavior that is built, to the cognitive aspects and thoughts that are formulated in relation to the social role that is carried out.

Regarding the political figures who became informants, a clearer connection in the analysis can be identified regarding the social roles they play when they are involved in politics. When these figures become actors in politics, of course there are several things that must be maintained and done in order to fulfill public interests. The assumption is, as part of the legislative delegation or people's representatives, public interests must be placed in the top position, compared to private or group interests. Regardless of whether they come from a certain group, a homogeneous group, even in the ranks when they were affiliated as students before then entering the political realm. This is what then becomes the explicit appearance and impression of a political figure. The existing student base, for example, will then follow these political figures, considering that the background of these political figures is considered strong enough to create a "net" that can be used to expand the network to the community. Although later, the majority of the votes and supporters collected may in general tend to be homogeneous and one group, namely the congregation who are followers, students who were fostered when in Islamic boarding schools, or religious figures as a circle of friendship as well as the cadre formation.

Image and Identity Construction of *Santri* Political Figures

Based on virtual observations of the political identities of *santri*-based political figures, a number of descriptions of political identities that have emerged massively can be identified according to the social media used by national *santri*-based political figures (Instagram, Twitter or X, Youtube, and Tiktok). Some samples that can be studied include:

Figure 1. The image of students wearing sarongs and peci at the *Santri* Healthy Walk Event

Figure 2. Students at the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday

Figure 3. Cak Imin gayeng with students

Figure 4. Claims about student funds

Figure 5. *Santri* **who are identified with PKB and NU affiliations**

Figure 6. Campaign involving the struggle of the *santri*
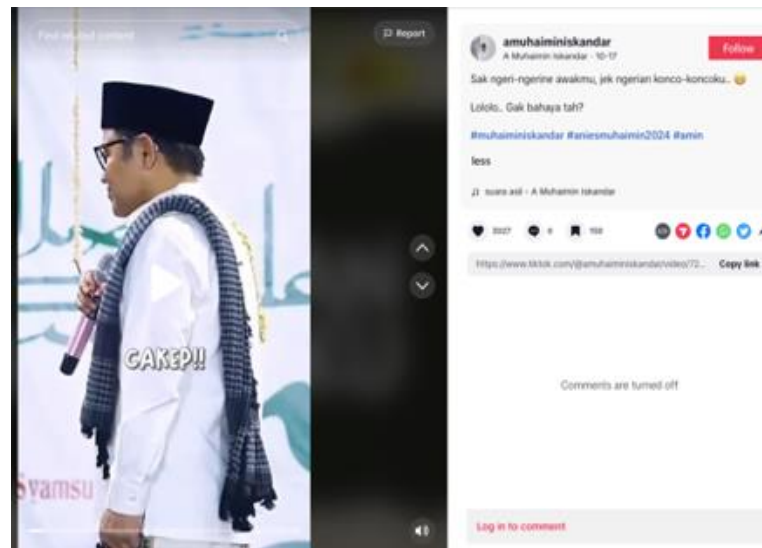
Figure 7. Punchlines and jokes from Cak Imin who always use *santri* identity attributes

Figure 8. Yenny Wahid's post related to the attributes of the *santri* community

Several posts from social media of figures who come from *santri* represent the identity of the *santri* that they build. The identity of the *santri* that they build can be seen from the way they dress in their daily

lives. This can be seen from several posts of social media content of figures who often wear white *koko* shirts, sarongs and *peci* which are often identified with the *santri* (Figure 1). In addition, the figures also often display following the agendas of the *santri* which are displayed on their social media. In addition, the identities displayed on social media also display jokes or jokes in the style of the *santri* (Figure 7). This shows that the identity displayed on social media is very close to the *santri.* In addition, several political parties that support these *santri* figures are indeed identical to parties affiliated with the *santri* (Figure 5).

Supporting the description above, several data through interviews with informants, as well as mapping regarding the image and identity of national political figures based on *santri,* it can be formulated that these *santri*-based political figures are seen as using their respective communication strategies in supporting the political identity that is built. In this case, communication that is carried out specifically can refer to direct communication, especially to the community base that is the congregation, the students under their care, or the scope of organizations that have the same affiliation with the related student political figures. Furthermore, communication strategies using social media are also carried out by a number of informants and national political figures based on students. This is because the concept of social media that can reach a massive audience in a short time, allows uploaded content (messages) to be received simultaneously by heterogeneous social media users, and on the one hand is able to provide a visualization of the image of the identity that will be presented by a number of figures.

At a glance, the tendencies of each of these *santri* political figures allow for different representations from each other, even though they later came through the same religious affiliation. One of them is Muhaimin Iskandar (Cak Imin). As someone who was once active as an activist in an extra-campus organization, served as a member of the Council, and even a Minister in the government, Cak Imin is said to be closely associated and identical when examining the identity of *santri* and his politics through the attributes he wears (*sarung* and *songkok*). This is inseparable from his party being the Chair of the religious-based Party that has supported him, namely PKB, and is portrayed as close to many NU *kiai*. In addition, Cak Imin's language style and rhetoric are considered light and try to approach the millennial generation and gen Z in order to get votes when undergoing a political contest as a Vice Presidential Candidate. This can be seen through the captions written in his social media content, as well as the packaging of his video content editing which is equipped with click bait, jokes, and punch lines to attract the attention of the audience. Moreover, Cak Imin also created a challenge "*nylepet sarung*" which was uploaded through his social media and intended for young people. The goal is of course to provide positioning related to Cak Imin's personal branding to be close to the community, attract the sympathy of young people so that they want to choose him in the political contestation that is currently being carried out, and be different from other vice presidential candidates or figures.

Unlike Cak Imin, although Mahfud MD describes himself as close to religious figures from NU in some of his content, Mahfud tends to provide a picture of his academic figure which has been his profession since the beginning, besides being a politician. It can be seen that a number of testimonies and supports were uploaded on Mahfud MD's Instagram account to provide a picture that a number of parties support Mahfud MD's vice presidential candidacy. This context indirectly also provides reinforcement that Mahfud MD is seen as a more neutral figure, able to represent the voices of academics, and is considered to have more integrity for his previous professional career. Although Mahfud MD's rhetorical style seems more formal and straight forward because the scope of academia is the initial branding of his figure, Mahfud MD also seems to be trying to approach Gen Z and artists to gain votes and support related to the political contestation he is participating in.

Mahfud MD's tendency seems similar to Ahmad Athoillah or Ayik. By utilizing Instagram, Twitter X, Youtube, and Tiktok, Ayik also defines himself as a *santri* political figure who is quite active on social media. In addition, Ayik also has an academic background so that the language style used tends to be adjusted to his academic background. As for Fuad Muhammad (Gus Mpung), his young figure is certainly considered to have a special magnet for the Gen Z generation who are not much different in age from him. In this case, Fuad Muhammad also utilizes social media, especially Instagram to upload content that aims to introduce himself as a young *santri* figure who has entered the world of politics. After all, Fuad Muhammad is still relatively new to the world of politics so that the mass base he has is certainly not as strong as the other incumbents. However, Fuad Muhammad's background as a movement activist in an organization under the auspices of NU is considered to be a support related to Fuad Muhammad's way of gaining votes for himself. In addition, the selection of the Nasdem party as the candidate to support Fuad Muhammad may be a more effective vehicle because of the political figure of his mother who had previously entered the political arena through the same supporting party.

Yenny Wahid and Khofifah Indar Parawansa are considered quite vocal in the context of politics in Indonesia, and quite active in the social media they use. Khofifah's background as identical to Muslimah, certainly strengthens her role in the world of politics, one of which is in supporting her representation as a Governor in East Java. On the other hand, Yenny with her political career is also involved in the Wahid Foundation which is active in voicing the voice of peace, maintaining tolerance and plurality, as well as realizing a moderate Islamic context, this is interesting in supporting her political image as a tolerant Muslim figure. Both Yenny and Khofifah, both can be representations of empowered women who are able to carry the voice of the community that they represent.

The fact regarding the active use of media by political *santri* figures, in fact, differs from the information collected through another informant, Khotimah. Her figure is considered not active in using social media because she stated that she only uses Whatsapp as a means of communication. However, Khotimah's background as the wife of a *kiai*, is considered to be a significant determining factor in making Khotimah advance in political contestation. In addition to Khotimah, the aspect of kinship as social capital is also possessed by Gus Zeki, so he thinks that there is no need to utilize social media in communicating and socializing with his supporters, because basically his party already has a mass base that is more than the congregation and students who follow him. Moreover, Khotimah and Gus Zeki are involved in the political map in the Kebumen area, which is a location or electoral district with a political base that is still closely related to the world of students and Islamic boarding schools.

DISCUSSION

This study finds that political figures from the *santri* community construct their political identities through a symbolic combination of visual appearance, institutional affiliation, and communication strategies adapted to the social context and voter demographics. Social media serves as a crucial medium for some figures—such as Muhaimin Iskandar (Cak Imin), Ahmad Athoillah (Ayik), and Fuad Muhammad—to showcase cultural attributes of *santri* identity, including *sarung*, *peci*, and narratives typical of *pesantren*. These identities are also manifested through language style, the use of humor, and participation in public events with Islamic themes. Meanwhile, figures such as Khotimah and Gus Zeki rely more on traditional networks—through *pesantren* affiliation, kinship ties with *kiai*, and community bases developed across generations—without extensively utilizing digital platforms.

A deeper explanation of these findings can be understood through the lens of Anthony Giddens's structuration theory. In this framework, *santri* political identity is seen as the result of a dialectical

relationship between structure and agency (van Rooyen, 2013). Structure—in this case, the values of *pesantren*, the cultural authority of *kiai*, and the social norms of the *santri* community—functions as both symbolic signification and legitimacy that frames individual political behavior. However, *santri* political figures also act as active agents who mobilize social, political, and technological resources to reproduce and modify these structures for electoral purposes. Giddens refers to this relationship as structural dualism, in which structure not only constrains but also enables action (Anthony Giddens & Held, 1982). This is reflected in informant narratives such as that of Ayik, who explained that *pesantren* and NU structures serve both as moral foundations and as sources of power to advocate for policies like the Regional *Pesantren* Regulation.

Within the framework of Giddens's three social structure systems—signification, legitimacy, and domination—each informant demonstrates signification through how they represent themselves in public, using *santri*-specific language and symbolic visual cues (Whittington, 2010). Legitimacy appears through the norms and values they carry from the *pesantren* world, such as loyalty to the *kiai* and commitment to traditional Islamic values. Domination is reflected in their use of resources tied to their social position—for instance, their influence as children of *kiai* or their family connections within political parties—to attain political power. Through these patterns, they not only reproduce *santri* identity symbolically but also reinforce their positions within local and national political power structures.

Compared to previous studies, these findings support Abidin's (2019) assertion that *santri* political identity has shifted from being purely religious symbolism to a strategic instrument in the political arena. However, unlike Abidin, who focused more on political elites, this study adds a new dimension by exploring local and younger *santri* figures who are actively participating in legislative elections. In terms of communication strategy, this study aligns with Jeffri's (2021) research, which emphasizes the importance of social media in shaping political image, while extending the focus to multiple media formats and the diverse approaches of *santri* figures. Moreover, unlike Mujab and Irfansyah's (2020) study, which centered on religious depolarization by elite figures, this research shows how religious identity is used as a tool of political differentiation at the grassroots level.

The findings of this study underscore that *santri* political identity is a construct that is historical, social, and ideological in nature—rather than being fixed or innate. Historically, this identity is rooted in the long-standing role of the *santri* community in Indonesia's struggle for independence, Islamic preaching (*da'wah*), and the development of traditional Islamic education. History records the active involvement of *santri* in resisting colonialism, such as the struggle of K.H. Zainal Musthafa in Tasikmalaya, guided by the spirit of *tawḥīd* and Islamic nationalism (Hidayat & Abdussalam, 2020). The Jihad Resolution declared by *Hadratus Syekh K.H. Hasyim Asy'ari* further exemplifies how *pesantren* served not only as spiritual centers but also as bastions of national defense (Syukur et al., 2024). Thus, *santri* identity is inextricably linked to a historical construction that fuses Islam and nationalism.

Socially, *santri* political identity cannot be separated from the role of *pesantren* as both cultural communities and complex, adaptive Islamic educational institutions. *Pesantren* in Indonesia have evolved into modern institutions that not only teach religious sciences but also instill scientific values, entrepreneurship, and social consciousness among their students (Assa'idi, 2021; Roqib, 2021). Within Indonesia's Muslim social structure, *santri* are viewed with respect due to their intellectual and moral grounding. *Pesantren* act as agents of social reform that produce not only religious scholars but also socially and economically empowered public actors.

The relationship between *santri* and *kiai* is a fundamental pillar in the formation of this identity. *Kiai* are not only spiritual leaders but also serve as moral authorities and political influencers within local

communities (Pribadi, 2013; Yani et al., 2022). This relationship is hierarchical and respectful, serving as the main mechanism for the transmission of Islamic values. *Kiai* often become centers of guidance not only in religious life but also in political and developmental affairs (Alfirdaus, 2013). In this context, many *santri* political figures gain public legitimacy not only due to their individual capacity but also because of their proximity to *kiai* or their integration within influential *pesantren* networks.

The Islamic values instilled in *pesantren* are not only taught normatively but also internalized through the daily practices of *santri*. Teaching methods such as *sorogan* and *bandongan* serve not only to help students understand classical Islamic texts but also to cultivate discipline, responsibility, honesty, and humility (Sauri, 2018). These values are carried by *santri* as they enter the public sphere, including political spaces. Even in simple practices like food management, *pesantren* instill environmental awareness through frugal and sustainable lifestyles (Hidayatullah et al., 2019).

When these Islamic values enter the political domain, a complex process unfolds between religious idealism and the pragmatic realities of politics. While Islamic political parties may not always secure dominant electoral support, Islamic mass organizations wield substantial power in mobilizing moral and emotional political agendas (Nastiti & Ratri, 2018). In this context, *kiai* play a vital role as political actors capable of shaping public opinion, even though their influence may not always translate into substantial policy change (Alfirdaus, 2013). This creates a space of ambivalence, where Islamic values are both instruments for supporting democracy and potential tools for electoral power strategies.

Furthermore, the integration of Islamic values and *santri* politics presents ideological challenges in a pluralistic society. On the one hand, *pesantren* and *kiai* play a vital role in preserving moderation and responding to social issues such as poverty and radicalism (Asror, 2017; Faisal et al., 2022). On the other hand, the politicization of religious values can also trigger polarization and threaten democratic principles, especially when sectarian tendencies or religion-based exclusivity emerge (Alam et al., 2023; Elson, 2010). Therefore, the social meaning of *santri* political identity reflects a dialectical arena between traditional heritage, structural social forces, and the ever-evolving demands of contemporary times.

Ideologically, *santri* identity in contemporary politics is often mobilized as an electoral strategy to gain legitimacy—particularly in Indonesia's Muslim-majority society. *Santri* politicians at both local and national levels use cultural symbols such as *sarung*, *peci*, and *pesantren*-style language to establish symbolic closeness with voters. As digital media has grown, preaching narratives that were once delivered through *wayang*, *gamelan*, and traditional pulpits have shifted to social media platforms and short-form video content, as seen in the rise of celebrity preachers among millennial audiences (Rustan et al., 2020; Setiawan, 2022). In this context, *santri* identity functions not only as a representation of Islamic values but also as a political branding tool in the battle for public opinion. The ideological aspect is further affirmed by the promotion of Islamic higher education pioneered by figures such as the leaders of Masyumi, which reflects the broader goal of enhancing Muslim dignity through institutional means (Latief, 2022).

Reflectively, the findings of this study reveal a duality in the use of *santri* identity in Indonesian politics. On one hand, it represents a positive manifestation of the *santri* community's active participation in electoral democracy. Their identity is no longer confined to the spiritual domain but has penetrated formal political structures. On the other hand, there is a serious risk of commodification of *santri* identity in contemporary politics. The values of *pesantren*, which fundamentally uphold knowledge, spirituality, and religious moderation, are often reduced to superficial visual symbols for electoral gain. *Santri* identity, in this context, is diluted into mere outward appearances—*sarung*, *peci*, religious slogans, or moralistic catchphrases—used to garner votes without necessarily reflecting a substantive commitment to *pesantren* values. This phenomenon is supported by Ma'arif (2019), who argues that the involvement of *pesantren* in

post-reform politics has often generated tension between the values of religious moderation and rigid, less democratic expressions of religiosity. Political manipulation of *pesantren* institutions is also evident in electoral alliances formed on pragmatic, ad hoc grounds without sustainable institutional relationships (Savirani & Aspinall, 2017).

Research by Afandi et al. (2020) shows that political endorsements by *pesantren* clerics can lead to internal conflicts, such as the political shift of Kiai Musta'in from PPP to Golkar in 1977, which caused divisions within the *santri* community. This suggests that political orientations in *pesantren* settings are often more strategic than ideological. In some cases, core *pesantren* values—such as tolerance, independence, and pluralism—are compromised for short-term electoral interests (Yahya & Sahidin, 2022). Nevertheless, there are *pesantren* that strive to maintain value autonomy through moral education and a deliberate distance from direct state influence (Kawakip & Sulanam, 2023). Thus, this commodification context highlights a serious challenge to preserving the integrity of *santri* identity in a political arena dominated by strategic calculations of power.

Furthermore, excessive dependence on traditional structures—such as *kiai* authority, *pesantren* networks, and political family heritage—also has the potential to constrain political innovation and the individual autonomy of *santri* figures. The hierarchical structure within *pesantren*, where the *kiai* holds near-absolute authority, fosters a power dynamic that can limit *santri's* freedom to adopt independent political stances (Hussin et al., 2017; Pribadi, 2013). In many cases, *santri* or political figures from *pesantren* communities feel bound by the "blessing" and political affiliations of their *kiai*, making their personal initiatives overshadowed by collective norms and paternalistic structures (Kingsley, 2014; Rosana et al., 2025).

Additionally, the dominance of *pesantren*-based political dynasties at the local level serves as a barrier to the emergence of new, innovative leaders. Azizah et al. (2021) describe this phenomenon as "octopus-like power," due to the pervasive influence of *pesantren* families in local politics. Hereditary political succession fosters exclusive structures that not only hinder independent young *santri* leaders from rising but also undermine local democratization processes. When political power is determined more by kinship and patronage networks than by merit or innovation, the potential of *santri* as agents of social transformation is reduced to that of passive followers in a stagnant system (Tusalem & Pe-Aguirre, 2013).

This reliance on collective structures also affects the personal autonomy of *santri*. Kachanoff et al. (2019) demonstrate that restrictions on collective autonomy in religious communities can directly impact the psychological well-being and self-determination of individual members. In the political context, *santri* who are too embedded in traditional social structures often struggle to assert themselves as autonomous public leaders. Stilz (2024) argues that relational autonomy requires a balance between collective identity and individual capacity to make rational political decisions. Without such space, *santri* figures risk becoming mere extensions of entrenched power rather than innovative political actors capable of introducing new ideas.

Based on the findings and dysfunctions presented, several key implications emerge in the realm of policy and capacity building for the *santri* political community. Government institutions, political parties, and Islamic educational bodies need to design *santri* political leadership programs that go beyond symbolic affiliations and are grounded in the substantive values of *pesantren*, such as intellectualism, moral independence, and social responsibility. These programs should integrate value-based political education, critical digital literacy, and leadership training that emphasizes individual autonomy and public ethics. In this way, *santri* identity is not reduced to an electoral gimmick but actualized as an authentic and sustainable model of leadership.

In addition, internal reforms within *pesantren* are necessary to balance respect for *kiai* authority with space for more independent and innovative political expression among *santri*. One potential strategy is to foster a culture of deliberative politics among *santri* through open political forums, contextualized civic education curricula, and the establishment of independent political training units within *pesantren*. On the other hand, political parties must cease exploiting *pesantren* networks as pragmatic electoral tools and instead pursue long-term institutional relationships with *pesantren* communities to foster value-driven and ethical political development.

Another strategic recommendation is to create affirmative mechanisms that encourage the emergence of young *santri* leaders outside dynastic political structures. This includes open selection processes, recognition of meritocratic achievement, and incentives for *pesantren*-based youth cadres with strong intellectual and visionary capacity. Such efforts are essential to break the cycle of patronage that inhibits political innovation. In the long run, building the political capacity of *santri* to be autonomous and critically engaged will help nurture public figures who are not only culturally representative but also capable of strategically and transformatively advancing the aspirations of the Muslim community.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the political identity of *santri* in Indonesia is a dynamic construct shaped by historical, social, and ideological dimensions. Such identity is not naturally given but formed through interactions between *pesantren* structures, the influence of *kiai*, affiliations with Islamic organizations, and the representational strategies employed by *santri* figures in political arenas. In the context of the 2024 General Election, *santri* political actors not only reproduce traditional religious symbols but also utilize communication technology and social media networks to construct and promote their political image. However, the study also reveals tensions between the substantive values of *pesantren* and the commodification of identity in electoral politics, as well as the limited space for political innovation caused by heavy reliance on traditional structures such as *kiai* patronage and local political dynasties.

The primary contribution of this study lies in its presentation of a conceptual framework that integrates Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration with the local Islamic context in Indonesia, particularly in analyzing the relationship between *pesantren* structures and *santri* political agency. It also enriches the discourse on contemporary Islamic politics by offering empirical data from *santri* figures at both local and national levels, while uncovering how social media serves as a new medium in the construction of *santri* identity. Furthermore, this study highlights a shift from normative religiosity toward complex political branding strategies, making it relevant to the fields of political identity, sociology of religion, and electoral democracy in Indonesia.

Nevertheless, the study acknowledges several limitations. First, the number of informants was limited to four *santri* figures operating in relatively homogeneous geographical contexts, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other regions with different *pesantren* dynamics. Second, limited access to internal documents of political parties or *pesantren* institutions led the analysis to focus more on external representations, such as social media content and interviews. Future research is therefore encouraged to expand the geographical and typological scope of *pesantren*, and to explore more deeply the structural dimensions of political institutions, patron-client relationships, and the potential resistance of young *santri* toward dominant traditional structures.

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