

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

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Abstract

Kyai play a considerably essential role in the life of Indonesian Muslim population, not only related to religious matters, but also pertaining to social, cultural, economic, and political aspects. This central position is highly correlated with the distinctive authority possessed by a kyai. Religious authority is dynamic and serves as a complex field of contestation. There has been an increasingly competitive contestation of religious authority, involving individuals and organizations subsequent to the fall of the New Order, which widely opens the room of democracy and leads to unrestricted political contestation for anyone to gain new authority. This article aims to delineate the road to fame of Kyai Abdullah Sam, as one of the most influential figures of kyai, and his strategy in building authority. This research was conducted using qualitative and a phenomenological approach. The data were collected through in-depth interviews, observations, and documentation to be further analyzed according to the method developed by Miles and Huberman. It was revealed that Kyai Abdullah Sam gained popularity through various social activities and intensive use of social media. Apart from the fact that Kyai Abdullah Sam neither inherits the “royal blood” of eminent kyai and is neither supported with adequate social capital, he has managed to establish strong religious authority in traditional Muslim societies by building distinctive pesantren, empowering the surrounding community through his da'wah (proselytizing), and making the best use of arts and cultural channels, social media, friendship, and scientific forums at various universities as the platform for promoting the self. This paper contributes to the development of a new perspective on traditional religious authority.

Keywords: *Abdullah Sam; kyai; contestation; authority; popular*

Abstrak

Kiai memiliki otoritas penting dalam kehidupan masyarakat Muslim Indonesia. Peranan kiai tidak hanya berkaitan dengan persoalan agama tetapi juga berkaitan dengan persoalan sosial, budaya, ekonomi, dan juga politik. Posisi penting ini memiliki relasi dengan otoritas yang dimiliki oleh seorang kiai. Otoritas keagamaan sifatnya dinamis dan menjadi medan kontestasi yang kompleks. Setelah Orde Baru jatuh kontestasi otoritas keagamaan semakin kompetitif yang melibatkan individu dan organisasi. Arus demokratisasi membuka ruang yang lebih luas bagi siapa pun untuk berkompetisi memperebutkan otoritas baru. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui bagaimana popularitas bisa diperoleh oleh Kiai Abdullah Sam dan strategi Kiai Abdullah Sam dalam membangun otoritas. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah kualitatif dengan pendekatan fenomenologi. Data yang terkumpul melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi, dan dokumentasi dianalisis dengan mengikuti langkah-langkah

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yang dikembangkan oleh Miles dan Huberman. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa popularitas diperoleh Kiai Abdullah Sam dengan melakukan berbagai kegiatan social kemasyarakatan dan memanfaatkan media social secara intensif. Kiai Abdullah Sam yang bukan keturunan kiai dan tidak memiliki modal sosial yang memadai berhasil membangun otoritas keagamaan dalam masyarakat Muslim tradisional dengan membangun pondok pesantren unik, melaksanakan dakwah pemberdayaan masyarakat, memanfaatkan saluran seni budaya, media sosial, silaturahmi, dan pertemuan ilmiah di berbagai perguruan tinggi. Tulisan ini memberikan kontribusi pada terbangunnya perspektif baru tentang otoritas keagamaan tradisional.

Kata Kunci: Abdullah Sam; kiai; kontestasi; otoritas; populer

مستخلص

يتمتع الكياهي بسلطة مهمة في حياة المجتمع الإسلامي الإندونيسي. ولم يكن دوره مقتصرًا على القضايا الدينية فحسب، بل يشمل أيضًا القضايا الاجتماعية والثقافية والاقتصادية والسياسية. ولهذه المكانة التي يتبوؤها علاقة بالسلطة التي يتمتع بها. فالسلطة الدينية تتصف بطابع ديناميكي وتصبح ميدان التنافس المعقد. وبعد سقوط النظام الجديد، تصاعد التنافس على السلطة الدينية بشكل متزايد حيث يضم أفرادًا ومنظمات عديدة. كما يتيح تدفق الديمقراطية فضاءً أوسع لأي شخص للمشاركة في التنافس على سلطة جديدة. وهذا البحث يهدف إلى معرفة الكيفية التي من خلالها اكتسب الكياهي عبد الله شام شعبيته ومعرفة الاستراتيجيات التي اتخذها في سبيل بناء السلطة. ويتم إجراء البحث على المنهج النوعي بمقاربة الظاهرية أو الفينومينولوجيا. وأما المعطيات التي تم جمعها من خلال المقابلات المعمقة والملاحظة والتوثيق فيتم تحليلها وفق الخطوات التي قام بتطويرها كل من مايلز وهويرمان. في النهاية، توصل البحث إلى أن الكياهي عبد الله شام قد اكتسب شعبيته من خلال القيام بمختلف الأنشطة الاجتماعية والاستفادة من وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بشكل مكثف. فنجح في بناء سلطة دينية داخل المجتمع الإسلامي التقليدي مع أنه لم يكن من سلاله رجال الدين وليس لديه ما يكفي من رأس المال الاجتماعي، وذلك من خلال بناء مدرسة داخلية إسلامية فريدة من نوعها، والقيام بالدعوة من أجل تمكين المجتمع، والاستفادة من قنوات الفنون والثقافة ووسائل التواصل الاجتماعي واللقاءات والمنتديات العلمية في العديد من الجامعات. ويساهم هذا البحث في بناء منظور جديد للسلطة الدينية التقليدية.

الكلمات الرئيسية: عبد الله شام؛ كياهي؛ تنافس؛ سلطة؛ شعبية

A. Introduction

Kyai play a considerably essential role in Indonesian Muslim population as the main reference for the community in the face of wide arrays of problems, not only in the religious field, but also in the political, cultural and economic fields. Therefore, the term kyai not only refers to the knowledgeable and experts of Islam, but also those who are able to solve problems Muslims face. No wonder, the title kyai bears a honorific that is highly respected in society, especially in Java.¹ Such respect is earned not only through his mastery of the religious sciences and morality, but also through the important role played by the kyai as cultural brokers.²

¹ Zamakhsyari Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren: Studi Pandangan Hidup Kyai dan Visinya Mengenai Masa Depan Indonesia*, cet. ke-6 (Jakarta: LP3ES, 2011), 56.

² Cora Du Bois, : "The Religion of Java . Clifford Geertz.," *American Anthropologist* 63, no. 3 (1961): 602–604; Amanah Nurish, "Santri and Abangan After a Half Century of Clifford Geertz," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura*, Volume 21, No. 2 (2021).

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

Nonetheless, it is untrue to constantly deem kyai as the central figure of the society because their position is highly contested, and thus may get strengthened or weakened, depending on some influential factors. One of the factors to affect the shifting position of kyai is their political behavior.³ In some cases, the involvement of some kyai in some political activities is likely to degrade their authority in the society. The kyai's political choices are not always in accordance with the aspirations and expectations of the people. Practical politics is considered contradictory with the moral majesty, and depth of knowledge of the kyai.⁴

Apart from other factors that could weaken their authority, their strategic role is known to contribute to the road to fame in the community. The fame of a kyai is not something given but gained. In other words, some factors are known to contribute and affect their rise to fame. On the basis of this complexity, this article will discuss the popularity and authority of kyai with the focal point of Kyai Abdullah Sam.

In fact, numerous researches have addressed the construction of religious authority. In a research on the relation of post-Prophetic religious authority and the construction of social formations in Indonesian and Yemeni society, Ismail Fajrie Alatas was of the view that religious authority is built by a lineage to the Prophet Muhammad.⁵ Another study by Campbell portrayed that the way of thinking, the formulation of fatwas, religious expressions or human relations that are established on the basis of religious norms are some factors to build religious authority. Nevertheless, in the current context, all of these factors are inseparable from the influence of the media.⁶ Emphasizing Campbell's research, Halimatussa'diyah found that the presence of new media had an impact on the transformation of socio-religious discourse, including aspects of authority.⁷ In Islam, religious authority, as Zulkifli stated, is never rigid, but is always dynamic to keep up with the changes of the time.⁸ The current development of this dynamic nature is attributed to the presence of new media, which has opened a space for authority contestation, and thus leads to a shift in religious authority.

Hyung-Jun Kim held that a person without any expertise in religious knowledge, without any intensive learning of religion to some prominent clerics, or intensive academic path

³ Ma'arif, M. A., Rokhman, M., Fatikh, M. A., Kartiko, A., Ahmadi, & Hasan, M. S. (2025). Kiai's Leadership Strategies in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Islamic Boarding Schools. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(1), 23–48.

⁴ Zainuddin Syarif, "Pergeseran Perilaku Politik Kyai dan Santri di Pamekasan Madura," *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 16, no. 2 (2016): 293-311.

⁵ Ismail Fajrie Alatas, "Aligning the *Sunna* and the *Jama'a*: Religious Authority and Islamic Social Formation in Contemporary Central Java, Indonesia," *Dissertation* (University of Michigan, 2016).

⁶ Heidi A. Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (Routledge, 2010).

⁷ Iim Halimatussa'diyah, "Beragama di Dunia Maya : Media Sosial dan Pandangan Keagamaan di Indonesia," *Merit Report Indonesia*, 1.1 (2020), 15 <https://ppim.uinjkt.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Merit-Report_Beragama-di-Dunia-Maya_072320.pdf>.

⁸ Zulkifli, "The Ulama in Indonesia: Between Religious Authority and Symbolic Power," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Keislaman* 37, no. 1 (2013): 180-197.

at an Islamic educational institution is likely to gain religious authority given his aptitude in interpreting Islamic teachings according to the needs of Muslims.⁹ In other words, as Burhani captured, the aspect of religious authority is no longer monopolized by certain people or groups, but has turned into a contested sphere. That said, whoever gains people's trust will acquire authority.¹⁰

The construction of religious authority no longer complies with or centered on the regular pattern of Islamic religious authority in traditional societies built on the basis of oral tradition that refers to the source of Islamic teachings.¹¹ The presence of new media, such as the internet, has shifted the authority of established traditional religious culture.¹² Some newly emerging religious authorities attributed to the presence of digital platforms have become alternative references in religious matters. The shifting situation leads to different responses from two well-established religious organizations referred to as the moderate Indonesian Islamic organizations, namely Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU). According to Akmaliah, while Muhammadiyah is inclined to calm response, NU tends to be more reactive.¹³ In this view, Zaman asserted that these attitudes indicate that they are not against the changes, but are quite responsive to the dynamics of the times.¹⁴

On this basis, this article seeks to further discuss traditional religious authority by positioning the figure of Kyai Abdullah Sam in the center stage. Two focal points are highlighted in this article: first, the popularity of Kyai Abdullah Sam as a young kyai who serve as the central figure in the community; and second, his newly gained popularity and relationship with traditional religious authority possessed by those having genealogical roots and those taking the traditional education path of pesantren.

The data in this article were obtained through interviews, observation, and documentation. The researcher had some interviews with Kyai Abdullah Sam at Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin on several occasions. The researcher also interviewed the informants who had a good record on the path of Kyai Abdullah Sam to fame. In addition, the researcher also had some participatory observations at Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin, Sumberpucung, Malang.

⁹ Hyung-Jun Kim, "Praxis and Religious Authority in Islam: The Case of Ahmad Dahlan, Founder of Muhammadiyah," *Studia Islamika* 17, no. 1 (2010): 69-92.

¹⁰ Ahmad Najib Burhani, "Plural Islam and Contestation of Religious Authority in Indonesia," dalam *Islam in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Modernity*, ed. Norshahril Saat, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019, 140-163.

¹¹ Misdah, M., Soemantri, A. I., Syahbudi, S., & Wajdi, M. B. N. (2025). Navigating Modernity and Tradition: Strategic Practices in Islamic Schools at the West Kalimantan-Malaysia Border. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(2), 1021-1048.

¹² Bryan S. Turner, "Religious Authority and the New Media," *Theory, Culture & Society* 24, no. 2 (2007): 117-134.

¹³ Wahyudi Akmaliah, "The Demise of Moderate Islam: New Media, Contestation, and Reclaiming Religious Authorities," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 10, no. 1 (2020): 1-24.

¹⁴ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

This article adheres to the notion held by Zaman that the shifting trend resulted from the introduction of new media can never erode the generally held traditional religious authority. This idea at the same time rejects the view posing new media, such as the internet, as a threat against religious people and traditional religious authorities.

Many cases in Indonesia pinpoint the important role of traditional authorities, such as kyai, in Muslim society. Kyai have always been a part of the current changes. This article offers a distinctive view from that of previous studies on authority, since it emphasizes on Kyai Abdullah Sam, a young kyai who leads Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin, Sumberpucung, Malang. This particular kyai is known to hold an exceptional position given the fact that he gained his formal education from the Faculty of Psychology of UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang. He studied religion at several pesantren in Malang. In addition, Kyai Abdullah Sam also interacts intensively with several non-governmental organizations. His activities are not limited to teaching religious knowledge in his pesantren, but also covers *da'wah* in a multicultural society. He is also involved in social charity for the poor through the program of Posdaya Berbasis Masjid (Mosque-Based Community Empowerment Post). His activities break through religious and ethnic boundaries. He is well-acquainted with anyone regardless of their religious, ethnic and cultural background. To top it all, despite the fact that Kyai Abdullah Sam does not inherit the 'royal blood' of kyai lineage since his parents are mere ordinary citizens, he has gained social recognition as a kyai. Thus, it is interesting to study the way he gained traditional religious authority amidst the challenges posed by social media against traditional authorities, as Solahudin and Fakhruroji mentioned that social media serve as a considerable important aspect in building religious authority.¹⁵

B. Discussion

1. *Post-New Order Religious Authority*

The aftermath of the New Order was marked by some major changes in the landscape of Islamic religious authority. The flourishing new Islamic groups posed new challenges for major Islamic organizations, such as NU and Muhammadiyah. The face of Indonesian Islam is dynamic. At the early period of his presidency, President Suharto made Islam one of the major political forces to support his leadership. However, over time Suharto started to marginalize, even to the extent of suppressing, the power of Islam. The New Order government strongly gripped all sorts of political-activities of Muslims in their restrained and strict control. However,

¹⁵ Dindin Solahudin and Moch Fakhruroji, "Internet and Islamic Learning Practices in Indonesia: Social Media, Religious Populism, and Religious Authority," *Religions* 11, no. 1 (2020): 1-12.

given his waning political power, starting in the 1990's, Suharto tried to win Islam back. This was marked by his approval in the establishment of Indonesian Association of Muslim Intellectuals (ICMI) with Prof. Dr. B.J. Habibie, who is Soeharto's favorite cabinet member as the General Chair.¹⁶ Confinement due to the authoritarian political policies of the New Order has shifted the attention of Islamic activists to the world of thought, education, and social life. During the New Order, Indonesian Islamic thought flourished as indicated by the mushrooming study and research groups in many fields. Indonesian Muslim intellectuals are known with the development of their distinctive thoughts and actualizations.¹⁷ The authoritarian and anti-ideological policies developed by the New Order accelerated the formation of young groups that distanced themselves from power. They were engaged in social and intellectual areas. Therefore, in this non-political area, Muslims have undergone a significant transformation.¹⁸

A shifting reality took place when the New Order collapsed in 1998, which marked the beginning of Reformation era. Soon the era saw a considerable change in the position of political Islam and Islamic thought. The unrestricted democratic space in the reform era provided broad opportunities for Muslim individuals and groups to express their ideas, thoughts, and movement agendas without any obstruction in the public sphere.¹⁹ Public space served as an open space for anyone to enter. This space allowed heightened discussions, criticisms, and contestations between groups that mobilize Islam as a source of legitimacy.²⁰

This political upturn, however, has created the shifting face of Indonesian Islam, from the widely known moderate version, to a new conservative face.²¹ The emergence of these conservative groups challenges against moderate Islamic groups, such as NU and Muhammadiyah.²² While NU and its kyai were busy managing pesantren, developing local economy, and empowering community during the authoritarian New Order and the era void of

¹⁶ R. William Liddle, "The Islamic Turn in Indonesia: A Political Explanation," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 55, no. 3 (1996): 613-634; Martin van Bruinessen et al., *Conservative Turn: Islam Indonesia dalam Ancaman Fundamentalisme* (Bandung: Mizan, 2014).

¹⁷ Martin Van Bruinessen, *What Happened to the Smiling Face of Indonesian Islam? Muslim Intellectualism and the Conservative Turn in Post-Suharto Indonesia*, RSIS Working Paper, no. 222 (Singapore: Nanyang Technological University, 2011).

¹⁸ Ahmad Suaedy, "Gerakan Muslim Progresif Pasca Rejim Suharto di Indonesia," *TOLERANSI: Media Ilmiah Komunikasi Umat Beragama* 10, no. 2 (2018): 118.

¹⁹ Vedi R. Hadiz, "Indonesian Political Islam: Capitalist Development and the Legacies of the Cold War," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 30, no. 1 (2011): 3-38.

²⁰ Akimitsu Ikeda, "Armando Salvatore & Dale F. Eickelman (Eds.), *Public Islam and the Common Good*," *Orient* 40 (2005): 191-196.

²¹ Bruinessen et al., *Conservative Turn*.

²² Masdar Hilmy, "Quo-Vadis Islam Moderat Indonesia? Menimbang Kembali Modernisme Nahdlatul Ulama dan Muhammadiyah," *MIQOT: Jurnal Ilmu-ilmu Keislaman* 36, no. 2 (2012): 262-281.

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

internet connection,²³ Muhammadiyah concentrated on philanthropy, education, and health activities.²⁴ These two moderate Islamic organizations put less concern on newly emerging internet-based public space.²⁵ No wonder, new Islamic organizations, such as Salafis, Hizb ut-Tahrir Indonesia (HTI), Tarbiyah, and other similar organizations, started to make the best use of the virtual public space to fight for authority. As a result, religious authority is not only possessed by the mainstream Islamic organizations, such as NU and Muhammadiyah, but also by new organizations. This portrayal serves as an indication that religious authority is something dynamic, instead of static.²⁶ That said, any organization has the opportunity to gain authority as long as it takes serious efforts.²⁷

Two major social-religious organizations, NU and Muhammadiyah, are known to incessantly exert their efforts to gain authority, and thus their religious authority is strongly embedded and is deeply rooted in the society. However, socio-political changes have brought about broad implications, including a shift in religious authority.²⁸ Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah are now venturing into social media in order to maintain their authority, although the effectiveness of their strategy is far below that adopted by the new Islamic organizations that have long established their religious authority by making the best use of social media.²⁹

As a matter of fact, the religious authority of traditional Islamic circles today is constantly under a threat of serious challenges from the newly emerging conservative Islamic organizations, which has started to gain innumerable followers since the collapse of the New Order, through their innovative efforts. They use breakthrough and attention-gabbing *da'wah* method by targeting countless university students. In addition, they also use the internet to

²³ Syarif Hidayatullah, "The Consolidation of the Islamic Traditionalism: A Case Study Of The Nahdlatul Ulama," *Proceeding of the 4th International Conference on Indonesian Studies: "Unity, Diversity, and Future"* (2012): 934-943.

²⁴ Hilman Latief and Haedar Nashir, "Local Dynamics and Global Engagements of the Islamic Modernist Movement in Contemporary Indonesia: The Case of Muhammadiyah (2000-2020)," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 39, no. 2 (2020): 290-309.

²⁵ Arifuddin Arifuddin, "DAKWAH THROUGH INTERNET: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ISLAMIC PREACHERS IN INDONESIA," *Ar-Raniry, International Journal of Islamic Studies*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.20859/jar.v3i1.80>.

²⁶ Alexander R. Arifianto, "Rising Islamism and the Struggle for Islamic Authority in Post-Reformasi Indonesia," *TRANS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* 8, no. 1 (2020): 37-50.

²⁷ Muhamad Agus Mushodiq, "Perilaku Patologis pada Kisah Nabi Musa dan 'Abd dalam Alquran: Telaah Epistemologi Al-Jābirī dan Semiotika Peirce," *ULUL ALBAB: Jurnal Studi Islam* 19, no. 1 (2018): 69-97; Anggi Afriansyah, "Konstruksi, Kontestasi, Fragmentasi, dan Pluralisasi Otoritas Keagamaan Indonesia Kontemporer," *Studia Islamika* 28, no. 1 (2021): 227-244.

²⁸ Haula Noor, "Dinamika Otoritas Keagamaan di Indonesia," *Jurnal Indo-Islamika* 2, no. 2 (2012): 311-316. Nuroniyah, W. (2023). Gender Discourses within Pesantren in Cirebon: Understanding the Typologies of Kyais' Interpretations of the Concept of Qawwam. *Samarah*, 7(2), 875-896.

²⁹ Dadan Suherdiana and Enjang Muhaemin, "The Da'wah of Nahdlatul Ulama and Muhammadiyah in Social Media of Facebook," *Ilmu Dakwah: Academic Journal for Homiletic Studies* 12, no. 2 (2018): 187-200.

expand their influence.³⁰ The emergence of conservative Islamic organizations in Indonesia is closely related with the influence of conservative Islamic organizations at a global scale.³¹

The government's efforts to curb the movement of conservative Islamic groups have played a significant role in maintaining national stability, but on the other hand also undermine the growing democracy.³² There has been a growing development of democratic atmosphere in Indonesia in various walks of life, including socio-religious life. The practice of democracy is no longer monopolized by the urban circles, but has also become an inseparable part of the life of rural communities. It took a long winding road to realize the democratic atmosphere because it has to go through many unsupportive factors, such as the authoritarianism of the village elite, absolute culture, and restrictive structures that go against the participation in public space.³³

The rapid flow of information opens up opportunities for the wider community to gain access to many things, including the achievement of socio-religious knowledge. To learn Islam today, people are no longer required to come to the kyai, through *madrasah diniyah*, pesantren, or through general recitations, since many sources of Islamic knowledge are made available on the internet.³⁴ However, a study conducted by Milie explained that preaching remains the most favorable model of Islamic religious learning for millions of Indonesian Muslims, even though this kind of Islamic learning model has many weaknesses, such as the passive role of listeners who are devoid of their right to dialogue.³⁵ The current Islamic preaching has been provided freely in numerous modern media. This change has broad implications, including the openness of religious orientation and selection of central religious figures for reference. Access to religious knowledge and religious figures is no longer monopolized by urban communities because rural communities are also provided with the same opportunities.

New media are used for various purposes, including the spread of radical Islamic teachings.³⁶ This fact has become part of the socio-religious life in Indonesia. Radical Islam movements not only spread their teachings through the internet, but also release many condemnations against NU and kyai as the pillars of the pesantren tradition.³⁷ According to Al-

³⁰ Arifianto, "Rising Islamism."

³¹ K. Navickas, "Radical Spaces: Venues of Popular Politics in London, 1790-c.1845, by Christina Parolin," *The English Historical Review* 128, no. 532 (2013): 697-699.

³² Arifianto, "Rising Islamism."

³³ Heru Cahyono, "Arah Perkembangan Demokrasi di Perdesaan Pasca Orde Baru," *Jurnal Masyarakat Indonesia*, 38, no. 2 (2012): 351-374.

³⁴ Solahudin and Fakhruroji, "Internet and Islamic Learning."

³⁵ Julian Millie, "The Situated Listener as Problem: 'Modern' and 'Traditional' Subjects in Muslim Indonesia," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 16, no. 3 (2013): 271-288.

³⁶ Jennifer Yang Hui, "The Internet in Indonesia: Development and Impact of Radical Websites," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 33, no. 2 (2010): 171-191.

³⁷ Slamet Muliono, Andi Suwarko, and Zaky Ismail, "Gerakan Salafi dan Deradikalisasi Islam di Indonesia," *Religió: Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama*, 9, no. 2 (2019): 244-266. Silahuddin, Saiful, S., Ikhwan, M., Zulfikar, T., & Hendra, S. H. (2025).

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

Makassary, new media has become a fierce space of ideological contestation. The existence of well-established traditions is constantly threatened and thus triggering myriad of conflicts in society.³⁸ The conflict is substantially not in line with the spirit of da'wah, which emphasizes the creation of harmony in society.³⁹

On one hand, the introduction of the internet has principally brought about a democratic atmosphere in religious life, but on the other hand, Indonesian democracy is still transitioning to reach consolidation.⁴⁰ The presence of democracy has changed the structure of religious power from the hierarchical to democratic and polycentric model. Religious authority is no longer centered on certain organizations and individuals, because the religious space for seeking religious knowledge is now wide open through various media.

One notable phenomenon that best represents the current condition is the introduction of online pesantren through attractive websites, designed as a learning medium as that in pesantren. Such website serves as a public learning space that is made accessible to the wider community.⁴¹ There have been various media on Islamic learning on the internet. Thus, the opportunities to gain knowledge are wide open for the communities, although not provided by pesantren, recitations, or religious teachers, but through sources in virtual media. This reality has consequently shifted the authority of religious leaders or Islamic organizations.

Nonetheless, this fact does not clearly denote the elimination of traditional religious authorities from their existence. The emergence of new media that is widely varied and is made freely accessible to the public may have an impact on the fragmentation of religious authority. All in all, traditional religious authorities are proven to have an aptitude in dealing with existing developments. Traditional religious authorities are able to maintain their existence by keeping up with the current development of Islamic discourse that penetrates the spaces of the modernists.⁴²

The introduction of new media provides an open opportunity for anyone to learn religious knowledge. In other words, it serves as a form of democratization of knowledge provided that there are no longer barriers to restrict readers' access from knowledge. The

Looking Inside Traditional Islamic Schools: Concerns and Prospects of Learning Culture. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(1), 1–22.

³⁸ Ridwan Al-Makassary, "Transnationalism and Transnational Islam in Indonesia with Special Emphasis on Papua," *International Journal of Interreligious and Intercultural Studies* 2, no. 2 (2019): 42-59.

³⁹ Harjani Hefni, "Makna dan Aktualisasi Dakwah Islam *Rahmatan lil Alamin* di Indonesia," *Ilmu Dakwah: Academic Journal for Homiletic Studies* 11, no. 1 (2017): 1-20.

⁴⁰ Louay Abdulbaki, "Democratisation in Indonesia: From Transition to Consolidation," *Asian Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 2 (2008): 151-172.

⁴¹ Saifuddin Zuhri Qudsy, "Pesantren Online: Pergeseran Otoritas Keagamaan di Dunia Maya," *Living Islam: Journal of Islamic Discourses* 2, no. 2 (2019): 169-187.

⁴² Najib Kailani and Sunarwoto, "Televangelisme Islam dalam Lanskap Otoritas Keagamaan Baru," dalam *Ulama dan Negara-Bangsa: Membaca Masa Depan Islam Politik di Indonesia*, ed. Noorhaidi Hasan, Yogyakarta: PusPIDeP, 2019.

democratization of knowledge allows anyone to gain knowledge as a way to establish their own religious authority.

The modern technological development today has brought about many most influential *ustad* (clerics) who rose to fame through social media. Greg Fealy articulated that some famous Islamic clerics have become celebrities.⁴³ These newly emerging celebrity clerics are known with their adaptive skills in designing their da'wah by making the best use of digital technological innovations. Their flair in packaging a popular way of thinking helped them gain zillion followers, especially from the digital generation. The wide social acknowledgment of this celebrity cleric has led them to gain religious authority, even though most of them do not have an adequate Islamic educational background. Roy referred to these celebrity clerics as *lumpen-intelligentsia*, while Jon Anderson would rather label them as new intellectuals.⁴⁴ Despite their devoid of a well-established religious education background, they gain the same authority as that possessed by religious traditional authorities.⁴⁵

It is noteworthy that in the Indonesian context, the label of *lumpen-intelligentsia* or new intellectuals also applies to the traditionalist NU and their pesantren. It is obvious that some traditionalists NU kyai and preachers have distributed their da'wah activities through various new media, as that conducted by Bahauddin Nursalim aka Gus Baha', Ahmad Muwafiq aka Gus Muwafiq, Nadirsyah Hosen, Kyai Anwar Zahid, and Gus Miftah. Not all of these traditionalist preachers gain the title as religious figures because of their scientific expertise in the field of religion. Some of them are recognized as religious leaders because their da'wah relies more on mediated popular culture. For instance, Gus Miftah serves as a clear representative of a religious figure, whose da'wah activities are mainly on cultural aspects. As the graduate of IAIN (State Islamic Institute), he cannot be categorized as an Islamic scholar in the traditional sense.

Miftah Maulana Habiburrohman or Gus Miftah is a preacher who has gone viral for delivering his preaching at the brothel area of "Lokalisasi Pasar Kembang Yogyakarta" (Sarkem). Gus Miftah often delivered his preaching by targeting non-religious locations, which

⁴³ Greg Fealy, "Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia," dalam *Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia*, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White, Singapore: ISEAS, 2008.

⁴⁴ Olivier Roy, "The Failure of Political Islam Revisited," in *Pathways to Contemporary Islam: New Trends in Critical Engagement*, ed. Mohamed Nawab Mohamed Osman, Amsterdam University Press, 2020. Choiri, M., & Ardyansyah, F. (2024). The Politics of Waqf Practice in Pesantren Kyai Families in Bangkalan Madura, Indonesia. *El-Usrah*, 7(1), 272–293.

⁴⁵ Azyumardi Azra, Kees van Dijk, and Nico J.G. Kaptein (eds.), *Varieties of Religious Authority: Changes and Challenges in 20th Century Indonesian Islam* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010).

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

often creates controversy. Nevertheless, the young preacher who also runs a Youtube account “Gus Miftah Official” has gained popularity through his multitude followers.⁴⁶

It is justified to classify Gus Baha’, Gus Muwafiq, Kyai Anwar Zahid, and Gus Miftah as the “millennial kyai” owing to their popularity among millennials. *Da’wah* through social media has proven to be effective in reaching out a fairly wide number of audience.⁴⁷ The emergence of this “millennial kyai” did not immediately reap positive words of appreciation. These millennial kyai are heavily criticized for their religious activities.⁴⁸ Such criticisms are inseparable from the contestation of authority among religious leaders.⁴⁹

2. *Kyai and His Authority*

Kyai is a typical Javanese honorific designation, especially in East Java and Central Java. In Javanese culture, the word kyai is broadly defined. According to Dhofier, the word kyai refers to objects or humans with special characteristics, which make them highly respected.⁵⁰ West Javanese call their kyai as *Ajengan*, the Lomboknese refer to them as *Tuan Guru*, the Sulawesi population address them as *Anregurutta*, while the Acehese call them *Tengku*. Despite the different terms, all these designation share the same meaning, namely a figure with religious expertise, who is widely respected by the community and thus gains authority.⁵¹

Authority is never static since it is highly likely to strengthen or weaken. Kyai increase their authority along with their escalating role in the framework of social transformation.⁵² A kyai who takes actions or issues policies against the community expectations will gradually decrease his authority. The kyai’s alignment with certain political parties often disappoints the public because this attitude, apart from being contrary to the public aspirations, is also deemed to be contrary to the kyai’s position as a moral guardian.⁵³

⁴⁶ Syamsul Arifin, “Gus Miftah Kisahkan Sebuah Ujian bagi Umat yang Tak Rukun,” *NU online*, 10 Desember 2019, <https://nu.or.id/nasional/gus-miftah-kisahkan-sebuah-ujian-bagi-umat-yang-tak-rukun-z5twd>.

⁴⁷ Evi Fatimatur Rusydiyah, Halimatus Sa’diyah, and Masykurotin Azizah, “The Millennial Kyais: Contemporary Indonesian Dakwah Activism through Social Media,” *Epistemé: Jurnal Pengembangan Ilmu Keislaman* 15, no. 1 (2020): 75-97.

⁴⁸ Mohamad Salik, “Conserving Moderate Islam in Indonesia: An Analysis of Muwafiq’s Speech on Online Media,” *Journal of Indonesian Islam* 13, no. 2 (2019): 373-394.

⁴⁹ Imam Jazuli, “Trend Ngaji Online dan Ambarnya Kharisma Kyai NU, sudah Saatnya Move On!” *Tribunnews.com*, 30 April 2020, <https://www.tribunnews.com/ramadan/2020/04/30/trend-ngaji-online-dan-ambarnya-kharisma-kyai-nu-sudah-saatnya-move-on?page=all>.

⁵⁰ Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren*, 55.

⁵¹ Didi Pramono, “The Authority of Kyai toward the Santri: A Review of Gender Construction at Pondok Pesantren,” *KOMUNITAS: International Journal of Indonesian Society and Culture* 10, no. 1 (2018): 92-100.

⁵² Leif Manger (ed.), *Muslim Diversity: Local Islam in Global Contexts* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 60.

⁵³ Mohamad Hidayatullah and Sudarman Sudarman, “Kyai and Political Relations Reconciling Politics and Religion in Indonesia,” *Al-Tahrir: Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 18, no. 2 (2018): 371-394.

Some kyai manage to build their central position as the founder of the pesantren, which grants them with the powerful authority.⁵⁴ The bigger the pesantren they establish, the greater their authority. This authority is generated by lineage, religious knowledge, noble character, and also supra-rational factors inherent in a kyai.⁵⁵

Another aspect that determines the authority and quality of the kyai is their proficiency in reading and interpreting Islamic classical textbooks (the yellow book). According to Bruinessen, mastery of the yellow book is an important element of the great tradition of Indonesian Islam. A kyai who profess in the interpretation of yellow book are able to convey their ideas orally in the form of recitation. Traditional Islamic knowledge is mainly transmitted through the recitation of the yellow book.⁵⁶ The combination of mastery of the yellow book text and verbal explanations is one of the pivotal instruments that determines the qualifications of a kyai.⁵⁷

It takes a long process to form religious authority in traditional Islamic societies. A person is renowned as a kyai after taking a long path of pesantren education at some different levels. The pesantren curriculum serves as the actualization of the identity of Indonesian Muslim and the Indonesian community. The pesantren curriculum is systematically structured to sharpen *santri* with expertise in classical Islamic treasures as a way to prepare them for the role of future religious leaders.⁵⁸

Nonetheless, there has been a conspicuous shift in the religious authority, including that in traditional societies. Kyai no longer refers to those meeting the traditional criteria of kyai, such as completing some stages of traditional education, establishing a pesantren, managing santri, and mosques, as those described by Zamakhsyari Dhofier.⁵⁹ Today's kyai are also no longer respected with absolute obedience.⁶⁰ The new media have now given birth to new kyai or religious actors who cannot always be addressed as ulama in the traditional sense.

3. *Kyai Abdullah Sam*

Kyai Abdullah Sam is the director of Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin, who resides in Suko Hamlet, Sumberpucung, Malang. This pesantren is located in a village with various distinctive

⁵⁴ Rosowulan, T., Hasyim, A. F., Sholikhun, M., Purwanto, P., Djamil, A., In'amuzahiddin, M., & Wijaya, R. (2025). Pesantren's Knowledge Identity Crisis in the Digital Era. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun*, 13(1), 49–76.

⁵⁵ Ronald Alan Lukens Bull, "A Peaceful Jihad: Javanese Islamic Education and Religious Identity Construction," *Dissertation* (Arizona State University, 1997).

⁵⁶ Martin van Bruinessen, "Martin van Bruinessen", ed. by Wolfgang Marschall, 1996th edn (Berne: University of Berne, 1996), 646–49.

⁵⁷ Martin van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat*, ed. ke-1 (Yogyakarta: Gading, 2015).

⁵⁸ Ronald A. Lukens-Bull, "Teaching Morality: Javanese Islamic Education in a Globalizing Era," *Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3 (2017): 26–47.

⁵⁹ Dhofier, *Tradisi Pesantren*.

⁶⁰ van Bruinessen, *Kitab Kuning, Pesantren dan Tarekat*.

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

anomali. The geographical and sociological conditions of the village are the main factors to support the development of a tradition free of religious norms and laws.⁶¹ This traditional village is renowned for traditions of cockfighting, gambling, drinking, prostitution, and the mystical world of shamanism. Sumberpucung is whether the biggest prostitution area in Malang is also situated.⁶²

Such disconcerting reality concerned Abdullah Sam a great deal. As the local of Sumberpucung, he always craves for making considerable changes in his village community. Born on August 16, 1982, Abdullah Sam does not inherit any 'royal blood' of a kyai lineage or descendants. His parents were born as peasants who could not afford to pay for his schooling. Since his fourth grade of primary school, Abdullah Sam has started his independent labor. He has been a busker, parking attendant, assistant driver, street vendor, car washer, and pedicab driver. He also once owned a coffee shop on the sidewalk, all of which were made to finance his schooling.

On the sidelines of his work, Abdullah Sam also recited the Qur'an in several pesantren. He has a profound interest in studying Islamic religious sciences, especially the yellow book. One of the pesantren where he studied was Pesantren Nurul Huda Mergosono Malang. Thus, he could rapidly develop his religious expertise given his high learning enthusiasm.

To upgrade his religious proficiency at the higher level, Abdullah Sam decided to learn at the Department of Psychology, Universitas Islam Negeri (UIN) Maliki Malang. Throughout his college life, he was involved in various organizations, such as the Indonesian Islamic Student Movement (PMII), the Student Executive Board (BEM) of UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, and the Indonesian Psychology Student Association (IMAPSI). Being active in various organizations and interacting with many leaders gave him a perspective on the social aspect of the society, including his village community. Since 1998, he has indicated the objective to make changes in his village community, but formally he could only realize his intention on June 25, 2008 by the establishment of Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin.⁶³

Kyai Abdullah Sam established and developed an educational institution with pretty distinctive and uncommon character, as indicated by the name: Pesantren Rakyat. It was founded to counter the widely held belief that pesantren is an elitist educational institution, since not all members of the Muslim community are given the opportunity to access it. The

⁶¹ Mufidah Ch, "Pesantren Rakyat: Perhelatan Tradisi Kolaboratif Kaum Abangan dengan Kaum Santri Pinggiran di Desa Sumberpucung Kabupaten Malang Jawa Timur," *el Harakah* 14, no. 1 (2012): 115-134.

⁶² Benedicta Joselin Mokal, "Prostitusi dan Kemiskinan (Lokalisasi Desa Sumberpucung Kabupaten Malang)," *Logos Spectrum* 9, no. 2 (2014): 148-52.

⁶³ Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, 12 February 2021.

socially and economically deprived community generally are not entitled to develop their potential through pesantren. On this basis, Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin was established with the aim of educating the public at large, since it always bases its policy for the sake of the common good of the surrounding community.⁶⁴

Accordingly, Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin has witnessed a significant growth as shown by the numerous varied educational institutions under the umbrella of this pesantren, ranging from Early Childhood Education, Kindergarten, Integrative Islamic Elementary School (SDII), Integrative Islamic Junior High School (SMP II), to Entrepreneur's High School. In other words, the pesantren has seen a quite rapid development despite the persistent obstacles and challenges.⁶⁵

The religious authority of Kyai Abdullah Sam is not something given but gained. One of the factors to influence his authority is his religious knowledge. He once learned at Pesantren Salafiyah Nurul Huda, Malang, under the care of KH Masduki Mahfudz. Abdullah Sam learned for several years in this pesantren, in addition to some other pesantren he learned from during the month of Ramadan. This way, he started to enrich his spiritual journey.

During the establishment of Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin, Kyai Abdullah Sam had to go through many ordeals, mainly from other figures who have established their religious authority in Sumberpucung. These group was mostly disturbed by the presence of Abdullah Sam's newly growing religious authority. "Why do so many people want to become kyai?," some of these figures probed Abdullah Sam with such question. Other primary challenges were also seen from various groups of communities. Nonetheless, Kyai Abdullah Sam turned these ordeals as a driving force to prove that he has the capacity to establish pesantren and provide the community with the proper education.

Another aspect that strongly supports Kyai Abdullah Sam's authority is his pesantren. In contrast to other common pesantren, Kyai Abdullah Sam named after his pesantren as Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin, which is an uncommon pesantren naming. In line with its name, Kyai Abdullah Sam revealed that his pesantren was founded with a different academic definition from the widely held view, as that developed by Zamakhsyari Dhofier or Mastuhu. In Kyai Abdullah Sam's perspective, an academic institution shall attempt to homogenize the distorted pesantren tradition. The presence of many pesantren will be eroded and eliminated by the rigid definition of an academic institution because they do not meet the academic criteria.

⁶⁴ Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, 12 February 2021.

⁶⁵ Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, 27 April 2021.

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

Thus, it is crucial to maintain the existence of a unique institution for community empowerment regardless of the strict and rigid definition of an academic institution.⁶⁶

The establishment of Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin has gradually spurred people's trust. This development is inseparable from the networking capacity. Kyai Abdullah Sam is renowned for his exceptional networking skill, since he is well aware of the importance of networking. Therefore, he constantly manages, maintains, and develops his network to help him build his authority as a kyai. His networking covers the inter-kyai, inter-pesantren, inter-community, social, cultural and economic networks.

Networking is an essential aspect in strengthening authority. Kyai Abdullah Sam highlighted that he developed his networks based on several categories, namely ideological networks, intellectual networks, theological networks, spiritual networks, and genealogical networks. All these networks are well cared for as part of his efforts to develop his pesantren.⁶⁷

The multicultural Indonesian society following the fall of President Soeharto was influenced by individual figures and organizational institutions with enormous social authority. They may come from different ideological backgrounds, be it liberal, moderate, or fundamental groups. Each competes with their ideological background to win over religious authority. The struggle for religious authority constantly took place through countless available media.⁶⁸

Jagong Maton

Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin, under the leadership of Kyai Abdullah Sam, imparts Islamic teachings to the community with various approaches as a form of actualization of thoughts and ideas that are in line with the dynamics of the framework of Islamic values. One of the selected approaches is carried out in an activity called *Jagong Maton*.

Jagong Maton serves as a forum of dialogue in the field of arts. At the *Jagong Maton* forum, everyone meets, talks, and seeks for solutions to various problems faced by the community. The talk is normally carried out in a casual and amusing manner. *Jagong Maton* has developed into a fairly well-established tradition because it continues to grow and contribute to building awareness about the importance of living in a harmonious society.⁶⁹

According to the management of Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin, Yahya, *Jagong Maton* serves as a considerably strategic platform in spreading the values of Islamic teachings. *Jagong*

⁶⁶ Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, 12 February 2021.

⁶⁷ Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, March 4, 2021.

⁶⁸ Ervan Nurtawab, "Widiyanto, Asfa: Religious Authority and the Prospects for Religious Pluralism in Indonesia . The Role of Traditionalist Muslim Scholars," *Anthropos* 112, no. 2 (2017): 716-717. Tabrani ZA., Idris, S., Yusoff, M. N., Siswanto, R., & Murziqin, R. (2023b). Strategy on boarding school development: between trend and performance analysis. *Multidisciplinary Reviews*, 6(2), 2023013.

⁶⁹ Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, March 4, 2021.

Maton is not only attended by students, but also by the *abangan* community. *Jagong Maton* is not a ceremonial forum, but an informal meeting that enables various components of society to talk about various topics at hand. On the sidelines of this talk, it is common to present various forms of traditional arts, which serve as an attraction for all social elements of the community who are craving for an opportunity to meet, get together and talk about broad aspects of life. From Yahya's point of view, *Jagong Maton* has been a satisfactorily effective platform since it can invite the public at large and attract the presence of many community leaders and their followers.⁷⁰

Kyai Abdullah Sam uses *Jagong Maton* as a medium to build close ties with the community. To promote this forum, Kyai Abdullah Sam disseminates the summary point of the foregoing *Jagong Maton* to the website of Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin. Kyai Abdullah Sam persistently summarizes the points gained from *Jagong Maton* forum to be uploaded on the website. The topics of these summary are diversely in line with the topics of the foregoing discussion, such as agriculture, psychology, Sufism, animal husbandry, attitudes to life, and many other topics.⁷¹

According to Kyai Abdullah Sam, the initial idea of *Jagong Maton* came from his concern on the disconcerting reality of his surrounding community. He was adamant to turn such a reality into a better social portrait. Thus, he approached community leaders from various groups to hold such community forum, which was only conducted only simultaneously in small informal groups. Over time, he could develop such sporadic forum into a regular one. As a result, now *Jagong Maton* has become a medium to embracing all elements of the diverse society, since everyone feels the warm welcome of this forum, instead of the authoritative atmosphere. According to Kyai Abdullah Sam, *Jagong Maton* is a medium to learn from each other. This is in line with *Jagong Maton*'s motto: *we learn, we teach, and we give us title*.⁷²

Kyai Sam's Point of View

It takes a proper attitude and understanding to deal with the multicultural life of Indonesian population, and Kyai Abdullah Sam is well aware of this diversity as indicated through how he properly dealt with the unavoidable fact of this multicultural life. Pluralism is something to be treated as reality and thus, everyone need to properly behave in accordance to this particular context. Kyai Abdullah Sam applied a particular attitude in dealing with religious and cultural pluralism through his multilevel strategy, based on the particular context and

⁷⁰ Interview with Yahya, September 11, 2020.

⁷¹ <https://pesantrenrakyat.com/tag/jagong-maton/>

⁷² Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, March 4, 2021.

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

conditions at stake. This predetermined attitude pinpoints Kyai Abdullah Sam's concern on the discourse of pluralism. To Kyai Abdullah Sam, pluralism is an unavoidable reality to be faced wisely. Kyai Abdullah Sam lives in a pluralist environment, since different religions, ethnicities, and beliefs are part of the daily life of the Sumberpucung community. As a result, it is not uncommon for Kyai Abdullah Sam's to socially interact with those of different religions and ethnics. He has been engaged in interfaith discussion forums ever since his college life, and even to this day. Interestingly, he had carried out various inter-religious activities in Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin.⁷³

In this line, Prof. Dr. Mufidah Ch., portrayed that Kyai Abdullah Sam lives in a society that is classified as the "black community" (the thugs) and "red community" (those performing syncretic version of Islam) . Such statement is attributed to Prof. Mufidah's awareness on the struggle of Kyai Abdullah Sam given the fact that Kyai Abdullah Sam is her protege.

The "red community" is highly likely to change, but the red and black community is very difficult to change. Abdullah Sam has uncommon ideals from other children in general. He has developed a very broad companionship with those of different background, which develops his fully enriched view in responding to the differences and problems faced.⁷⁴

Mufidah's intensive interaction with Kyai Abdullah Sam made her understand how Kyai Abdullah Sam built his relationship with his surrounding community. According to Mufidah, the community must be approached with the appropriate method. Without the right approach, people are likely to stay away. According to Mufidah, Kyai Abdullah Sam lives in a marginal community and he has been part of this marginal community. This deprived condition initially made Kyai Abdullah Sam felt insecure. However, over time he could boost his self-confidence, among other, due to his association with a broad circle of people, his active participation in forums with interfaith leaders, the visits made by interfaith leaders to his pesantren, and intensive communications with other religious interfaith leaders, and intensive interaction with various groups. These activities made Kyai Abdullah Sam have an appreciative and tolerant attitude towards differences. Religious and cultural differences were responded positively. This attitude is then followed up with practical steps, such as designing transformative da'wah and inclusive da'wah.⁷⁵ In line with Mufidah's statement, Dr. Muhammad Mahpur, Kyai Abdullah Sam's lecturer while studying at UIN Maulana Malik Ibrahim Malang, who has been assisting Pesantren Rakyat until today, stated that Kyai Abdullah Sam has an inclusive view. According

⁷³ Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, 6 May 2021.

⁷⁴ Interview with Prof. Dr. Mufidah, 19 July 2020.

⁷⁵ Interview with Mufidah, 19 July 2020.

to Mahpur, this view is generated by Kyai Abdullah Sam's background in social psychology besides his heavy reading and discussion on philosophical books.⁷⁶

The administrator of Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin, Yahya, also held that Kyai Abdullah Sam was quite open to accepting the existence of many religions that developed in society. In terms of inter-religious relations, according to Yahya, Kyai Abdullah Sam is of the principle that each religious adherents shall comply with their respective beliefs, should not interfere with each other, and shall protect each other. According to Yahya, Kyai Abdullah Sam is well aware that Muslims need to respect adherents of other religions, even though the need to respect others is not a demanding aspect in his community where Muslim is the major population. Adherents of other religions may be the minority in his area, but in other areas they are the majority. Therefore, Kyai Abdullah Sam, as stated by Yahya, invited everyone to treat them well, instead of treating them injudiciously.⁷⁷

Kyai Abdullah Sam's inclusive view of any religion was formed by a fusion of several factors, namely his view of religion as nature, his pluralistic social surrounding, his extensive reading across schools of thought and different religions, his relationship with various communities, his broad networking, and his view on the mutual need between adherents of different religions, either in his local area or other areas. A person's point view is not resulted from non-contextual space, but is gradually shaped by various interrelated factors.

According to Mufidah, the interaction between Kyai Abdullah Sam and adherents of other religions started with his companionship with the Buddhists in his neighborhood, but his friendship with Confucians do not take place in Sumberpucung, his permanent residence in Malang City. Kyai Abdullah Sam started to dialogue with them through his meetings in some empowerment programs, not to mention to his frequent intensive discussions with interfaith activists.⁷⁸

Kyai Abdullah Sam is a kyai with a character of traditional Islamic community. Traditional Islam is inclined to be more adaptive to any tradition. The tradition of intensive dialectics with Islamic teachings has formed a distinctive Islamic identity.

Kyai Abdullah Sam seriously take heed on various social problems, including the issue of violence that is widely committed in his areas. As a Kyai who has been actively engaged in the life of pesantren and the community, Kyai Abdullah Sam has been taking part in building public understanding on a peaceful and tolerant life. To realize his view, he took an important

⁷⁶ Interview with Dr. Mahpur, June 4, 2021.

⁷⁷ Interview with Yahya, September 11, 2020.

⁷⁸ Interview with Prof. Dr. Mufidah, 19 July 2020.

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

decision to institutionalize his institutions to ensure that they are in line with the state ideology. In terms of educational implementation, he designs the educational curriculum to be in accordance with the framework of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia.

The basis for a harmonious life is an established state system. The emergence of various groups bringing about the non-Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia system has grabbed the attention of Kyai Abdullah Sam. For him, the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia is the final form of the state that must be cared for, maintained, and managed. All forms of efforts to disrupt the existence of the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia must be watched out for since they pose a looming danger to the currently well-established system of state life as a whole.⁷⁹

This study highlights the important role of religious authorities in the life of Indonesian Muslim population. Unlike kyai in the past who held sole authority, the current religious authority is an arena of contestation between individuals and institutions.⁸⁰ This contestation makes the arena of religious authority no longer a monopoly for those who have heredity-based social capital, have established strong religious knowledge, and have studied in pesantren,⁸¹ but also for those who have the ability to manage social media in building religious authority.⁸² Those who gain an adept mastery of the new media can gain new authority, although they do not have the widely held capital as those owned by traditional religious authority.

The contestation of religious authority reflects the current shift and fragmentation of religious authority, which is influenced by, among others, the widespread use of new media. The internet has now become an inseparable part of people's lives to the extent of strong dependence and addiction.⁸³ The path taken by Kyai Abdullah Sam demonstrates the shifting trend in the contestation for religious authority. He who was born from the socially and economically deprived family and does not inherit the "royal blood" of kyai lineage can gain authority as a kyai. This recognition was born through a long winding road of struggle and hardship.

⁷⁹ Interview with Kyai Abdullah Sam, March 4, 2021.

⁸⁰ Burhani, "Plural Islam."

⁸¹ Yanwar Pribadi, "Religious Networks in Madura: Pesantren, Nahdlatul Ulama and Kyai as the Core of Santri Culture," *Al-Jami'ah* 51, no. 1 (2013): 1-32. Azizah, N., Yusrina, J. A., Nugraini, E. D., & Zulfa, L. N. (2025). "Humanizing Humans" in Inclusive Pesantren: The Role of Peer Support in Promoting Self-Efficacy and Independence. *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeum*, 13(2), 987-1020.

⁸² Pauline Hope Cheong, "Tweet the Message? Religious Authority and Social Media Innovation," *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 3, no. 3 (2014): 1-19.

⁸³ Martina Benvenuti et al., "Factors Related to Phone Snubbing Behavior in Emerging Adults: The Phubbing Phenomenon," dalam *The Psychology and Dynamics Behind Social Media Interactions*, ed. Malinda Desjarlais, Canada: Mount Royal University, 2019.

The way Kyai Abdullah Sam gained his religious authority as aforementioned, clearly marks a shift in the construction of authority in Indonesian Muslim society. Existing studies on religious authority highlighted that authority is built through a complicated process. Religious authority is related to socio-political aspects,⁸⁴ pesantren ownership,⁸⁵ and education.⁸⁶ In the case of Kyai Abdullah Sam, the authority is not something gained from his lineage, but through his undying efforts to build his own social capital and win religious authority. The capital of Kyai Abdullah Sam is not something given, but is gained through his unending efforts. He doesn't inherit the authority of kyai lineage, but he constantly accumulates many capitals from his deeds, which can be put to good use⁸⁷ to establish religious authority.

This research on Kyai Abdullah Sam definitely marks that religious authority can be built in different ways, as many kyai in Indonesia have done. Research on religious authority pinpoints that religious authority can be achieved through lineage, economic capital, oratory skills, and massive use of social media. This article complements existing studies of religious authority with the emphasis on various strategies to gain authority. Kyai Abdullah Sam's religious authority is not given through lineage-basis, but is gained through efforts to build his "distinctive" pesantren, community empowerment through his da'wah, utilization of cultural arts channels, social media, friendships, and scientific meetings at universities. This article delineates the reformulation of the traditional religious authority of Kyai Abdullah Sam.

Religious authority of a person, as that of Kyai Abdullah Sam, is never static, but dynamic.⁸⁸ Those having authority will be obeyed by his surrounding people. This obedience is related to the expertise in high religious knowledge and the daily attitude of the kyai as the role model. However, religious authority may escalate, remain the same, or even dwindle and eventually disappear. The reduction or loss of authority is marked by the increasing separation of owner of authority from social life.⁸⁹ Political partisanship is one aspect that may degrade the religious authority of a kyai. In other words, kyai may destroy their socio-religious authority because of their participation in practical politics.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Jeremy J. Kingsley, "Redrawing Lines of Religious Authority in Lombok, Indonesia," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 42, no. 5 (2014): 657–677.

⁸⁵ Akhmad Munir, "Power and Authority di Pondok Pesantren: Potret Kepemimpinan Kyai dalam Lingkungan Multikultural," *JIEMAN: Journal of Islamic Educational Management* 1, no. 1 (2019): 107-120.

⁸⁶ Muhammad Masud, Armando Salvatore, and Martin van Bruinessen (eds.), *Islam and Modernity: Key Issues and Debates* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

⁸⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, "Outline of a Theory of Practice," dalam *The New Social Theory Reader*, ed. Steven Seidman dan Jeffrey C. Alexander, ed. ke-2 (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁸⁸ Burhani, "Plural Islam."

⁸⁹ John Portmann, *Celebrity Morals and the Loss of Religious Authority* (Routledge, 2019). Damopolii, M., Shabir, M. U., & Burga, M. A. (2023). The Phenomenon of Punishment at Pesantren in South Sulawesi: An Islamic Law and Islamic Education Approaches. *Samarah*, 7(3), 1643–1660.

⁹⁰ Suswanta, "Reconsidering the Stigma of Political Opportunism among the Kyai: A Critique of the Modernist Perspective," *PCD Journal* 6, no. 1 (2018): 147-172.

POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI ABDULLAH SAM

C. Conclusion

Kyai Abdullah Sam and public recognition of his religious authority insinuates a phenomenon in line with Oliver Roy's *lumpen-intelligentsia*. The religious authority that Kyai Abdullah Sam gained was not based on his lineage, but on the basis of his proximity to the surrounding community. Kyai Abdullah Sam has built Pesantren Rakyat Al-Amin on the basis of distinctive principle, which deconstructs the commonly found character of the pesantren as formulated by Zamakhsari Dhofier and Mastuhu. Kyai Abdullah Sam consider the formulation of Dhofier and Mastuhu as limiting the diverse aspect of pesantren in the community. His constant approach and determined efforts using numerous strategies have enabled Kyai Abdullah Sam to gain religious authority from the community. The predetermined cultural approach contributes to his achievement in establishing social, religious, cultural, political, and educational activities.

This study is limited to Kyai Abdullah Sam's strategy in building religious authority. Religious authority in the society and the social engagement serve as a pivotal phenomena to be further studied. The emergence of various social organizations with an exclusive ideological pattern towards the development of identity politics has been a major challenge since these newly emerging groups exert intensive efforts to build the constantly contested religious authority by way of recruiting new members.

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**POPULAR KYAI AND NEW AUTHORITIES: A CASE STUDY OF KYAI
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