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The Kiai's Leadership Model in Shaping Social and Political Life: A Pesantren-Based Perspective in Karangharjo Village

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Abstract

The concept of kiai kepemimpinan is a kind of social and political control that is derived from several needs. Kiai dengan sosok elitnya, sebagaimana kelimuan dan keahliannya dalam berbagai bidang menjadi sosok yang dijunjung tinggi. The position of the kiai is very sensitive to changes in the political and social spheres. In addition to serving as a resource for the kiai community, it can also be used as a place for consultation. Desa Karangharjo's children are taught to respect strategic locations, not just as people with a deep understanding of religion but also as good citizens who can uphold social and political stability in the event of conflict. This is the point of contention in this study, which is based on the elit theory proposed by Vilfredo Pareto. This study employs a qualitative approach to phenomenon analysis, which is complemented by a deskriptif critical analysis method. Data collection is done by long-term observation, fieldwork, and documentation. On the other hand, the data analysis used is a deskripsi analysis model that is obtained by primary data collection, data analysis, and kesimpulan reasoning. The following are the main conclusions drawn from this research: a) the specific ways in which the community in Desa Karangharjo is involved in social and political matters; in other words, the community is being transformed into social and political consultants. In addition, kiai serves as an eminent religious figure and a specialist in classical consultation; b) the means of reconciliation between kiai and the Desa Karangharjo community is through interactive communication to understand the current situation. In addition, residents of Desa Karangharjo actively participate in social events and programs that are held in conjunction with the community. This is a type of writing that is often used as a euphemism and can be used to develop social structures, particularly in the village of Karangharjo in Silo, Kabupaten Jember.

Key Word:

Kiai Leadership,
Social and Political
Dynamics,
Rural Community,

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between kiai and rural communities in Indonesia represents one of the most enduring forms of faith-based social leadership in the Muslim world. Unlike formal political authority, the kiai's influence is rooted in moral legitimacy, religious

scholarship, and sustained emotional proximity to the community. Khanif (2007) argues that the presence of kiai in rural settings serves primarily to nurture a spirit of communal solidarity, ensuring that the cohesion and dynamism of rural society remain anchored within religious and moral values. In this capacity, the kiai functions not as a dominating or hegemonic force, but rather as a catalyst and unifier who mediates social tensions and reinforces collective identity.

This distinctive form of leadership has attracted growing scholarly attention, particularly in the context of Indonesian rural sociology and Islamic political thought. Scholars such as Horikoshi (1976) and Dhofier (1982) have long established that the kiai's authority is inseparable from the institution of the pesantren, which serves as both a center of religious education and a social infrastructure for community governance. More recently, Turmudi (2004) and Fealy & Hooker (2006) have underscored how kiai navigate the intersection of religious authority and political influence, often functioning as brokers between state institutions and grassroots communities. In the contemporary context, Muhtadi (2019) further demonstrates that kiai remain influential actors in shaping political behavior and social norms at the village level, even in the absence of formal political office.

The village of Karangharjo, located in Silo District, Jember Regency, East Java, offers a compelling case for examining this phenomenon. The village is home to fifteen kiai, four of whom lead pesantren institutions and are widely recognized as holding significant social and political influence across multiple hamlets. These four kiai do not compete for community trust or leadership recognition; rather, each commands distinct forms of respect within their respective domains, sustained in part by kinship ties that further minimize the potential for intra-elite conflict. Their collective presence creates a harmonious leadership ecology in which authority is distributed, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing rather than singular and contested.

Notably, none of the kiai in Karangharjo occupy formal governmental positions. As George (2004) observes, formal village administration — including development planning and bureaucratic governance — is managed exclusively by the village head and related government apparatus. The kiai's domain, by contrast, operates within the realm of social facts, a concept elaborated by Durkheim (1982) to describe the normative structures — including groups, social systems, roles, values, and institutions — that shape individual behavior from without. It is precisely within this sociological framework that the kiai's leadership becomes analytically significant: their authority is not imposed through institutional power but reproduced through social trust, cultural embeddedness, and moral consistency.

The theoretical lens of this study is grounded in Vilfredo Pareto's elite theory, which posits that every society is governed by a minority possessing superior qualities — whether intellectual, moral, or social — that elevate them above the general population (Pareto, 1935). Applied to the rural Indonesian context, this framework illuminates how the kiai constitutes a religious elite whose legitimacy is constructed not through coercion but through the community's voluntary recognition of their exceptional knowledge, wisdom, and spiritual authority. Dhofier (1982) reinforces this point by arguing that the designation of kiai is most fully realized when an individual leads a pesantren, as this institutional affiliation confers both symbolic and practical dimensions of authority.

Despite the substantial body of literature on kiai leadership, several gaps remain underexplored. First, existing studies tend to focus on kiai as political actors at the regional or national level, neglecting the micro-dynamics of their leadership at the village scale. Second, the relational and communicative dimensions of kiai leadership — particularly how they engage communities through interactive dialogue and participatory social programs — have received limited systematic attention. Third, the question of how pesantren-based leadership models contribute to social stability and conflict prevention in rural settings remains theoretically underdeveloped.

This study addresses these gaps by investigating three interrelated questions: (1) How do kiai in Karangharjo Village construct and exercise their leadership model within the social and political sphere of rural community life? (2) How does the community perceive and respond to the presence and authority of kiai in Karangharjo? (3) What relational patterns exist between kiai and the broader community, and how do these patterns sustain social cohesion and political stability? By engaging these questions through a qualitative fieldwork approach, this study contributes to the theoretical understanding of pesantren-based leadership as a distinctive model of faith-based social governance in rural Indonesia.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach, designed to examine the alignment between theoretical frameworks and lived social realities observed in the field. This approach is particularly suited to capturing the depth and complexity of the kiai's leadership practices as experienced and interpreted by community members in their natural setting (Creswell, 2014; Sugiyono, 2008). The research subjects consist of multiple informants drawn from Karangharjo Village, including prominent community figures, religious leaders, and ordinary residents across various hamlets within the village. Informants were selected purposively, ensuring that those with direct

knowledge of and engagement with the kiai's social and political leadership were adequately represented.

Data were collected through three complementary techniques. First, field observation was conducted using a moderate observational stance, in which the researcher maintained a presence within community activities while preserving an analytical distance. Second, in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants using a semi-structured guide that allowed sufficient flexibility for exploratory responses. Third, documentation was employed to corroborate and enrich field data, drawing on written records, photographic evidence, and relevant archival materials from the pesantren and village administration. The triangulation of these three methods was integral to ensuring the comprehensiveness and consistency of the data gathered.

Data analysis followed an interactive model comprising three sequential yet iterative stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). In the data reduction stage, raw data were systematically filtered, coded, and categorized according to their relevance to the research questions. In the data display stage, the reduced data were organized into coherent narrative and thematic structures that facilitated interpretive analysis. In the conclusion drawing stage, patterns and relationships identified across the data were synthesized into substantive findings, which were subsequently verified through cross-referencing with the full dataset. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed data validity testing through both source triangulation – cross-checking information across multiple informants – and technique triangulation – comparing data obtained through observation, interview, and documentation. These procedures collectively strengthen the analytical rigor and scientific accountability of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

This study presents findings derived from in-depth interviews with four kiai, field observations conducted across multiple hamlets in Karangharjo Village, and supporting documentation gathered from pesantren records and community archives. The findings are organized around four thematic areas that directly correspond to the research questions: the kiai's role as social consultants, their function as political consultants, the interactive communicative patterns sustaining the kiai–community relationship, and the kiai's position as embedded social figures within village life. Together, these findings illuminate the distinctive character of pesantren-based leadership as it is lived and practiced in the rural context of Karangharjo, Silo District, Jember Regency.

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Karangharjo Village is home to fifteen kiai, four of whom lead established pesantren institutions and are widely recognized as holding significant cross-hamlet social influence. These four — KH. Abdul Muqit Arief, KH. Syihabuddin Attoillah, KH. Hodri Arief, and K. Hilmi Syaiful Bari — were selected as the primary subjects of this study on the basis of their institutional standing, community reach, and demonstrable roles in the social and political life of the village.

What distinguishes the leadership landscape of Karangharjo from many comparable rural settings is the absence of intra-elite competition among the kiai. Each figure commands distinct domains of trust and influence, reinforced by kinship ties that further reduce the likelihood of conflict. Their collective presence creates a distributed and mutually reinforcing leadership ecology that contributes significantly to the overall stability and cohesion of village life. None of the four kiai hold any governmental position at any administrative level, whether at the village, district, or regency level. Their authority is thus entirely extra-institutional, reproduced through sustained social trust, moral consistency, and the community's enduring perception of the kiai as figures of exceptional religious knowledge and wisdom.

The Kiai as Social Consultant

The first and most consistently observed finding across all four cases is the function of the kiai as the primary social consultant to whom community members turn for guidance on personal, familial, and communal matters. This consultative function operates independently of any formal governance structure and is sustained entirely through voluntary social trust and the community's recognition of the kiai's superior moral and religious knowledge.

KH. Abdul Muqit Arief, the custodian of Pesantren Al-Falah in Parebalan hamlet, is the most widely recognized arbitrator of social disputes in Karangharjo. His reputation rests not only on the depth of his religious scholarship but equally on his consistent demonstration of impartiality across diverse and often competing community interests. Community members approach him with disputes ranging from family conflicts and inheritance disagreements to neighborhood tensions and interpersonal grievances. His responses are invariably framed in terms of religious principle and social balance rather than personal preference or factional loyalty. As one community member explained during interview:

"Kiai Muqit tidak pernah memihak siapapun. Kalau ada masalah, beliau selalu memberikan jalan tengah yang adil. Masyarakat percaya karena beliau tidak punya kepentingan pribadi." (Informant A, community member, interview, 2023)

Beyond dispute resolution, KH. Muqit is also sought for spiritual guidance and protective supplications when community members face personal threats or uncertainty. This dimension of his consultative role reflects the broader cultural framework within which kiai authority operates in rural Java, where the boundaries between the social, the spiritual, and the practical remain porous and mutually constitutive. His approach to community leadership is characterized by what might be described as principled accessibility — maintaining close emotional proximity to community members while preserving the moral distinctiveness that underpins his authority.

KH. Syihabuddin Attoillah presents a contrasting yet complementary leadership profile. His dominant characteristic is a gradualist and persuasive approach to social engagement, one that prioritizes cultural sensitivity and the deliberate avoidance of abrupt social disruption. Rather than issuing directives or leveraging his authority to compel behavioral change, KH. Syihabuddin introduces new perspectives incrementally, allowing community members to internalize guidance at their own pace. This approach is rooted in a conscious awareness of the risks of cultural imposition, particularly in a village where traditional norms and practices remain deeply embedded in everyday life. As he articulated during interview:

"Saya tidak bisa memaksakan perubahan kepada masyarakat. Yang bisa saya lakukan adalah memberikan pandangan secara perlahan agar masyarakat bisa menerima dengan hati yang lapang." (KH. Syihabuddin Attoillah, interview, 2023)

His daily routine involves receiving a continuous flow of visitors from diverse social backgrounds — farmers, local traders, young people, and village officials — each bringing different concerns and seeking different forms of guidance. This breadth of social engagement reinforces his position as a generalist community authority whose influence extends across domains from personal ethics and family matters to broader questions of communal harmony. His wife and extended family play a significant supporting role in sustaining this open-house model of leadership, ensuring that his accessibility is maintained even during periods of external commitment.

KH. Hodri Arief represents the most institutionally connected of the four kiai, holding the position of Deputy Chairman of the Rabithah Ma'ahid Islamiyah within the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Executive Board (RMI PBNU). This national-level affiliation distinguishes him within the local leadership landscape and lends additional symbolic weight to his presence in Karangharjo. Despite his broader organizational commitments, KH. Hodri maintains intensive engagement with the local community through a structured program of monthly gatherings that combine informal social interaction with substantive discussion of current developments in politics, economics, education, and

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social affairs. These gatherings, organized through community associations he himself established, function as deliberate instruments of civic education and social awareness:

"Forum makan-makan itu bukan sekadar silaturahmi. Saya gunakan untuk menyampaikan informasi dan pandangan agar masyarakat tidak buta terhadap apa yang terjadi di sekitar mereka."(KH. Hodri Arief, interview, 2023)

In addition to these direct community forums, KH. Hodri also works through the mosque management committee (takmir masjid), ensuring that community programs aligned with his social vision receive institutional backing. This dual-channel approach — direct community forums combined with mosque-based programming — reflects a sophisticated understanding of the social infrastructure through which influence can be effectively channeled in rural settings. His use of social media as a supplementary communication platform further extends his reach beyond the immediate circle of pesantren affiliates, enabling him to engage a broader and more diverse audience on matters of public concern.

K. Hilmi Syaiful Bari occupies a distinct position among the four kiai by virtue of his exclusively salaf pesantren background and his characteristically inward-oriented leadership style. Unlike his counterparts, K. Hilmi does not maintain a structured program of community outreach or social forums. His primary sphere of influence is the pesantren itself, where the formation of religious character and the transmission of classical Islamic knowledge constitute his central preoccupations. His engagement with the broader community occurs primarily through occasional public lectures to which he is invited, rather than through proactive community programming. As he noted:

"Tugas saya yang utama adalah mendidik santri. Tapi kalau masyarakat membutuhkan saya, saya tidak pernah menolak untuk hadir." (K. Hilmi Syaiful Bari, interview, 2023)

Despite this more reserved posture, K. Hilmi commands significant moral authority within Karangharjo, particularly among residents who value the depth and authenticity of the salaf tradition. His influence operates less through direct social programming and more through the respect accorded to his scholarly identity and the graduates his pesantren produces, who carry his teachings into community life across multiple hamlets. His leadership thus exemplifies a form of indirect social influence that is no less significant for being structurally less visible than that of his counterparts.

Table 1. Social Consultancy Roles of Kiai in Karangharjo Village

| Kiai | Pesantren | Consultancy Style | Primary Social Domain |
|---------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|--|
| KH. Abdul Muqit Arief | Al-Falah | Neutral arbitration | Dispute resolution, spiritual guidance |
| KH. Syihabuddin Attoillah | — | Gradualist-persuasive | Social harmony, cultural mediation |
| KH. Hodri Arief | Bahrul Ulum | Structured deliberation | Social education, community forums |
| K. Hilmi Syaiful Bari | Salaf-based | Reserved-educational | Religious instruction, moral guidance |

The Kiai as Political Consultant

The second major dimension of the findings concerns the kiai's role as political consultants — a role made all the more noteworthy by the fact that none of the four figures engage in formal partisan politics. Their political influence operates entirely through the domain of moral guidance, community counsel, and the deliberate cultivation of civic awareness. This form of political engagement is neither passive nor apolitical; rather, it constitutes a conscious and strategically maintained posture of principled neutrality designed to preserve the moral authority upon which broader social influence depends.

KH. Abdul Muqit Arief's prior experience as Deputy Regent of Jember makes him the most politically informed of the four kiai, and political candidates — particularly those seeking election as village head or as members of the regional legislature — frequently approach him seeking endorsement or blessing. His consistent response is to offer normative guidance on the qualities of good leadership rather than to endorse specific candidates:

"Saya tidak bisa mendukung satu calon secara terbuka. Kalau saya dukung salah satu, kepercayaan masyarakat kepada saya habis. Tugas saya adalah mengarahkan masyarakat memilih pemimpin yang amanah." (KH. Abdul Muqit Arief, interview, 2023)

This posture reflects a sophisticated understanding of the conditions under which kiai authority remains socially sustainable. The community's trust in the kiai as a moral arbiter is contingent upon the perception of his disinterestedness; once that perception

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is undermined by visible partisanship, the authority itself is irrevocably at risk. KH. Syihabuddin Attoillah articulates this tension with particular clarity:

"Kalau kiai sudah cawe-cawe politik, masyarakat tidak bisa lagi membedakan mana dawuh agama dan mana kepentingan politik. Itu berbahaya." (KH. Syihabuddin Attoillah, interview, 2023)

Observations conducted during the period approaching local village head elections confirm that KH. Syihabuddin actively monitors community political tensions and intervenes — through personal counsel, public addresses, and informal conversations — to prevent the escalation of political disagreements into social conflict. His role during electoral periods is less that of a political actor and more that of a social stabilizer, ensuring that the community's political diversity does not fracture its underlying social cohesion. He remains acutely aware that even the appearance of political alignment carries the risk of permanently diminishing the moral authority he has built over decades of community service.

KH. Hodri Arief frames his political engagement explicitly in the language of civic and moral education. His interventions during electoral periods focus on equipping community members with the criteria for evaluating candidates rather than directing their choices toward any particular individual or party:

"Yang saya sampaikan ke masyarakat bukan siapa yang harus dipilih, tapi bagaimana memilih pemimpin yang berakhlak, adil, dan tidak membeli suara." (KH. Hodri Arief, interview, 2023)

This approach reflects a broader philosophy of social leadership in which the kiai's function is to elevate the quality of community decision-making rather than to substitute his judgment for that of community members. The political domain, in his view, is not a space to be avoided by the kiai but one to be engaged with responsibly and on terms that preserve rather than compromise the kiai's moral independence. K. Hilmi Syaiful Bari reinforces this perspective by emphasizing the foundational importance of perceived disinterestedness to the kiai's social legitimacy:

"Kiai itu dipercaya karena dianggap tidak punya kepentingan. Begitu kiai memihak, selesai sudah kepercayaan itu." (K. Hilmi Syaiful Bari, interview, 2023)

The finding that all four kiai maintain deliberate political neutrality while simultaneously exercising substantial political influence through moral counsel is one of the most analytically significant outcomes of this study. It points to a form of political agency that operates through the legitimacy of disinterestedness rather than through the

mechanisms of partisan mobilization, and which constitutes a distinctive feature of pesantren-based leadership in the Indonesian rural context.

Table 2. Political Orientation of Kiai in Karangharjo Village

| Kiai | Political Background | Political Stance | Influence Mechanism |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| KH. Abdul Muqit Arief | Former Deputy Regent | Strictly neutral | Normative counsel |
| KH. Syihabuddin Attoillah | None | Neutral with active monitoring | Emotional stabilization, conflict prevention |
| KH. Hodri Arief | RMI PBNU Executive | Civic-educational neutrality | Community forums, social media |
| K. Hilmi Syaiful Bari | None | Reserved neutrality | Moral example, occasional public address |

Interactive Communication as a Relational Mechanism

The third major finding concerns the communicative patterns through which the kiai–community relationship is constructed and continuously renewed. Across all four cases, the dominant relational mechanism is interactive, two-way communication rather than top-down directive authority. Community members do not require appointments or formal protocols to approach the kiai; the pesantren and the kiai's residence function as open social spaces where residents of all backgrounds feel entitled to seek counsel, share grievances, or simply spend time in the kiai's company. As one village elder observed:

"Kiai di sini tidak pernah jauh dari masyarakat. Kalau ada apa-apa, kita langsung bisa datang. Tidak perlu buat janji dulu." (Informant B, village elder, interview, 2023)

This pattern of open accessibility is not incidental but constitutes a deliberate relational strategy through which the kiai reproduces his social proximity to the community and continuously renews the trust upon which his authority rests. The interactive quality of this communication – in which the kiai listens as much as he speaks, and responds to community-defined concerns rather than imposing an external agenda – distinguishes it markedly from the top-down directive model that might be associated with traditional or patrimonial forms of religious authority.

KH. Muqit maintains this proximity through his consistent physical presence within community spaces and his willingness to engage with even the most ordinary of daily

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concerns. KH. Syihabuddin sustains it through pastoral attentiveness and a conversational style that makes community members feel genuinely heard rather than merely instructed. KH. Hodri extends this interactive model into the digital sphere, using social media platforms to communicate perspectives on current issues and to invite responses from a wider community audience, particularly younger residents who may be less likely to attend physical gatherings. K. Hilmi, while more reserved in his outward social engagement, maintains the pesantren as an open educational and social environment in which community members feel welcome to participate beyond the formal boundaries of religious instruction.

The significance of this communicative pattern is particularly evident during periods of social tension, such as the approach of village head elections. During these periods, observations confirm that community members seek out the kiai not for directives but for what might best be described as moral orientation — a reaffirmation of the values and principles that should guide their political choices. The kiai's response in each case is consistent: to listen attentively, to acknowledge the complexity of the situation, and to offer guidance rooted in religious principle and concern for communal welfare rather than personal interest. This pattern of morally grounded interactive communication constitutes one of the most important mechanisms through which the kiai's social authority is reproduced and sustained across generations.

The Kiai as Embedded Social Figure

The fourth and final dimension of the findings concerns the kiai's function as an embedded social figure whose presence is woven into the fabric of everyday community life in Karangharjo. This embeddedness is most visibly expressed through the kiai's consistent participation in community rituals and ceremonies that mark the significant moments of individual and collective life in the village. Field observations confirm that the four kiai are routinely present at and called upon to lead wedding celebrations, circumcision ceremonies, religious study circles (*pengajian*), pesantren graduation events (*haflatul imtihan*), and monthly communal assemblies. This ritual embeddedness ensures that the kiai's presence is experienced not as an occasional or crisis-driven intervention but as a continuous and constitutive element of social life. As one younger community member reflected:

"Acara apapun di desa ini terasa kurang kalau kiai tidak hadir. Kehadiran beliau itu seperti tanda bahwa acara itu sah dan berkah." (Informant C, community member, interview, 2023)

The kiai's embeddedness in community ritual life performs several important social functions simultaneously. It reinforces the symbolic legitimacy of the kiai as a central

social authority; it sustains cultural continuity by connecting contemporary community practices to the religious and moral traditions the kiai embodies; and it creates regular, low-stakes occasions for social interaction between the kiai and community members that reinforce the bonds of trust and familiarity upon which the kiai's broader consultative authority rests. In this sense, ritual participation is not merely ceremonial but constitutes a substantive dimension of the kiai's social leadership.

Beyond ceremonial occasions, the kiai's social embeddedness is further expressed through their role as guardians and transmitters of local cultural tradition. Several of the kiai actively promote the preservation of traditional Madurese and Javanese cultural practices — including *macapat* recitation and communal *istighosah* — that have come under pressure from the encroachment of external cultural influences and the rapid advance of digital media. This custodial function positions the kiai not only as religious authorities but as cultural anchors who help the community maintain a sense of identity and continuity in the face of accelerating social change.

The community's recognition of the kiai as an irreplaceable social figure is further reinforced by the growing challenge of misinformation and hoax content circulating through social media. Several community members noted that they rely on the kiai to provide authoritative interpretation and guidance when confronted with confusing or contradictory information from digital sources. As Informant D, a middle-aged community member, stated:

"Kalau ada berita yang tidak jelas kebenarannya, saya lebih percaya pendapat kiai daripada yang ada di medsos. Kiai tidak akan menyesatkan." (Informant D, community member, interview, 2023)

This finding points to an important contemporary dimension of the kiai's social role — one that extends the traditional functions of moral and religious guidance into the domain of information literacy and digital civic life. Far from being rendered obsolete by modernization and technological change, the kiai's authority in Karangharjo has adapted to encompass new arenas of social need, reinforcing rather than diminishing their centrality to community life.

Discussion

The findings of this study offer a substantive contribution to the growing body of scholarship on Islamic leadership, pesantren-based social authority, and the dynamics of rural community governance in Indonesia. This discussion addresses the three research questions posed in the introduction, interprets the findings in light of established theoretical frameworks and recent empirical literature, and proposes a conceptual refinement of existing models of kiai leadership that better captures the

distinctive character of the pesantren-based leadership model observed in Karangharjo Village.

The Pesantren-Based Leadership Model as a Distinctive Form of Social Governance

The first research question asks how kiai in Karangharjo Village construct and exercise their leadership model within the social and political sphere of rural community life. The findings reveal a leadership model that is simultaneously multi-dimensional, extra-institutional, and morally grounded — characteristics that distinguish it meaningfully from both formal governmental authority and from the more transactional forms of political leadership that have increasingly characterized kiai involvement in Indonesian public life at the regional and national levels.

The four kiai studied here exercise their leadership through two principal channels: social consultation and political counsel. In both domains, their authority is constructed not through institutional appointment or coercive power but through what Weber (1947) classically described as charismatic authority — legitimacy grounded in the personal qualities, moral consistency, and perceived divine sanction of the leader. However, the findings of this study suggest that the Weberian framework requires modification to adequately capture the relational and institutional dimensions of kiai authority in the contemporary rural context. Unlike the purely personal and unstable character of Weberian charisma, the authority of the Karangharjo kiai is institutionally anchored in the pesantren, reproduced through sustained community interaction, and transmitted across generations through networks of alumni, students, and community affiliates. This institutional embeddedness gives the kiai's authority a durability and social depth that pure charismatic leadership typically lacks.

This finding is broadly consistent with Dhofier's (1982) foundational argument that the pesantren constitutes the primary institutional basis of kiai authority in rural Java, but it extends that argument by demonstrating how the pesantren functions not merely as an educational institution but as a social infrastructure through which the kiai's moral authority is continuously reproduced and renewed in relation to evolving community needs. More recently, Wahid (2018) has argued that the pesantren's social role has expanded significantly in the post-reformasi era, encompassing functions of civic education, community development, and political socialization that extend well beyond its original mandate of religious instruction. The findings of this study strongly corroborate this argument, particularly in the cases of KH. Hodri Arief and KH. Abdul Muqit Arief, whose leadership activities demonstrate a sophisticated integration of religious authority with civic and political engagement.

The deliberate maintenance of political neutrality by all four kiai — despite their evident and substantial political influence — represents one of the most analytically significant findings of this study and warrants careful theoretical attention. Existing literature on kiai political involvement tends to frame the question in terms of a binary between engagement and withdrawal, with scholars such as Turmudi (2004) and Muhtadi (2019) documenting the increasing integration of kiai into partisan political structures at the regional and national levels. The Karangharjo case complicates this binary by demonstrating a third modality — what this study terms *morally grounded political influence* — in which the kiai exercises substantial and recognized political agency precisely by refusing to translate that agency into formal partisan commitment. This is not political abstention but a strategically conscious form of political engagement whose effectiveness depends entirely on the preservation of the kiai's perceived disinterestedness.

Pareto's elite theory (1935), which provides the primary theoretical framework of this study, offers important but ultimately partial explanatory purchase on this phenomenon. Pareto's account of elite circulation and the role of superior qualities in sustaining elite authority helps explain why the kiai occupies a position of recognized social pre-eminence in Karangharjo. However, Pareto's framework does not adequately account for the relational and communicative mechanisms through which this pre-eminence is constructed and sustained, nor does it capture the specifically moral and religious dimensions of the kiai's authority that distinguish it from other forms of social elite. To address this limitation, this study draws on Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic capital, which provides a more nuanced account of how authority rooted in perceived moral and intellectual superiority is accumulated, reproduced, and deployed in social life. The kiai's deliberate political neutrality can be understood, within this framework, as a strategy for protecting and accumulating symbolic capital by refusing the forms of political entanglement that would diminish it. Each act of principled neutrality — each instance in which the kiai declines to endorse a candidate or take a partisan position — is simultaneously an investment in the symbolic capital that sustains their broader social authority.

Relational Dynamics and the Reproduction of Kiai Authority

The second research question asks how the community perceives and responds to the presence and authority of kiai in Karangharjo. The findings demonstrate that community perception of the kiai is characterized by a combination of deep respect, active reliance, and a nuanced awareness of the conditions under which kiai authority remains legitimate. Community members across all demographic groups — young and

old, men and women, farmers and traders — consistently position the kiai as their primary point of reference for moral guidance, social counsel, and, increasingly, information verification in the digital age. This pattern of voluntary and comprehensive reliance on the kiai reflects what Geertz (1960) described as the *santri* cultural orientation — a deeply internalized disposition toward Islamic authority and pesantren-based moral leadership — but it also reflects the specific track record of the Karangharjo kiai in delivering consistent, impartial, and practically useful guidance over extended periods of community service.

The community's perception of the kiai is not, however, uncritical or unconditional. Several informants articulated a clear awareness of the risks associated with kiai political involvement, expressing concern that partisan engagement would compromise the very qualities that make the kiai trustworthy. This finding is significant because it suggests that the community's recognition of kiai authority is actively conditional — sustained by the kiai's ongoing adherence to the norms of moral consistency and political impartiality that the community regards as constitutive of legitimate kiai leadership. This conditionality introduces a dynamic of mutual accountability into the kiai–community relationship that is not adequately captured by accounts that frame the community's orientation toward the kiai in purely deferential or patron-client terms.

This finding resonates with Hefner's (2000) argument that Indonesian Muslim communities have developed increasingly sophisticated expectations of religious leadership in the post-New Order era, demanding not only moral authority but also transparency, accountability, and a demonstrated commitment to community welfare over personal or factional interest. It also aligns with Feillard and Madinier's (2011) observation that the social legitimacy of kiai in rural Java is increasingly contingent on their ability to navigate the tension between traditional religious authority and the democratic norms that have gained traction in Indonesian public life since reformasi. The Karangharjo case provides concrete empirical support for both of these arguments, demonstrating how a community of rural Muslims actively shapes and polices the boundaries of legitimate kiai authority in ways that reflect both religious tradition and contemporary democratic sensibilities.

The finding that community members increasingly rely on the kiai for guidance in navigating social media content and digital misinformation represents a particularly noteworthy extension of the kiai's traditional social role. Lim (2017) has documented the significant challenges posed by the rapid spread of hoax content and political disinformation through Indonesian social media, particularly in rural communities where media literacy remains limited and traditional authority figures retain significant epistemic influence. The data from Karangharjo suggest that rather than being

marginalized by the digital information environment, kiai are adapting to it — leveraging their existing moral authority to provide a trusted anchor of epistemic stability in an increasingly confusing information landscape. This adaptive capacity speaks to the resilience and flexibility of the pesantren-based leadership model and to its continuing relevance in the context of rapid social and technological change.

Patterns of Kiai–Community Relations and Their Social Functions

The third research question asks what relational patterns exist between kiai and the community in Karangharjo and how these patterns sustain social cohesion and political stability. The findings identify four principal relational mechanisms — interactive communication, ritual embeddedness, emotional proximity, and cultural guardianship — each of which performs distinct and complementary social functions within the overall ecology of kiai–community relations.

The centrality of interactive communication to the kiai–community relationship in Karangharjo is consistent with a growing body of literature that emphasizes the dialogical and participatory dimensions of effective Islamic leadership in contemporary Indonesia. Mastuhu (1994) argued, in his foundational study of pesantren education, that the most enduring forms of kiai authority are those grounded in genuine responsiveness to community needs rather than in the unilateral exercise of religious prerogative. More recently, Nafi' (2022) has argued that the kiai who demonstrate the greatest social resilience in the face of modernization are those who have successfully transitioned from a directive to a dialogical mode of community engagement, maintaining their authority not by insisting on deference but by consistently demonstrating the practical value of their guidance. The four kiai of Karangharjo exemplify this transition, each in their distinctive way, sustaining their social centrality through the quality and consistency of their responsiveness rather than through the assertion of hierarchical prerogative.

The ritual embeddedness of the kiai in village social life — their consistent presence at weddings, circumcisions, religious gatherings, and communal assemblies — performs functions that extend well beyond the ceremonial. Drawing on Collins' (2004) theory of interaction ritual chains, this pattern of recurring co-presence and collective attention can be understood as a mechanism for the continuous regeneration of the emotional energy and symbolic solidarity that underpin social cohesion. Each communal event at which a kiai presides is simultaneously a ritual affirmation of the moral order he represents and a renewal of the community's collective commitment to the values and norms that order embodies. This ritualized reproduction of social solidarity is particularly important in the context of Karangharjo, where the community faces ongoing pressures from in-migration, technological change, and the erosion of traditional cultural practices.

The kiai's function as cultural guardian — actively promoting the preservation of traditional practices such as *macapat* recitation and communal *istighosah* — represents a dimension of pesantren-based leadership that has received relatively limited attention

in the existing literature, which has tended to focus on the kiai's roles in religious education and political life. Woodward (2011) has argued that the preservation of traditional Javanese Islamic cultural forms constitutes an important dimension of pesantren social practice, serving to anchor community identity and intergenerational continuity in the face of homogenizing cultural pressures. The findings of this study strongly support this argument and suggest that the cultural custodial function of the kiai deserves greater recognition as a component of the broader pesantren-based leadership model.

Toward a Refined Model of Pesantren-Based Kiai Leadership

Taken together, the findings of this study support a refined conceptualization of the pesantren-based kiai leadership model that goes beyond the existing literature in several important respects. First, while existing accounts of kiai leadership tend to emphasize either the religious-educational or the political dimensions of that leadership, the findings of this study demonstrate that these dimensions are inseparable components of a single integrated model in which each reinforces and conditions the others. The kiai's effectiveness as a social consultant depends on his credibility as a religious scholar; his effectiveness as a political consultant depends on his credibility as a social impartial figure; and both depend on the sustained quality of his relational engagement with the community through interactive communication, ritual participation, and cultural stewardship.

Second, the findings suggest that the pesantren-based leadership model is better understood as a form of *distributed moral governance* than as a form of individual charismatic authority. The leadership landscape of Karangharjo is not dominated by a single pre-eminent figure but is constituted by the complementary and mutually reinforcing contributions of four kiai with distinct profiles, strengths, and domains of influence. This distributed character is itself a structural feature of the model — one that enhances its resilience, prevents the concentration of authority in ways that might generate resentment or conflict, and ensures that the diverse needs of the community are addressed by leaders with relevant expertise and relational proximity.

Third, the findings illuminate the democratic dimensions of the pesantren-based leadership model in ways that complicate the common association of traditional religious authority with hierarchical and non-participatory governance. The four kiai of Karangharjo consistently demonstrate a commitment to community participation in decision-making, transparency in the exercise of their authority, respect for diversity of opinion, and the promotion of civic awareness and responsibility among community members. These characteristics align closely with the principles of democratic leadership identified by Burns (1978) in his foundational account of transformational leadership, suggesting that the pesantren-based model constitutes a distinctive indigenous variant

of transformational leadership that deserves recognition on its own terms rather than being evaluated against imported Western leadership frameworks.

This study thus contributes to the theoretical literature in three ways: by demonstrating the institutional rather than purely personal character of kiai authority; by introducing the concept of morally grounded political influence as a distinct modality of kiai political engagement; and by proposing the framework of distributed moral governance as a more adequate conceptual lens for understanding the collective and complementary character of pesantren-based leadership in the rural Indonesian context. These contributions have implications not only for the academic study of Islamic leadership but also for policy discussions about the role of religious institutions in supporting social cohesion, civic education, and democratic governance at the community level in Indonesia and beyond.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the pesantren-based leadership model of kiai in Karangharjo Village constitutes a distinctive and socially significant form of moral governance that operates entirely outside formal institutional structures yet generates substantial and durable social authority. The kiai's influence in both the social and political spheres is sustained not through coercive power or institutional appointment but through the community's voluntary and conditional recognition of their moral consistency, religious expertise, and genuine commitment to communal welfare. The concept of morally grounded political influence introduced in this study — whereby the kiai maximizes political agency precisely by refusing partisan commitment — offers a theoretically productive refinement of existing accounts of kiai political engagement in post-reformasi Indonesia, which have tended to emphasize integration into partisan structures at the expense of attention to this alternative and arguably more socially resilient modality.

The framework of distributed moral governance proposed here, in which four kiai with complementary profiles collectively constitute a resilient and responsive leadership ecology, points toward a broader reconceptualization of pesantren-based leadership as an inherently collective rather than individually charismatic phenomenon. This reconceptualization has practical implications for how religious leadership is understood and engaged within discussions of community governance, social cohesion, and democratic development at the grassroots level in rural Indonesia.

Future research should examine whether the patterns identified here are replicated across comparable rural settings in other regions of Indonesia, and whether the distributed moral governance model retains its social effectiveness under conditions of

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more intense political polarization or more rapid cultural change than those currently prevailing in Karangharjo.

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