

Faith, Nation, and Digital Piety

The Moral Politics of Kyai Responses to the 212 Action in Banten

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Abstract

This article explores how Islamic authority, digital communication, and moral politics intersect in post-reform Indonesia through the responses of kyai in Banten to the Aksi Bela Islam (ABI 212) movement. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews with nineteen kyai, it analyses how these clerics interpreted the 2016 blasphemy controversy involving Jakarta's governor and negotiated their moral positions amid rising Islamic mobilisation. The study identifies three orientations: activist-participatory, spiritual-sympathetic, and critical-pragmatic—each reflecting different moral logics linking faith and civic duty. Digital platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp became key arenas for coordination and emotional expression, reshaping kyai authority into a form of “networked Islam.” Rather than mirroring conservatism, the kyai's engagement reveals an ongoing negotiation between piety, nationalism, and democracy, highlighting the reconfiguration of Islamic authority in Indonesia's digital and moral public sphere.

Keywords: Islamic authority, moral politics, digital religion, kyai and pesantren, Aksi Bela Islam (ABI 212)

Introduction

Since Indonesia's independence in 1945, the relationship between Islam, the state, and society has remained a persistent axis of tension (Sebastian, 2006). Although *Pancasila* was accepted as a compromise between nationalist and Islamist factions, its first principle—"Belief in the Almighty God"—continues to provoke debate over whether Indonesia should be understood as a secular or religious state (Burhani, 2018). The formulation, deliberately avoiding explicit mention of *Sharia*, nonetheless sustains what Fealy (2008) calls a productive ambiguity, allowing successive governments to frame Indonesia as a *religious state* (*negara berketuhanan*) rather than an *Islamic* or *secular* one. This ambiguity, while foundational to national unity, has also enabled the gradual entrenchment of conservative interpretations of Islam within public discourse and politics (Van Bruinessen, 2013; Hasan, 2021).

Indonesian politicians have long recognised the electoral utility of religious rhetoric. Candidates commonly project an image of *pious Muslim identity* to attract the predominantly Muslim electorate (Menchik, 2016; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). Consequently, Islam functions not only as a source of moral authority but also as a symbolic resource within political competition. In the post-Suharto democratic era, this dynamic has accelerated with the rise of what Van Bruinessen (2013) termed the "*conservative turn*"—a socioreligious shift marked by increased public visibility of Islamist movements, moral policing, and demands for the implementation of *Sharia*-inspired local regulations (Liddle & Mujani, 2007). Manifestations of this conservatism have included interreligious conflict, terrorist attacks such as the Bali bombings, the push to restore the Jakarta Charter's "seven words" into the constitution, and the spread of provincial by-laws enforcing Islamic morality (Van Bruinessen, 2013; Hefner, 2023).

Islamic conservatism in Indonesia is frequently conflated with "political Islam", yet the relationship between the two is more complex than a simple effort to transform the state into an Islamic polity (Fealy & White, 2008; Burhani, 2018). Conservative movements often operate within democratic parameters, mobilising moral outrage through constitutionally protected means such as demonstrations, petitions, and online campaigns. They thus represent not merely marginal radicals but also a segment of mainstream Muslim sentiment that views the defence of Islam as integral to civic participation (Suryana, 2019; Hasan, 2021). Organisations such as the Indonesian Ulama Council (*MUI*), the National Movement to Safeguard the Fatwa of the Ulama (*GNPF*), Hizbut Tahrir Indonesia (*HTI*), the Indonesian Mujahidin Council (*MMI*), and factions within *Nahdlatul Ulama*—notably *NU Garis Lurus*—embody this conservative ethos, seeking to steer Indonesian Islam toward exclusivist interpretations while retaining legitimacy within the national framework (Burhani, 2018; Fealy, 2018).

The emergence of digital communication technologies has further transformed the landscape of Islamic activism. In comparative perspective, scholars such as Oh, Eom, and Rao (2015) demonstrated how social media platforms facilitated collective action and situ-

ational awareness during the Arab Spring in Egypt, while Breuer, Landman, and Farquhar (2015) identified similar patterns in Tunisia, where digital networks acted as catalysts for popular mobilisation. Likewise, Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheaffer (2013) observed that the Arab uprisings were frequently dubbed the social media revolutions due to the unprecedented role of online platforms in shaping protest dynamics. In the Indonesian context, social media has become a crucial arena for religious discourse, moral persuasion, and political mobilisation, enabling the rapid spread of conservative ideas and calls for collective action (Lim, 2017; Sirait, 2024).

These dynamics were vividly illustrated during the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election (*Pilkada DKI Jakarta*), which became a watershed moment in the articulation of Islamic identity politics in democratic Indonesia. The contest attracted extraordinary public attention, amplified by 24-hour media coverage and viral social media campaigns (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). The election was widely perceived as a proxy battle between President Joko Widodo's political bloc and his rival Prabowo Subianto, reflecting the polarisation of Indonesia's post-reformasi political landscape (Pepinsky, 2019; Fealy, 2018).

The incumbent governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok), who had succeeded Joko Widodo in 2014, was initially regarded as an effective technocrat. His administration achieved notable successes in improving public services, increasing transparency, and implementing urban renewal programmes. Yet his leadership style—perceived as brash and confrontational—along with several policies viewed by segments of the Muslim population as *anti-Islamic* (such as restrictions on *takbiran* parades and animal sacrifices in public schools), became focal points of controversy (Hadiz, 2018). Although early opinion polls indicated strong support for Ahok's re-election, his popularity sharply declined following the circulation of a video of his remarks on Qur'anic verse al-Mā'idah 51 during a speech in the Thousand Islands in September 2016. The video, edited and widely disseminated via Facebook and WhatsApp, was interpreted by many as blasphemous, igniting nationwide outrage and a sequence of mass protests known as the *Aksi Bela Islam* (Action to Defend Islam) I, II, and III (Alkatiri, 2023; Heryanto, 2018).

The *Aksi Bela Islam* demonstrations—culminating in the massive “212 Action” on 2 December 2016—mobilised millions of Muslims under the banner of defending the Qur'an. These events marked an unprecedented convergence of religious conservatism, political mobilisation, and digital activism in Indonesia's democratic history (Suryana, 2019; Sirait, 2024). What began as a protest against perceived blasphemy evolved into a broader expression of Muslim solidarity and discontent with elite politics. For many observers, the 212 mobilisation crystallised the transformation of Islamic conservatism from a marginal current into a dominant moral and political force, capable of shaping national discourse through both physical and digital means (Van Bruinessen, 2013; Hefner, 2023).

Despite growing scholarship on Islamic populism and digital religion in Indonesia, few studies have examined how traditional religious leaders (*kyai*) reinterpret their moral and social authority amid these transformations. This article therefore asks: How do Bantenese *kyai* perceive, negotiate, and perform their authority in relation to the *Aksi Bela Islam*

(ABI) movement and the rise of digital Islam? The study aims to (1) explore the moral and theological reasoning underlying *kyai* responses to the ABI 212 mobilisation; (2) analyse how digital communication reshapes clerical authority; and (3) contribute to broader debates on Islamic moral populism and mediated religious leadership in Southeast Asia.

Previous Studies

Scholarship on Islamic authority and conservatism in Indonesia has developed substantially over the past four decades, tracing the transformation of religious leadership from *pesantren*-centred authority to digitally mediated populism. Early anthropological accounts by Clifford Geertz (1960), Zamakhsyari Dhofer (1982), and Hiroko Horikoshi (1987) framed the *kyai* and *ulama* as the moral and intellectual anchors of Javanese Islam. These studies emphasised the *pesantren* as a site of cultural reproduction and the *kyai* as a charismatic figure whose authority was both personal and pedagogical. Geertz conceptualised the *kyai* as the “axis of the *pesantren* world,” while Horikoshi highlighted the relational nature of *kyai* authority, grounded in both spiritual charisma and social embeddedness.

Subsequent studies extended these analyses into the socio-political sphere. Martin van Bruinessen (2013) explored how *kyai* authority interacted with the bureaucratisation of Islam and the expansion of Muslim middle-class culture. Greg Fealy and Sally White (2008) further demonstrated that *pesantren*-based authority remains pivotal in shaping Islamic discourse, particularly in localised settings such as Banten and East Java. Their works underline the continuing moral legitimacy of traditional scholars (*ulama salafiyah*) amidst the pluralisation of religious actors in post-authoritarian Indonesia.

In the post-Reformasi period, the liberalisation of media and politics reconfigured the terrain of Islamic authority. Studies by Burhani (2018), Hefner (2023), and Suryana (2019) showed how decentralisation and digitalisation have fragmented religious leadership, giving rise to new forms of populist *dakwah* and lay preachers. This transformation has blurred the boundaries between *kyai*, *ustadz*, and celebrity *da'i*, producing what Raya (2025) calls “the commodification of Islamic authority in digital spaces.” In this context, social media functions both as a platform for moral outreach and as a marketplace for religious legitimacy.

The proliferation of online preachers and digital activism has been linked to what scholars describe as *Islamic populism* (Hadiz, 2018; Sirait, 2024). Hadiz’s work on *Islamic populism* situates Indonesia within a global trend in which religion becomes a vehicle for political contestation and moral purification. These dynamics culminated in the *Aksi Bela Islam* (ABI) or “Action to Defend Islam” movement in 2016–2017, which mobilised millions of Muslims under the banner of religious justice. Scholars such as Arifianto (2021), Lanti and Dermawan (2020), and Wati et al. (2022) interpret the ABI as a manifestation of moral populism—an attempt to reclaim political agency through the language of religious outrage.

The ABI movement also marks a turning point in the digital mediation of religious

authority. Salma (2025) and Nurcahyono (2024) argue that social media became an infrastructure for participatory propaganda, where religious affect and political mobilisation converged. Rheinhard Sirait's (2024) doctoral research on *digital preachers* demonstrates how *kyai*, *ustadz*, and lay influencers utilise online platforms to cultivate moral capital and mobilise followers, often invoking populist narratives of defending Islam from elite corruption or Christianisation. Similarly, Zuhri (2023) identifies the tension between moderate and populist theologies in Indonesian cyberspace, where traditional *ulama* institutions such as the MUI compete with emergent digital preachers for authority.

Other recent analyses focus on the intersection between *pesantren* culture and digital transformation. Raya (2025) highlights how the *kyai*—once bound to localised networks of *santri*—now operate in hybrid religious economies shaped by digital visibility, online donations, and mediated *barakah*. These studies converge on the argument that authority in contemporary Indonesian Islam is increasingly “networked” (Campbell, 2013; Lim, 2017): it is no longer confined to textual mastery or lineage, but is reconstituted through online interaction and algorithmic amplification.

At the same time, scholars such as Fealy (2008) and Hefner (2023) caution that this digital reconfiguration does not necessarily diminish traditional authority. Instead, it produces new modalities of *charismatic mediation*, wherein traditional *kyai* employ digital tools to reinforce existing hierarchies of knowledge and piety. In regions like Banten, this hybrid form of authority remains embedded within *pesantren* traditions while simultaneously engaging with the performative logic of social media.

In terms of political sociology, the ABI 212 phenomenon has attracted significant scholarly attention. Lanti and Dermawan (2020), Marijan (2023), and Hajid and Pratama (2023) document how the mobilisation of Islamic identity through moral populism redefined the relationship between the state, civil society, and religious elites. These movements, while ostensibly grassroots, were often facilitated by established networks of *kyai*, *ulama*, and Islamist organisations such as the FPI and GNPf-MUI. Scholars interpret the mobilisation as both a critique of perceived secularism in governance and a reclamation of moral order through religious symbolism (Nur Ichwan, 2018; Alnizar & Munjid, 2020).

Despite the richness of this scholarship, few studies have explored how *kyai* at the local level—particularly in Banten—negotiate their religious and social authority in relation to both digital media and populist mobilisation. Much of the literature on *digital Islam* in Indonesia focuses on national figures, celebrity preachers, or urban middle-class contexts (e.g., Lim, 2017; Campbell, 2013; Sirait, 2024), while the *pesantren*-based leadership in peripheral provinces remains underexamined. Similarly, although moral populism and the ABI movement have been widely analysed as political phenomena (Hadiz, 2018; Arifianto, 2021), there is limited ethnographic attention to how these developments are interpreted, contested, or re-appropriated by traditional religious leaders.

This research therefore addresses an important lacuna in the literature by situating Bantenese *kyai* within the broader transformation of Islamic authority. It builds upon the anthropological tradition of studying *pesantren* (Geertz, 1960; Horikoshi, 1987) while

incorporating newer insights from media and religious studies on digital religion and moral populism (Campbell, 2013; Sirait, 2024; Raya, 2025). By examining the responses of Bantenese *kyai* to the ABI 212 movement, this study contributes to understanding how local religious elites adapt to, and sometimes resist, the digital and populist reconfiguration of public Islam in contemporary Indonesia.

Charisma, Populism, and Digital Mediation Framework

This study is grounded in three interrelated theoretical perspectives that together provide a lens for analysing the reconfiguration of Islamic authority among *kyai* in Banten: (1) Weberian charismatic authority and its transformation in *pesantren* contexts, (2) moral populism and the politicisation of religious identity, and (3) digital religion and networked authority. The intersection of these frameworks allows for an understanding of how traditional religious leadership adapts to new moral and technological conditions in post-Reformasi Indonesia.

The study begins with Max Weber's (1978) concept of *charismatic authority*, which refers to legitimacy derived from the extraordinary personal qualities of an individual perceived to possess divine inspiration or exemplary virtue. Within Indonesian Islam, the *kyai* has long embodied this Weberian form of charisma, situated in a moral economy of knowledge, piety, and service. Scholars such as Horikoshi (1987) and Dhofier (1982) have shown that in the Javanese and Bantenese contexts, charisma is not only a theological attribute but also a *socially embedded form of power*—one that is continuously reconstituted through the *pesantren*, ritual practices, and communal recognition.

The *kyai's* authority, therefore, is both charismatic and relational. It is sustained through reciprocal ties between teacher and student (*kyai–santri*), materialised in the *pesantren* as a moral community. This dynamic corresponds to what van Bruinessen (1995) calls “the social reproduction of charisma,” where piety and learning are transmitted through personalised mentorship rather than bureaucratic hierarchy. Charisma, in this sense, is performative and contingent: it must be continually enacted through teaching, preaching, and exemplary conduct (Darmini, 2021).

Recent works extend Weberian analysis by showing that *charisma* in the *pesantren* world is undergoing rationalisation and diversification. Arifin (2021) argues that modernising *pesantren* incorporate bureaucratic and managerial elements while still relying on the aura of the *kyai* as a moral guardian. Similarly, Huda and Muslih (2024) describe the emergence of “fractured charisma,” where the proliferation of religious actors—digital *ustadz*, celebrity preachers, and populist figures—creates overlapping claims to authority. In this shifting landscape, the *kyai's* traditional charisma must negotiate between inherited sanctity and new demands for visibility, accountability, and digital fluency.

The second conceptual strand derives from the theory of moral populism, developed most prominently by Vedi Hadiz (2018) and expanded by Hefner (2023) and Sirait (2024). Moral populism refers to a discursive and affective mode of politics that juxtaposes

a virtuous “people of faith” against a morally corrupt elite, framing political participation as a moral duty. In the Indonesian context, the *Aksi Bela Islam* (ABI 212) movement exemplifies this phenomenon, transforming piety into political action.

Within this moral-populist frame, religious authority operates as both a mobilising resource and a symbolic capital. The *kyai* becomes not merely a teacher of faith but a moral entrepreneur whose endorsement or critique can legitimise populist causes. As Rohmatulloh (2022) and Zaenurrosyid et al. (2020) suggest, *pesantren* and their leaders are drawn into populist networks that trade on the language of *defending Islam*, often through emotionally charged narratives amplified by digital platforms.

Moral populism also redefines the boundaries between *ulama* and lay activists. Whereas classical Islamic authority rested on mastery of the *kitab kuning*, the populist moment privileges moral outrage and collective affect. This shift echoes Hannan and Mursyidi’s (2023) observation that social media populism fragments the epistemic hierarchy of religious learning by enabling “affective authority”—the ability to influence through emotional resonance rather than scholastic rigour.

By engaging with populist discourse, traditional *kyai* face a paradox: their charisma is both reinforced and endangered. On one hand, moral populism revitalises their public visibility; on the other, it subjects their authority to the volatile dynamics of digital affect and partisan politics. This study uses this framework to interpret how Bantenese *kyai*—situated in a deeply traditional but politically charged environment—responded to the ABI 212 movement by adopting, mediating, or resisting its populist claims.

The third theoretical pillar draws from the field of digital religion and the sociology of networked authority. Pioneering work by Campbell (2013) conceptualises digital religion as a hybrid domain where online and offline religious practices mutually shape one another. Within this environment, authority becomes decentred, distributed, and performative—it depends less on institutional hierarchy and more on communicative skill, interactivity, and digital presence.

Lim (2017) and Raya (2025) expand this framework by analysing Indonesia’s digital Islamic sphere, showing that *kyai*, *ustadz*, and lay influencers engage in a “market of piety” governed by algorithmic visibility. Digital platforms, particularly Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube, enable what Sirait (2024) terms “algorithmic charisma,” where authority is co-produced by audience engagement metrics, virality, and emotional resonance. In this sense, digital media do not simply transmit religious messages; they transform the epistemology of authority itself.

Ichwan and Pabbajah (2024) highlight the implications of this transformation: the *ulama*’s interpretive monopoly erodes as lay audiences participate in the circulation of religious meaning. However, rather than signalling the decline of traditional authority, this process fosters a hybrid ecology in which the *kyai* operates alongside new digital actors. Rosidi et al. (2024) demonstrate how traditional leaders reassert moral authority by embedding their *pesantren* ethos within digital sermons, thus creating “mediated piety” that retains symbolic depth while adapting to networked publics.

In this study, the concept of networked authority is particularly salient. Following Hefner (2023) and Darmini (2021), authority in contemporary Indonesian Islam is seen as the outcome of negotiation between three fields: religious charisma, moral populism, and digital mediation. The *kyai*'s influence now circulates not only through the *santri* network but also through the algorithmic and affective networks of social media. This conceptualisation enables the analysis of how Bantenese *kyai* selectively use digital platforms to maintain legitimacy while navigating moral and political polarisation.

Together, these theoretical strands offer a composite lens for analysing *kyai* authority in Banten. The Weberian notion of charisma explains the traditional foundations of moral legitimacy; the theory of moral populism situates that legitimacy within broader socio-political mobilisation; and the concept of digital religion elucidates how such legitimacy is reconstituted through mediated interaction. The synthesis of these perspectives reflects what Hefner (2023) describes as “the moral pluralisation of authority”—a condition in which Islamic leadership must continuously negotiate between inherited sacred capital and modern communicative power.

By employing this tripartite framework, the study positions *kyai* as agents of continuity and transformation—custodians of *pesantren* tradition who simultaneously engage the populist and digital reordering of public Islam. This approach not only deepens the understanding of religious authority in Indonesia but also contributes to global debates on how charisma and populism are mediated in digital religious economies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive design grounded in the traditions of religious ethnography and interpretive sociology. The central aim is to explore how *kyai* (Islamic boarding school leaders) in Banten perceive, interpret, and enact their religious authority amid the moral, political, and technological shifts exemplified by the Aksi Bela Islam (ABI) 212 movement. Rather than seeking causal generalisations, the study focuses on uncovering the meanings, rationalities, and moral frameworks through which *kyai* make sense of their engagement with contemporary Islam in Indonesia's public sphere.

This interpretive orientation aligns with the phenomenological tradition of Weberian *verstehen* and Clifford Geertz's (1973) cultural anthropology, which emphasise the importance of understanding social action from the actor's own point of view. By situating the analysis within the *pesantren* milieu of Banten, the study foregrounds local categories of moral reasoning and religious legitimacy as articulated by the *kyai* themselves. The approach thus combines emic perspectives (the internal religious worldview) with etic analysis (the researcher's interpretive framing) to capture both the depth and complexity of Islamic authority in practice.

Field research was conducted over a three-month period between June and August 2017 in Banten Province, Indonesia—a region historically recognised for its strong Islamic identity and network of traditional *pesantren*. The province was selected as a critical case study

because of its historical association with Islamic revivalism and its documented participation in the ABI 212 movement.

Primary data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with nineteen kyai and Islamic teachers representing diverse theological orientations and institutional affiliations. These included salafiyah (traditionalist), modernist, and independent pesantren across the districts of Serang, Pandeglang, Lebak, and Cilegon. The participants ranged in age from their mid-30s to late 70s, encompassing both senior religious authorities and younger ustadz who are emerging leaders within the pesantren ecosystem.

The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia, recorded with consent, and later transcribed and translated into English for analysis. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes and was conducted either in the kyai's residence, in their pesantren, or during local religious gatherings. The questions revolved around five thematic clusters: (1) perceptions of the ABI 212 movement; (2) theological interpretations of "defending Islam"; (3) moral reasoning and civic responsibility; (4) the role of social media in religious mobilisation; and (5) the meaning of religious authority in the digital era.

In addition to formal interviews, participant observation was conducted in selected pesantren and community gatherings, particularly during collective prayers (istighosah), pengajian (religious study circles), and meetings of the Forum Silaturahmi Pondok Pesantren (FSPP). These informal encounters provided valuable contextual insight into how kyai express religious authority through embodied practices and social interaction.

Supplementary data were obtained through digital ethnography, focusing on Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp networks used by kyai and santri communities. Online posts, sermons, group messages, and video materials circulating within Banten's clerical networks were archived and coded to trace how moral discourse travels through digital infrastructures. This combination of offline ethnography and online observation follows the model of "hybrid fieldwork" recommended by Pink et al. (2016) for studying networked religious phenomena.

The Emergence of the Islamic Defence Actions I, II, and III

The controversy surrounding the so-called *Action to Defend Islam* (Aksi Bela Islam) movements of 2016–2017 originated in a speech delivered by Jakarta's then Governor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (popularly known as Ahok), to residents of the Seribu Islands in September 2016. In his remarks, Ahok encouraged residents to continue supporting his development programmes regardless of the outcome of the forthcoming 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election. The speech, largely administrative and normative in tone, contained a brief reference to *Surah* al-Mā'idah (5:51) of the Qur'an, which he argued had been "used to deceive voters" into believing that Muslims were forbidden to elect non-Muslim leaders. The key passage, according to the official transcript, read:

“It is possible that, deep in your hearts, you will not vote for me because you have been lied to using *Surah* al-Mā'idah 51 in various ways. That is your right, ladies and gentlemen. If you feel you cannot vote for me because you are afraid of going to hell for being deceived, that's fine. Just continue with this programme. You do not have to feel guilty if your conscience prevents you from voting for Ahok.”

Shortly thereafter, an edited version of the speech was uploaded to Facebook by a university lecturer, Buni Yani, who transcribed the contentious sentence slightly differently—omitting the verb “*use*” (*menggunakan*). His version read: “Ladies and gentlemen... were lied to in *Surah* al-Mā'idah 51 and went to hell for being deceived.” The accompanying caption, “It looks like something bad is going to happen with this video,” was perceived as an incitement. This post rapidly went viral, shared tens of thousands of times across Facebook and other platforms (Lim, 2017; Sirait, 2024). The omission of a single word significantly altered the tone of Ahok's remarks, transforming them from a critique of political manipulation into what many perceived as a direct insult to the Qur'an and to Islam itself (Heryanto, 2018; Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018). The viral spread of this edited clip exemplifies the power of digital media in shaping political emotions and moral outrage within Indonesia's contemporary religious sphere (Burhani, 2018; Slama & Barendregt, 2018).

The post quickly provoked a polarised response. Supporters of Ahok—led by social media activists such as Guntur Romli and Nong Darol Mahmada—accused Buni Yani of deliberately manipulating the video to discredit the governor, while others alleged that he was affiliated with Ahok's political opponents, particularly Anies Baswedan and Sandiaga Uno. Although both Yani and Baswedan denied these accusations, the controversy nonetheless became a catalyst for mass mobilisation. Religious leaders, preachers, and organisations interpreted Ahok's comments as an affront to Islamic sanctity and moral order. Popular clerics such as Abdullah Gymnastiar (*Aa Gym*) publicly condemned the statement, asserting that it had “deeply wounded Muslim feelings” and demonstrated Ahok's lack of sensitivity toward religious beliefs. Similarly, K.H. Ahmad Zahro, Chairman of the *Ikatan Persaudaraan Imam Masjid* (IPIM), declared that Ahok's words constituted *penodaan agama* (blasphemy), urging the National Police to take swift legal action to prevent civil unrest (Burhani, 2018; Suryana, 2019).

The outrage was soon institutionalised as various Islamic organisations lodged formal police reports. The Islamic Defenders Front (*Front Pembela Islam* or FPI), represented by its secretary-general, Habib Novel Chaidir Hasan, filed an official complaint at the Jakarta Metropolitan Police (Polda Metro Jaya) under report numbers TBL/705/X/2016 and LP/1010/X/2016, accusing Ahok of insulting Islam and violating Indonesia's blasphemy law under Article 156a of the Criminal Code. The Muhammadiyah Youth Association submitted a parallel report alleging both blasphemy and defamation of *Pancasila*, the state ideology. These legal petitions marked the beginning of an unprecedented mobilisation of religious and political networks across the archipelago (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Hadiz, 2018).

The controversy was not confined to Jakarta. Regional branches of the Indonesian

Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia* or MUI) in provinces such as South Sumatra, West Java, and Central Kalimantan lodged their own complaints, framing Ahok's statement as a national insult to Islam. In Palembang, for instance, Yogi Vitagora, a member of the MUI's Law and Legislation Commission, formally reported Ahok for "religious blasphemy and denigration of the Qur'an." The dissemination of outrage beyond the capital signified that the issue had transcended electoral politics, transforming into a moral cause uniting diverse Muslim constituencies under the banner of religious defence (Fealy, 2018; Van Bruinessen, 2013).

Mainstream media coverage and social media amplification created a feedback loop that magnified religious emotions and moral panic. Television talk shows, online portals, and mosque sermons all contributed to framing the incident as a test of Islamic dignity. Within weeks, Jakarta became the epicentre of nationwide protests organised by Islamic groups under the coordination of the *Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa Ulama* (GNPF Ulama), an umbrella coalition led by FPI leader Habib Rizieq Shihab (Alkatiri, 2023). The first demonstration, known as *Aksi Bela Islam I*, took place on 14 October 2016, followed by *Aksi Bela Islam II* on 4 November, and culminating in the massive *Aksi Bela Islam III*—popularly known as the "212 Action" (*Aksi 212*)—on 2 December 2016, which drew an estimated six to seven million participants (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Alkatiri, 2023).

These successive mobilisations represented more than spontaneous outbursts of religious sentiment; they constituted a coordinated moral and political movement that redefined the role of Islam in Indonesia's democratic space (Hasan, 2021). The 212 Action, in particular, became emblematic of what scholars have called the "Islamic populist turn" (Hadiz, 2018; Hasan, 2021)—a fusion of moral outrage, digital connectivity, and political mobilisation. Through the convergence of clerical authority, populist networks, and digital media, the movement transformed the Ahok controversy into a symbolic struggle over national morality and Islamic identity (Fealy & White, 2008; Hefner, 2023).

The *Aksi Bela Islam* episodes thus mark a critical juncture in Indonesia's post-reform political history. They demonstrate how religious discourse, social media, and moral emotions can intertwine to mobilise millions in defence of sacred values, while simultaneously reshaping the boundaries between faith and politics. The events surrounding Ahok's speech and its viral aftermath illustrate not only the potency of religious symbolism in electoral politics but also the fragility of Indonesia's pluralist democracy in the face of moral populism (Lim, 2017; Pepinsky, 2019).

The Role of the MUI Fatwas and the Emergence of the GNPF-MUI

The Indonesian Ulema Council (*Majelis Ulama Indonesia*, MUI) occupies a distinctive position within Indonesia's religious and political landscape as a semi-official body mediating between state and ummah. Its pronouncements often blur the line between religious edict and moral injunction, operating as what Ichwan (2013) terms moral technologies—discursive instruments that shape Islamic subjectivity while influencing state policy. The

Ahok controversy in 2016–2017 vividly illustrates how MUI authority functioned as both a moral and political force in democratic Indonesia.

Following Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's (Ahok) remarks on Qur'anic verse al-Mā'idah (5:51), which were perceived as blasphemous, the Jakarta branch of the MUI issued a teguran keras (strong reprimand) on 9 October 2016. Two days later, the Central MUI released a statement titled *Pendapat dan Sikap Keagamaan Majelis Ulama Indonesia* ("Religious Opinions and Attitudes of the MUI"). Although this document did not meet the procedural criteria of a formal fatwa, as outlined in the council's internal guidelines, its rhetorical tone and authority effectively rendered it a quasi-fatwa (Ichwan, 2013; Burhani, 2018). The statement declared that Ahok's words had "insulted the Qur'an and ulema," giving religious legitimacy to public anger. In doing so, the MUI transformed a local controversy into a national moral crisis, asserting itself as custodian of public morality in a plural democracy (Fealy, 2018; Hasan, 2021).

The issuance of this statement became a moral and political catalyst for mass mobilisation. On 11 October 2016, leaders from various Islamic organisations—including the Islamic Defenders Front (FPI), Forum Umat Islam (FUI), Wahdah Islamiyah, and Majelis Intelktual dan Ulama Muda Indonesia (MIUMI)—visited the MUI headquarters to demand a fatwa against Ahok. The MUI's response provided the moral legitimacy they sought. Within days, the Gerakan Nasional Pengawal Fatwa Majelis Ulama Indonesia (GNPF-MUI)—the National Movement to Safeguard the MUI Fatwa—was established as a coalition to coordinate legal, religious, and mass mobilisation efforts (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Pepinsky, 2019).

The GNPF-MUI's founding leadership symbolised an unprecedented alliance between Indonesia's long-divided Islamic factions. Its structure included Habib Rizieq Shihab (FPI) as Chief Patron, Bachtiar Nasir (MIUMI, Muhammadiyah) as Chairman, Zaitun Rasmin (Wahdah Islamiyah) as Deputy Chair, and Muhammad al-Khathtath (FUI, formerly HTI) as Secretary-General (Hadiz, 2018; Hasan, 2021). This coalition bridged traditionalist-populist and modernist-reformist strands: FPI represented the devotional populism rooted in Sufi practices such as *tahlil* and *istighosah*, while Wahdah Islamiyah and MIUMI reflected scripturalist reformism and Salafi influence (Fealy & White, 2008; Van Bruinessen, 2013). Their cooperation under the GNPF-MUI banner was remarkable given their historical antagonism, reflecting a pragmatic convergence around shared moral outrage and political grievance—a dynamic Hadiz (2018) identifies as Islamic populism.

Through both mosque-based preaching and digital networks, the GNPF-MUI positioned itself as guardian of the ummah's dignity. Social media—especially Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube—became crucial infrastructures for affective mobilisation (Lim, 2017; Slama & Barendregt, 2018). The movement's slogan, "Defending the Qur'an and Islam," resonated deeply among Muslims who perceived the Ahok case as emblematic of broader moral marginalisation. The symbolism of al-Mā'idah (5:51)—warning Muslims against electing non-Muslim leaders—was repeatedly invoked to frame participation as *ibadah* (worship) and *jihad damai* (peaceful struggle).

The first Aksi Bela Islam (ABI I) took place on 14 October 2016, primarily involving FPI networks. ABI II on 4 November drew an estimated three million participants, and the culmination—Aksi 212 on 2 December 2016—brought more than seven million people to Jakarta’s National Monument (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2018; Alkatiri, 2023). These mass gatherings, described as super peaceful actions, transcended conventional protest, taking on the symbolic quality of a sacred pilgrimage. One *kyai* from Banten recalled, “the energy of al-Mā’idah 51 was enough to inspire both *kyai* and *santri* to walk to Jakarta at all costs.” Even attempts by local authorities to contain mobilisation—such as simultaneous *istighosah* in Serang—failed to stem the wave of religious solidarity (Hasan, 2021; Alkatiri, 2023).

The emergence of the GNPF-MUI thus marked a pivotal moment in post-reform Islamic politics. It demonstrated how disparate religious currents—traditionalist, modernist, and populist—could unite under a single moral cause. More importantly, it revealed how the authority of *fatwa*, even when informal, could be operationalised through digital and populist networks to reshape national political discourse. The MUI’s quasi-*fatwa* lent moral legitimacy; the GNPF-MUI transformed that legitimacy into mass action. Together, they exemplify how Islamic authority in contemporary Indonesia operates as a mediated moral force—simultaneously theological, political, and technological in its reach (Burhani, 2018; Ichwan, 2016; Fealy, 2018).

Patterns of Kyai Engagement in the 212 Action: Between Faith, Morality, and Politics

Drawing upon extensive interviews with *kyai* (Islamic boarding school leaders) across Banten Province, this study reveals a multifaceted range of attitudes towards the Action to Defend Islam 212 (Aksi Bela Islam or ABI 212), a mass mobilisation that took place in Jakarta in December 2016. The event, triggered by allegations of blasphemy against the Qur’an by the then Governor of Jakarta, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok), elicited complex religious, moral, and political responses from *kyai* whose authority is deeply embedded in Banten’s long-standing *pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) tradition (Burhani, 2018; Sarhindi & Sahrial, 2021). As moral and spiritual leaders in a province historically associated with Islamic conservatism and clerical influence, their responses offer a valuable insight into how traditional religious authority interacts with contemporary political movements in Indonesia.

The study demonstrates that the *kyai*’s responses were far from monolithic. Rather, they reflect a dynamic interplay between personal piety, institutional affiliation, moral reasoning, and the awareness of an increasingly complex relationship between religion and politics in post-reform Indonesia (Achmadin, Asrori, & Barizi, 2024). Their engagement with the ABI 212 movement ranged from active participation and organisational involvement to symbolic spiritual endorsement and critical detachment. Beneath these differences lay competing yet overlapping understandings of what it means to “defend Islam” within

a plural and democratic society (Alkatiri, 2023; Nubowo, 2020). These findings not only highlight heterogeneity within Indonesia's Islamic leadership but also illuminate broader transformations in the moral politics of public Islam (Burhani, 2018).

The most visible form of engagement among *kyai* in Banten was direct participation in the ABI 212 protest. For many, joining the mobilisation was not perceived as a political act but rather as a moral and religious obligation. Participation was construed as *ibadah* (worship) and *jihad damai* (peaceful struggle)—an embodied expression of faith through collective presence and physical sacrifice (Sholikin, 2018). As moral figures whose legitimacy derives from both spiritual charisma and social authority, *kyai* mobilised their *santri* (students) and *ustadz* (teachers), transforming *pesantren* networks into disciplined infrastructures of religious activism (Achmadin et al., 2024). This demonstrates the enduring role of *pesantren* not only as educational institutions but also as socio-political nodes within Indonesia's Islamic landscape.

At the heart of such engagement lay the conviction that defending religion transcends political allegiance. Many *kyai* sought to distance their participation from party politics, framing the mobilisation as a sacred act of faith rather than partisan confrontation. The movement was often interpreted through the lens of *amar ma'ruf nahi munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil), viewed as a collective moral obligation incumbent upon all believers in response to perceived blasphemy (Fenton & Nurhajati, 2021). Public protest, therefore, became a ritualised assertion of moral order, reaffirming the unity of the Muslim community and the ethical integrity of Islam within the national sphere (Suryana, 2019). The fusion of spirituality and activism was a recurrent theme: marching, chanting *takbir*, and gathering in solidarity were regarded as *ibadah berjamaah*—a collective ritual of worship enacted in the public realm (Alkatiri, 2023). Through this lens, protest was transformed from a political act into a sacred performance of piety, a form of national prayer embodied in movement and devotion.

Participation was also justified through a discourse of moral exceptionality. While Islam generally discourages public disorder, many *kyai* argued that extraordinary offences—particularly blasphemy against the Qur'an—necessitated extraordinary responses (Sarhindi & Sahrial, 2021). The mobilisation was thus framed as *dharurah syar'iyah* (religious necessity), in which the defence of faith supersedes normative constraints. This reasoning reflects what Hidayati, Maulidi, and Niam (2025) describe as the “contextual pragmatism” of *pesantren* ethics—a moral flexibility enabling clerics to reinterpret doctrine in light of contemporary challenges.

Beyond theological justification, the movement was also perceived as an enactment of Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwah Islamiyah*). The ABI 212 event was frequently described as a moment of rare unity among Indonesia's diverse Islamic currents—NU, Muhammadiyah, Salafi, Wahhabi, and others—united under a shared cause (Nubowo, 2020; Lukman, 2022). For many *kyai*, this convergence was understood as a manifestation of divine guidance and communal maturity, where differences in theology and organisation were temporarily transcended by a higher moral purpose. Within this framework, *pesantren*

functioned not only as moral anchors but also as symbolic centres of national religious solidarity (Marijan, 2021).

The narratives of participation were also infused with a historical consciousness linking religious devotion to national struggle. Many *kyai* invoked the memory of *ulama* contributions during Indonesia's independence movement, recalling the *jihad fi sabilillah* proclamations of the 1940s (Abdurahman, 2018). Defending Islam was equated with defending the nation, reinforcing a moral genealogy that links anti-colonial resistance with contemporary religious mobilisation (Burhani, 2018). Within this view, participation in the ABI 212 protest was reinterpreted as patriotic devotion—an expression of Islamic nationalism in which loyalty to religion and loyalty to Indonesia were mutually reinforcing (Achmadin et al., 2024).

A substantial number of *kyai*, however, chose to participate symbolically rather than physically. These figures expressed unwavering support for the movement's aims but refrained from direct involvement. Their solidarity was articulated through prayer, *istighosah* (collective supplication), and *dhikr* (remembrance of God). This restraint was grounded in the belief that Islam values composure and wisdom over confrontation. Supporting the cause spiritually, they argued, sustained the protest's moral legitimacy while preserving social harmony. Through synchronised prayers and gatherings in *pesantren* across Banten, these *kyai* enacted what might be termed “remote participation”, embodying solidarity through spiritual rather than physical means.

A key element of this spiritual participation was religious nationalism. Many *kyai* asserted that defending Islam was inseparable from defending Indonesia. The phrase *hubbul wathan minal iman* (“love of the homeland is part of faith”) was frequently invoked to reconcile piety with patriotism. The ABI 212 mobilisation, often described as a “super-peaceful action”, was interpreted as an embodiment of civic virtue rather than rebellion (Lukman, 2022). This reflects what Alkatiri (2023) terms “ritualised nationalism”: the intertwining of religious fervour and national pride that underpins the moral politics of contemporary Muslim activism.

Central to this discourse was the moral valuation of peace and order. The *kyai* emphasised that the peaceful character of the protest testified to Islam's role as a guardian of national harmony. Non-violence was seen as both a moral discipline and a means of safeguarding the ethical image of Islam and the credibility of its leaders (Sarhindi & Sahrial, 2021). By articulating a theology of civility, these clerics redefined activism as a spiritual exercise in balance—assertive yet restrained, passionate yet peaceful.

Nonetheless, not all interpretations were uncritical. Some *kyai* acknowledged the ethical complexities of the movement, recognising the presence of political opportunism among participants (Nubowo, 2020). While the mobilisation originated in genuine religious sentiment, it risked being appropriated for electoral ends. Yet these clerics argued that the movement's deeper significance lay in its ability to revive moral consciousness among Muslims—a spiritual awakening that transcended political contestation. A smaller group advanced an ethic of compassion and equilibrium, praying for both demonstrators and the

accused. They contended that justice must be tempered with mercy, a sentiment rooted in Sufi moral philosophy. This inclusive approach reveals a humanistic strand within Banten's Islamic thought, demonstrating that empathy and forgiveness remain integral to religious reasoning even within conservative circles.

Alongside enthusiasm and spiritual support, a minority of *kyai* adopted a neutral or critical stance. They questioned the sincerity of public motivation and warned that religious causes risked being overshadowed by political manipulation (Suryana, 2019). For these clerics, defending Islam should operate within legal and constitutional frameworks rather than populist mobilisation. Their position reflects an emerging current of Islamic legalism, which locates moral legitimacy within the rule of law rather than the rhetoric of protest. As Achmadin et al. (2024) observe, such rational perspectives signify the growing intellectual pluralism of Indonesia's *pesantren* culture, challenging assumptions of ideological uniformity.

Across all these positions, digital media played a transformative role. Platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and particularly WhatsApp—especially through the Forum Silaturahmi Pondok Pesantren (FSPP) Banten—served as vital channels for communication and coordination (Sirait, 2024; Richtig & Maulana, 2022). The rapid circulation of videos, religious commentaries, and calls to action facilitated the emergence of a “networked Islam”—a digitally mediated religiosity that blurred traditional hierarchies of authority (Burhani, 2018). Social media thus functioned both as a tool of empowerment and a source of anxiety. It enabled swift dissemination of moral messages and fostered a sense of unity among believers, but it also undermined the *kyai*'s traditional monopoly over religious interpretation. As Sarhindi and Sahrial (2021) note, digital platforms decentralise religious authority, allowing emotional narratives to spread faster than institutional guidance. The digital dimension of ABI 212 exemplifies the evolving terrain of Islamic leadership in Indonesia, where *kyai* must navigate between enduring tradition and viral religiosity.

The findings of this study underscore the complexity of *kyai* engagement with the ABI 212 movement. Their responses, far from homogeneous, ranged from embodied activism to spiritual reflection and from patriotic devotion to cautious neutrality. Beneath this diversity lies a shared moral horizon—a collective commitment to preserve Islam's dignity while negotiating the ethical boundaries of citizenship and democracy. Whether through physical mobilisation, prayerful solidarity, or digital participation, the *kyai* of Banten demonstrate how religious authority adapts to the moral demands of modern public life. Their interpretations of ABI 212 reveal an ongoing reconfiguration of public Islam in Indonesia, where religious devotion, civic virtue, and digital mediation converge to produce new forms of collective piety. In this light, the *kyai*'s role extends beyond leading protests or prayers; it encompasses sustaining the nation's moral imagination, in which faith and politics remain inseparable yet continually reinterpreted (Alkatiri, 2023; Fenton & Nurhajati, 2021).

Negotiating Islamic Authority in Contemporary Indonesia: Moral, Political, and Digital Dimensions

The interviews conducted with *kyai* (Islamic boarding school leaders) across Banten Province reveal a complex and multilayered structure of religious reasoning and political sensibility. Their responses to the *Action to Defend Islam 212* (*Aksi Bela Islam* or ABI 212), held in December 2016, show not merely a reaction to a single event but a broader expression of how Islamic authority operates within Indonesia's evolving public sphere. Rather than representing a unified clerical voice, the *kyai* articulated varied positions that together demonstrate the adaptability and pluralism of contemporary Indonesian Islam (Burhani, 2018; Suryana, 2019). These differences are not contradictions but indicators of a dynamic religious field in which faith, politics, and modern communication technologies interact in mutually transformative ways (Fealy, 2018; Sirait, 2024).

The patterns that emerged from these narratives suggest three overlapping orientations through which the *kyai* in Banten interpreted and engaged with the ABI 212 movement. The first is an activist-participatory orientation, expressed through physical presence and direct mobilisation. For *kyai* holding this view, participation was both a moral duty and a form of devotional performance. The protest was not seen as a political contest but as a legitimate expression of *jihad damai* (peaceful struggle), through which Muslims collectively enacted their piety (Sholikin, 2018; Alkatiri, 2023). Their understanding of defending Islam thus moved beyond doctrinal rhetoric towards embodied solidarity, transforming public protest into a ritualised act of worship. This tendency, rooted in Banten's historical association with Islamic revivalism, reflects a moral economy in which spiritual authority is inseparable from collective action (Abdurahman, 2018; Marijan, 2021).

A second and more contemplative orientation was represented by what might be described as spiritual-sympathetic responses. These *kyai* did not participate directly in the Jakarta mobilisation but nonetheless offered unambiguous moral and spiritual support. Their form of engagement was defined by prayer, *istighosah* (collective supplication), and localised acts of devotion conducted within their *pesantren*. They emphasised that solidarity could be enacted not only through physical attendance but through the intentional synchronisation of hearts and prayers. This position drew upon an ethical framework that privileges composure, patience, and moral restraint (Sarhindi & Sahrial, 2021). For them, preserving peace and dignity was an equally powerful form of resistance. Their stance reflected a spiritual cosmopolitanism in which the moral weight of protest could be maintained without confrontation, ensuring that the movement remained a testimony to faith rather than a catalyst for social discord (Burhani, 2018; Hefner, 2021).

A third orientation might be termed critical-pragmatic. The *kyai* adopting this view were cautious about the intersection of religion and politics, recognising that the ABI 212 movement, though born of genuine religious grievance, also unfolded within the politically charged atmosphere of the Jakarta gubernatorial election. They expressed concern that the mobilisation could be appropriated by partisan forces seeking to weaponise religious

sentiment for electoral gain (Nubowo, 2020). While acknowledging the legitimacy of defending the sanctity of the Qur'an, they argued that moral integrity must be preserved through lawful and constitutional means rather than through populist mobilisation (Fealy & White, 2008). Such a position reveals an emerging rationalist strand within the *pesant-ren* world, one that seeks to anchor Islamic ethics within democratic institutions and the rule of law (Achmadin, Asrori, & Barizi, 2024).

The theological justifications offered across these orientations demonstrate the depth and diversity of moral reasoning within Banten's religious elite. Many *kyai* cited Qur'anic injunctions that urge believers to uphold and defend their faith against insult, situating their participation within a framework of moral *jihad*. Yet this *jihad* was understood not as violent struggle but as an act of principled self-restraint and public witness (Suryana, 2019). Simultaneously, numerous clerics invoked the prophetic maxim *hubbul wathan minnal iman* ("love of the homeland is part of faith"), framing the defence of Islam as coterminous with the defence of Indonesia's moral and political integrity. This synthesis of religion and patriotism resonates with the historical trajectory of Indonesian Islam, in which nationalism and faith have long coexisted as mutually reinforcing projects (Lukman, 2022; Burhani, 2018). Within this conceptual universe, the ABI 212 movement was imagined not as defiance against the state but as the reaffirmation of Islam's moral presence within the national narrative (Alkatiri, 2023).

Such reasoning highlights the persistence of what might be termed civic piety—a form of religious consciousness that integrates Islamic virtue with civic responsibility (Fealy, 2018; Hefner, 2023). For many Bantenese *kyai*, the mobilisation was not merely about protecting religious doctrine but about safeguarding the moral order of society. Their public performance of faith was therefore inseparable from their conception of citizenship. This fusion of piety and civic virtue represents an evolving form of Islamic civic nationalism, where loyalty to the state is expressed through the idioms of faith rather than in opposition to them (Nubowo, 2020; Marijan, 2021).

Nevertheless, the timing of the protest in the midst of Jakarta's gubernatorial campaign inevitably blurred the lines between religious devotion and political manoeuvre. The awareness of this ambivalence pervaded many interviews. While some *kyai* dismissed the allegation of political co-optation, others regarded it as unavoidable in a democratic system where religious symbolism frequently intersects with political calculation (Fealy & White, 2008). This tension underscores the *kyai*'s dual awareness: on the one hand, of their obligation to defend Islam's dignity, and on the other, of the ethical risk of allowing religion to serve as a tool of partisan mobilisation (Hidayati, Maulidi, & Niam, 2025). Their cautious balancing act—participating without aligning, supporting without endorsing—reveals an acute strategic consciousness shaped by both moral commitment and political realism.

The spread of digital media proved decisive in shaping both the perceptions and the organisation of ABI 212. The *kyai* repeatedly emphasised the role of platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and WhatsApp in disseminating information, mobilising participants, and creating a shared emotional climate (Sirait, 2024; Richtig & Maulana, 2022). Social media

transformed outrage into immediacy, collapsing distance between religious messages and their audiences. In many cases, *kyai* used WhatsApp groups within the *Forum Silaturahmi Pondok Pesantren* (FSPP) to coordinate travel and communication, effectively weaving together a digital infrastructure of faith (Sarhindi & Sahrial, 2021). This phenomenon illustrates the emergence of what scholars have called *networked Islam*—a decentralised, technologically mediated mode of religious activism that reconfigures traditional hierarchies of clerical authority (Lim, 2017; Burhani, 2018).

The digitisation of religious discourse has thus reshaped the very contours of *kyai* leadership. Authority is no longer defined solely by proximity, lineage, or institutional affiliation but also by visibility and digital connectivity (Fealy, 2018; Sirait, 2024). While this expansion allows for broader outreach, it simultaneously exposes the *kyai* to new vulnerabilities. The circulation of unverified or emotionally charged information challenges the slow, deliberative modes of guidance characteristic of the *pesantren* tradition (Hefner, 2023). Some clerics expressed discomfort with this acceleration of religious communication, noting that moral discernment risks being replaced by viral sentiment. Yet others perceived it as an opportunity to revitalise *da'wa*, enabling the dissemination of religious values to audiences far beyond their local communities. Digital mediation has thus become both a site of empowerment and a source of anxiety—a reflection of the broader transformation of Islamic authority in the twenty-first century (Lim, 2017; Richtig & Maulana, 2022).

At a deeper level, the diversity of responses among Banten's *kyai* illustrates the fragmentation and democratisation of religious authority in contemporary Indonesia. In contrast to the more centralised models of clerical hierarchy found in the Middle East, Indonesian Islam—particularly in regions like Banten—operates through a plural network of *pesantren* traditions, each with its own theological orientation and social base (Achmadin et al., 2024). *Salafiyah* institutions coexist alongside modernist and independent schools, and many *kyai* assert interpretive autonomy even when nominally affiliated with large organisations such as *Nahdlatul Ulama* or *Muhammadiyah*. This pluralism allows for remarkable flexibility but also creates tensions over legitimacy and representation. The ability of individual *kyai* to interpret doctrine and mobilise followers independently demonstrates how religious authority has become both decentralised and personalised (Burhani, 2018; Hidayati et al., 2025). In this sense, the *kyai*'s engagement with ABI 212 is emblematic of a wider process: the reconfiguration of Islamic authority from a corporatised structure into a dispersed moral network (Fealy & White, 2008).

What unites these divergent positions is a shared insistence on the peaceful character of the movement. Across ideological lines, the *kyai* were unanimous in describing ABI 212 as a “super peaceful action”. Violence, they stressed, would have betrayed the very spirit of Islam that the movement sought to defend (Suryana, 2019; Alkatiri, 2023). This rhetoric of peace was central to their effort to distinguish Islamic activism from radical extremism (Hefner, 2023). By framing the protest as an act of moral discipline rather than defiance, the *kyai* positioned themselves as mediators between the demands of faith and the requirements of public order. Their discourses of unity—“Muslims from all groups united

to defend Islam”—sought to transcend organisational and doctrinal divides, reaffirming the ideal of *ukhuwah Islamiyah* (Islamic brotherhood) as a social ethic that sustains both religious and national cohesion (Lukman, 2022; Marijan, 2021).

In this configuration, religion and nationalism appear not as opposing forces but as interdependent moral projects. The *kyai*'s invocation of unity and peace functions as a counter-narrative to the polarisation that often accompanies religious politics (Fealy & White, 2008). It projects an image of Islam as the moral foundation of civic life and situates the clerical class as custodians of both spiritual and national integrity. This synthesis of faith and patriotism constitutes a distinctively Indonesian articulation of religious modernity—one that reconciles pious commitment with plural democracy (Burhani, 2018; Hefner, 2023).

Conclusion

This study has explored the dynamic negotiation of Islamic authority, moral mobilisation, and digital mediation in post-reform Indonesia through the case of Aksi Bela Islam (Action to Defend Islam, or ABI 212) and the responses of *kyai* in Banten. The findings reveal that far from being a monolithic clerical body, Banten's *kyai* articulated diverse yet interrelated orientations—activist-participatory, spiritual-sympathetic, and critical-pragmatic. Each reflects a distinct moral logic through which Islamic leaders navigate the tensions between piety, politics, and public responsibility. These variations illustrate the adaptability and pluralism of Indonesia's pesantren-based Islam, where moral reasoning is deeply embedded in both spiritual devotion and civic consciousness.

The study further highlights the pivotal role of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) as a moral and political intermediary. Its religious opinions and attitudes on the Ahok case—though formally a *tausiyah* rather than a *fatwa*—provided the moral legitimacy that enabled the emergence of the GNPF-MUI and the subsequent mass mobilisation. This episode demonstrates how religious institutions in Indonesia operate as moral entrepreneurs within a democratic order, capable of transforming theological grievance into civic activism. For many *kyai*, participation in the 212 movement was not a partisan act but a devotional performance—*jihad damai* (peaceful struggle)—linking faith, morality, and national belonging through the idiom of *hubbul wathan minal iman* (love of the homeland as part of faith).

Theoretically, the study contributes to the understanding of Islamic authority as decentralised, relational, and networked, rather than institutional or hierarchical. The *kyai*'s authority is reproduced through moral example, digital communication, and affective participation, challenging classical models of religious leadership. It extends theories of Islamic populism by showing that moral legitimacy, not merely ideological opposition, sustains collective mobilisation. Furthermore, it advances scholarship on digital religion by revealing how social media reconfigures clerical visibility and reshapes the moral economy of Islamic communication.

Future research could deepen this analysis through comparative ethnographies across regions and longitudinal studies of kyai authority in digital environments. Exploring gendered dimensions of religious leadership, particularly among nyai (female pesantren leaders), would also enhance our understanding of moral authority in Indonesian Islam. Ultimately, the Banten case demonstrates that Islamic authority in Indonesia is a living negotiation between devotion and democracy—anchored in tradition yet responsive to the moral and technological transformations of the twenty-first century.

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Interviews

1. Kyai Supriyadi interviewed in June 2017.
2. K.H. Sulaiman Efendi interviewed in June 2017.
3. K. Sunan Rohman, interviewed in June 2017.
4. Kyai Sufyan Hariri, interviewed in June 2017.
5. Kyai Ahmad Basyir, interviewed in July 2017.
6. KH. Syafrudin, interviewed in July 2017.
7. KH Abdul Khoir Nasuki bin Nasuki bin Ashnawi, interviewed in July 2017.
8. KH Bukhori Arsyad, interviewed in July 2017.
9. KH Ikhwan Hadiyyin, interviewed in July 2017.
10. KH Bustomi Angling Darma, interviewed in July 2017.
11. Kyai Haji Baudin, interviewed in July 2017.
12. Kyai Abdul Rasyid, interviewed in July 2017.
13. KH. Akief, interviewed in August 2017.
14. Kyai Erih Supriadi, interviewed in August 2017.
15. KH Mas'a Thoyyib, interviewed in August 2017.
16. Kyai Hayumi, interviewed in August 2017.
17. KH. Ahmad Rukam, interviewed in August 2017.
18. KH Muhammad Amin, interviewed in August 2017.
19. KH Shodiqin, interviewed in August 2017.