The Interplay of Religion, Ethnicity, and Politics: The Power Contestation between Old and New Informal Actors in Madura, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The presence of informal leaders, especially *ulama*, remains influentialin the current regional election in Indonesia. Through their religious authority, they shape voter preferences and provide legitimacy to political candidates. Consequently, they occupy a strategic position that bridges elite and public interests. This creates a unique opportunity to understand informal leaders as brokers who persuade voters. Some studies have suggested that the role of ulama is widely recognised due to their religious and charismatic authority. However, this is inadequate to capture the current local political configurations as new actors emerge to replace the established ones. Ultimately, this led to a change in allegiance, with the emergence of new informal figures such as *Gus* (a young ulama) and *Nyai* (wife or daughter of ulama) in the local public space. The findings of the study show that struggles over socio-cultural patronage exist between old and new patrons. It has resulted in heated tensions in society. While old local patrons represented by ulama tend to maintain their influence over society, it faced new challenges from other actors who aspired to be new patrons particularly during local elections.

Keywords: Ethnicity, informal Leaders, Madura. politics, religion

INTRODUCTION

Electoral contestation in local elections in Indonesia is generally different from

presidential or legislative elections. While the latter two rely on massive campaigns, regional elections tend to rely on informal approaches to connect with voters. The emergence of religious figures as informal leaders is significant. They served as bridges between candidates and voters. This indicates how Indonesian electoral politics operate along hierarchical lines rather than debates over ideas, as commonly shown in Western context (Fionna & Tomsa, 2020; Sobari, 2017; Van Klinken, 2009). In this regard, the longer the hierarchical chain, the more intermediaries are needed to reach voters, as candidates are often uncertain about how to identify or map their potential supporters.

It has been widely discussed in the literature that regional elections are more competitive and fiercer than national elections (Buehler et al., 2021; Toha, 2017). The shared identity similarity between candidates and voters, the role of middlemen, and potential violence are those factors that have made local elections particularly heated in Indonesia. Among these factors, the role of middlemen, performed by informal leaders, is the focus of further discussion here. In a paternalistic society, protection, the possession of knowledge, and the distribution of resources are vital factors that made foster voters' attachment to informal leaders. This illustrates how economic dependency shapes emotional relationships in the public sphere.

As the regional elections relied on the emotions due to the identity and kinship closeness, this makes the position of informal leaders important as sources of local voters' preferences. At the same time, candidates need symbolic legitimation from the local powers in order to enhance their electability (Berenschot, 2019). This eventually leads candidates to reach out to informal leaders to seek legitimation. In this regard, informal grassroots leaders serve as a nexus between parties/candidates and voters. This nexus is examined in detail in this article.

In line with the above discussion, Madura offers an interesting case to show how political nexuses operate working out in electoral campaign. As mentioned earlier, the reliance on informal leaders has made informal leaders influential figures. *Ulama* is not solely the main actors, but there are other informal leaders who shared paternalistic power in society (Jati et al., 2025). This creates a unique case to understand the complexity of informal actors to gain political advantages as a nexus between parties/candidates and voters. Previous studies have shown *ulama* and *blater* together form a power channel that connects aspects of piety and violence (Pribadi, 2013, 2018).They not only mobilise votes but also play a strategic role in the formation of local power networks, which have implications for tensions between religious moral authority and the use of coercive force. This ultimately led to the rise of local oligarchs seeking to control the centralised distribution of resources, which fostered existing patronage networks (Rozaki, 2021a).

In alignment with earlier claims, the authority of original patrons largely rests

on established forms of veneration and coercion. In this context, reverence for ulama is influenced by both ancestral ties and the organisational affiliations that legitimise individuals as patrons within religious networks (Pribadi, 2025). Meanwhile, coercion employed by *blater* is less visibly exercised due to legal and religious sensitivities (Sila, 2019; Pribadi, 2023). Building on this argument, it is compelling to examine the familial ties that underpin the hereditary positioning of *ulama*. Presently, existing studies have paid limited attention to *Gus* (young *ulama*) and *Nyai* (wives or daughters of *ulama*). This study seeks to address this gap by examining their roles within contemporary patronage and electoral networks.

METHODS

The primary method employed in this study is ethnography. This approach enables the researcher to comprehend complex contexts of specific social phenomena and to analyse relationships among actors and their interests (Ploder & Hamann, 2021; Xiaochen & Li, 2024). The data collection strategy included in-depth interviews with various actors, such as academics, media practitioners, and *ulama*. Once the primary data had been compiled, it was cross-referenced and validated with documentary analysis to verify its credibility and consistency (Emerson et al., 2011; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The findings were subsequently synthesised into a coherent analytical framework.

Earlier research included ethnographic studies, but these primarily examined existing informal actors but did not investigate their long-standing networks and hereditary lineages of these actors, especially within recent generations. This study contributes by offering a detailed examination about the new patrons, *Gus* and *Nyai*, who represent the emerging generation of religious patrons.

To achieve this, this study conducted fieldwork research on Madura Island, particularly in Bangkalan, Sampang, and Pamekasan Regencies in June 2024. In-depth interviews were conducted with selected respondents representing ulama, academics, community members, and media practitioners. Documentary analysis was also conducted to strengthen the fieldwork data. All the data were compiled and then selected based on the findings and their relevance with the fieldwork context. After that, the data were then synthesised into a manuscript that underwent internal review.

Madura was chosen due to the complex role of informal actors in local elections. More specifically, its political nexus has generated heightened tensions, particularly during the electoral campaign period. These tensions remain understudied in the recent studies on Madurese politics. While most studies have focussed primarily on religious power as reflected in recent publications, studies focussing on these tensions remain limited. This represents the novelty of the present study to examine whether the intersection of local power structures influences electoral outcomes. Otherwise, each informal leader has their own voter base market to convince. Therefore, competition

among informal leaders becomes a key determinant in electoral success.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

The Emergence of Informal Leaders as Authoritarian Populism Expression

In general, informal leaders are individuals or groups that can maintain an influential presence in society. Informal leaders, also understood as individuals who have a significant impact on policy and decision-making processes, operate outside the constraints of formal political roles and titles. Their influence stems from a combination of strong personal relationships, deep expertise and networking in their field, and a well-established reputation, allowing them to shape opinions and actions primarily outside of conventional political structures and processes even without the formal authority of elected office or appointment, informal leaders demonstrate considerable power and play a significant role in determining the course of political events. Therefore, informal leaders themselves can, to some extent, rival the influence of the state apparatus.

The emergence of informal leaders especially in the decentralised Indonesia signals the persistence of local strongmen. Joel Migdal's classical theory argues that strongmen are non-state actors that undermine state capacity through their infiltration of formal state institutions (Migdal, 1988). Strongmen themselves are recognised for their power and charisma, which enable them to act as patrons offering protection. This argument has been used in many studies especially Southeast Asian studies. More specifically, the emergence of strongmen is often associated with declining democratic performance as governments face limitations in delivering public goods.

While the system has been declining due to strongmen' pervasive infiltration, this results in the strengthening capacity of informal leaders as strongmen. Specifically, their capacity exploits the void between state and society, thus making them the broker. This new kind of legitimacy is a fundamental response to the era of democracy which is still in an immature condition in Indonesia. More importantly, this enables strongmen and their networking to use their existing influence to gain electoral support to become elected democratic leaders. This differs to previous strongmen who used violence as the primary source of power.

Since the influence of strongmen fade away, their influence has been passed down to the informal leaders. It is important to note that the current informal leaders may share blood ties with the strongmen since the informal leaders often used strongmen symbols to obtain public acknowledgment. The involvement of informal leaders into local election indicates how populist campaign is deemed as political strategy. As the informal leaders have authority over society, it is a response to the failures of democracy to deliver equal prosperity and justice for all people (Rakhmani & Saraswati, 2021). This condition eventually forces people to turn their backs on informal leaders as a method of speaking up within the policymaking process (Foa & Mounk,

2017). In this sense, the implementation of democracy that practically has been election, it nurtures the transactional exchange between candidate and informal leaders as brokers.

The brokers provide backups based on voters' mobilisation, whereas the candidate offers money politics or club goods to brokers. This mechanism has been pervasively ingrained within electoral campaign in Indonesia. Especially informal leaders, this strengthens their position as the informal actors that should be most wanted figure during the election. Obviously, the authoritarianism populism expression is the umbrella term to find out how informal leaders cultivate patronage power for their interests. As the populist figures, they can be able to mobilise people to aspire for certain purpose (Jati, 2024). At the same time, as an authoritarian figure, they can bind people with their knowledge and strength. These two capitals made the informal leaders served to be informal political actors.

The Politics Identity Constellations in Madura

Madura as a region with rich and diverse socio-political dynamics, where education, religious identity, and informal leadership play a major role in shaping political direction and social stability. Outsiders often view Madurese society as homogeneous, with stereotypes that all Madurese are uniform in their beliefs, habits, and political affiliations. Madurese society is much more diverse and complex, especially in terms of political identity and religious affiliation. In

brief, Madura shapes its own structure and actors that eventually ingrained in society level.

Most Madurese do identify themselves as part of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), but this does not mean that they are automatically loyal to a particular political party such as PKB or follow the policy lines of PBNU. This made an interesting position that the Party ID is weak in the grass-root levels. Instead, the locals tend to in line with their preferred informal actors. There is also fragmentation in political affiliation, indicating that loyalty to a religious organisation does not always mean parties political loyalty (Jati & Supriatma, 2024). From these two factors, it shows significant differences between Madurese people who live in cities and villages. Ulama are still highly respected political advisors in villages. In contrast, cities have seen a weakening of ulama's power, which can be attributed to greater access to formal education and a more open approach to modern political advancements. Politics in urban areas are viewed more critically and independently.

Religious and cultural teachings are key in the village. In cities, however, formal education plays a more significant role, leading to increased political literacy and independent political choices. Rural and urban areas hold contrasting political perspectives, partly due to this. In recent decades, formal education in Madura has fostered greater political awareness and religious tolerance. Even though NU remains dominant, a new understanding

and acceptance of diversity, including other religions, has emerged (Jati et al., 2024). For example, the *ulama's* intervention in preventing interreligious conflict shows the important role of the *ulama* as mediators and peacekeepers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Intersection of Informal Actors within Local Politics in Madura

Situated in the northeastern part of East Java, Madura Island is renowned for its distinctive social structures and cultural traditions, which set it apart from neighbouring Java Island. From a sociological perspective, the social structure of Madurese communities is characterised by a robust emphasis on tradition, religious observance, and the importance of kinship ties. These elements resulted complex structures that headed by different informal actors. Religious figures, such as the ulama, and community leaders, who are considered informal actors, exert considerable sway in melding the political leanings of individuals within their communities. Their influence extends beyond the formal political structures, shaping both individual and collective political decisions through various channels such as social networks, religious studies, and religious gatherings (Jati, 2021).

The island of Madura is conveniently located near the island of Java in terms of geography. The historical context of Javanese culture, particularly the influence of the Hindu-Buddhist Kingdom until Islamic sultanate, has significantly shaped and continues to ongoing impact the relational structures and belief systems of the Javanese people, making this situation a product of that long history. It is important to note, however, that Madura's cultural identity is distinctive, and its people are known for their courageous display of cultural treasures, setting it apart from Java Island (Syamsuddin, 2019).

In its socio-religious construction, Madurese society prioritises religious values in every aspect of life and highly values the figure of ulama/*ulama*. For Madurese society, ulama is not only considered a religious leader but also a reference and role model that covers all aspects of life (Suswanta, 2018). *Ulama* Madura plays a social, cultural, political, educational and even economic role. This shows the central position of the ulama, because the ulama is considered not only as a subject who is able to teach religious values but also has the power of blessings (Asmawati et al., 2021).

In the context of the 2024 Election, the power of informal actors in Madura remains influential because of cultural ties to local authority figures (Jati, 2025). These actors not only mobilise political support through da'wah and moral messages but are also able to act as mediators between politicians and the community, so that political preferences are often linked to emotional and religious closeness.

There are two informal actors in Madura that are generally referred to as *ulama* and *blater* (Rozaki, 2021a). The role of ulama in Madura is not only in religious aspects but also in politics. They are respected as spiritual leaders who can move and influence

society, especially in the election context. The charisma and moral legitimacy of ulama are often used by aspiring politicians to build political support and public trust.

On the other hand, *blater* - a figure who is known to have a strong influence both physically and socially, plays a role as a figure who is able to organise groups and support political candidates with methods that are more based on strength and informal networks.(Rozaki, 2009) The tradition of the blater as a "champion" adds a complex layer to power relations in Madura, because it combines personal loyalty and loyalty to the prospective leaders they support (Rozaki, 2021b).

Ulama and *blater* together form a power channel that connects aspects of piety and violence. Their vote mobilisation and strategic power building impact the tension between religious morality and force. Madura's carok tradition uses physical fights to resolve conflicts of honor. *Carok* is carried out as a form of fighting between two people, which is triggered by issues of honor, family disputes or insults. Despite declining rates of *carok*, it remains a significant aspect of Madurese identity and social dynamics. The proverb "better dead than ashamed" encapsulates the cultural justification for carok actions among the Madurese (Pribadi, 2018). *Ulama and blater* play an important role in mediating conflicts with the aim of preventing violence (Sila, 2019). But over time, the influence of modernisation and law enforcement, the practice of carok has decreased. Now, *ulama and blater* focus more on resolving problems peacefully

with a more rational approach, although this tradition remains embedded in local culture.

Based on fieldwork findings, it turns out that there are 2 informal actors besides ulama and blater who have influence in local politics, namely: the role of *gus* (son of ulama) and *nyai* (wife or daughter of ulama). Both have an important role in bridging the influence of the two main actors, ulama and blater. *Gus* and *Nyai* often act as mediators who can connect the spiritual world and social power with the wider community.

Gus, a modern ulama, represents the next generation. They adapt better to young groups and changing times, subtly blending religious and political strategies. *Nyai* empowers women's communities and socio-religious activities. They inspire community participation, mobilising female followers. *Gus* and *Nyai* strategically combined religious and secular power. *Gus* and *Nyai's* networks bridge influence and power for stable grassroots support. In Madura, *Gus* and *Nyai* are key influencers, bridging socio-political divides. These two actors help maintain harmony between the religious morality brought by the ulama and the social control carried out by the *blater*, creating a balance in the unique local political dynamics in Madura. In addition to being a balance between religious and social power, it also connects public belief in religion with cultural aspects and local political pragmatism.

Nyai or female clerics, although often positioned under the patronage of *ulama* in patriarchal culture, apparently have a strong role in managing Islamic boarding schools

and religious activities. They are often the driving force in community activities, providing teaching and preaching through Islamic poetry which influences the social life of the community. For example, *Nyai* Fatmah Mawardi from Prenduan, Sumenep, shows an active role in the fields of education and economics, and uses the art of poetry as a medium for da'wah. Including gus - the ulama's children and grandchildren who are often involved in various social and political activities to facilitate communication and unite the influence of *ulama* and *blater*.

The Heated Tension between Old and New Informal Actors in Shaping Voting Preferences

Gus and Nyai versus Old Informal Actors in Madura

Gus and Nyai are typically members of Madura's long-standing traditional ruling class. Being from a family of religious scholars, gus and nyai are definitely highly respected in the community because of their family history. Furthermore, the public also perceived that Gus and Nyai would succeed the existing ulama capacity. This ultimately resulted in Gus and Nyai amassing a substantial following within various *pengajian* groups.

As previously stated, some of the gus and nyai have received modern or secular higher education and tend to have a more contemporary perspective, thus enabling them to successfully engage with younger generations. Their adaptability in mediating between the religious community and political power renders them influential

mediators. This capability has caused disputes among the old and *gus/nyai* who sought to preserve patronage influence within society.

In this respect, the emergence of *gus* and *nyai* as new informal actors fundamentally addressed the generational transition within the Madurese political and social sphere. By challenging conventional power dynamics and introducing innovative concepts to the political landscape, younger generations, who tend to possess more contemporary perspectives and various approaches to political involvement, are making an impact. Political priorities and alliances could be redefined by this change in generations as time passes.

As mentioned, Gus and Nyai certainly challenged the current patrons. Because of their standing as an ulama family, they do not directly engage in physical confrontations, contrasting with the Madurese tradition of *carok*, a knife fight used to settle disputes. Instead, they seek to amass a larger following that defies the established patron's supporters. Gus and Nyai slowly become well-known in society via religious gatherings, and in the end, they become new informal actors. It may be effective in shaping public opinion, specifically in relation to how people voted in the recent elections.

Gus and *nyai* helped Khofifah Indra Parawansa win the most recent East Java local election as part of her coalition. The "Khofifah Effect" highlights the considerable impact of Khofifah Indar Parawansa on East Java's political landscape, especially

concerning the 2024 presidential election. Her public endorsement of the Prabowo-Gibran ticket has considerably boosted their chances of winning in the province, as support for other candidates, including Ganjar Pranowo and Anies Baswedan, has fallen. Khofifah is thought to be very good at getting political support from Nahdliyin (NU followers), which may be key to the Prabowo-Gibran ticket winning in East Java, where votes from NU members were very important, thanks to a strong network of nyai (women's wives). Khofifah's impact, combined with backing from various factions within NU, illustrates how she can rally a wide political network and shape political trends at both local and national scales.

Ulama, Village Heads, and Thug Bosses as Brokers

In line with above explanations, the existence of old informal leaders has shaped the social relationship. They have their own traditional authority over society through violence control and socio-religious patronage. These two source of power often to be political brokerage during electoral campaign period. It is important to note that current brokerage power is the legacy of past similar power.

At the grassroot level, old informal leaders have played a significant role for centuries. Previously, this large number of leaders were head of their respective polity before surrendering their authority to the national government after the independence proclamation in 1945. These processes took gradual progress since the local leaders retained traditional authority as part of formal power sovereignty transfer to the national government. In some places specially Bali, Papua, Maluku, Aceh, and Madura, those informal leaders continue to exist in the meantime (Tyson, 2010).

Although they have lost their formal political authority, they remain influential at the grassroots due to their alluring charisma. In other words, these leaders still possess some level of political capital. Another informal figure is called *Tojing*, which in the Madurese cultural context refers to individuals or groups who act as intermediaries or political liaisons between candidates or parties and voters. The role of *tojing* is often considered as a "vote broker" who can mobilise support in elections through their personal or social networks. They have strong relationships with local communities, and their influence can be based on social, economic, or family power.

Tojing coordinates grassroots campaigns, candidate-voter communication, and positive candidate image events. They sway voters through personal or group persuasion. This role involves mobilising large groups, sometimes using incentives. *Tojing* relies on community trust. Madura's patron-client system relies on them to connect elites and voters. Their influence on local politics is significant, despite lacking formal regulation. Tojing and Blater's societal impacts differ in scale and breadth. *Blaters* strongly influence local communities socially and politically. Respected figures, they wield considerable electoral power. Blatters bridge the gap between elites

and communities. They informally sway citizens' political decisions despite lacking formal election roles. *Tojing* act as local intermediaries. Despite smaller networks, they still link politicians and voters. *Tojing emphasise personal communication with voters.* While less influential than *blater,* *tojing* builds trust and better connects local communities politically.

Blater is more often seen as a more dominant figure on a large scale, with a wider social network and stronger influence, while perhaps operating at a more micro level and relying more on personal relationships. Both play a role in mobilising votes for certain political interests, but in different ways and with different influences. In the context of local elections, *blater* can be considered as an actor who plays a more macro role (district/city), while tojing focusses more on the micro (sub-district/village), but both play an important role as vote brokers in the Madurese political system.

Such old informal leaders include Islamic religious leaders or *ulama*, village heads and thug (*preman*) bosses. These three figures has been extensively discussed in literatures (Mudhoffir, 2017, 2022). Some have described them as "strongmen" due to their significant influence over people (Young, 2021). Meanwhile, others have proposed that they are local patrons, owing to their immense power to confer protection in exchange for tributes from people (Sidel, 2005, 2012).

Among those informal local leaders, the ulama would be the preferred informal local leaders for both candidates and voters. The possession of religious knowledge can dogmatically affect people. For voters itself, ulama's suggestions might be the best for life including political decision making. Meanwhile, the candidates considered the ulamas' endorsement can be powerful to attract voters. These two factors made ulama to be influential actors in the current *Pilkada* campaign.

Given their considerable influence and ability to enforce decisions, Gus and Nyai typically do not directly engage with those informal leaders. In this situation, Gus and Nyai prefer connecting with the younger generation because of shared generational interests, possibly using soft power instead of force.

Village Chiefs as New Brokers

The role of village heads in local political influence tends to be significant, especially in the distribution of power at the village level. This reflects the fact that village heads are often a channel for mobilising political support, especially because they have direct access to village communities. In the *Imabra* region (possibly referring to a part of Madura or a particular area), village heads have a stronger influence, although this strategy is not always effective, especially if they only rely on village assistance.

Given that the strategic position of village heads in local Madurese politics, political parties often try to control village heads to support their political agendas. However, this practice shows limited effectiveness because the influence of village heads does not always guarantee campaign success or full support. On the

contrary, there is a tendency that politicians who try to approach the community through village heads are those who do not have a strong power base or wider political access.

During elections, village heads strategically coordinate logistics, mediate citizen needs, and connect elites with communities. Village heads' political activity shapes Madura's elections. Village heads control local politics, including polling places. Village heads sometimes rig elections, causing tensions like the protests in Grampes. In Madura, political success hinges on a strong power base, despite the influence of informal actors like village heads.

Regarding this, the village heads appear to have a cordial relationship with Gus and Nyai, given their frequent attendance at religious meetings. Moreover, village heads aim to partner with gus and nyai in terms of local informal stability, instead of other actors who might operate independently. At the same time, Gus and Nyai are also seeking protection from the village heads, who have the authority to secure villagers and negotiate with other informal actors.

The Contested Position of Ulama as The Political Patron

In Madura, the Ulamas, as long-standing local figures, may serve as active informal leaders who can propose their own candidacy or endorse their preferred candidates for the regency. They could mobilise their students *(santri)* and even the *pesantren* (boarding schools) alumni to vote for them or their preferred candidates. The presence of such alumni networking is a main factor that contributes to why *ulamas* and their *pesantrens* still continue to exist in Madura. Many of the *pesantren* alumni have even become public figures such as politicians. It is worth noting that some Madurese politicians nominated as regents or lawmakers are usually *pesantren* alumni, for example: Mahfud MD, Achmad Baidowi, and Hasani Bin Zuber. They still maintain connections with their alumni and *ulamas* for their electability because of their strong communal bonding. Therefore, this network can be relied on by candidates to secure *pesantren* votes.

The above condition also applies to *ulamas*. As they have spiritual and religion authority, most of Madura people still have great admirations toward *ulamas* and families. *Ulamas* can be great endorsers for those whom candidates win over Madura people. Ulama also have large assets possession that surrounded people still used it. this resulted in dependent relations between ulama and people that turned to be great votes sources.

Ulama remain important figures in the social, cultural, and economic life of Madurese society. However, their influence in politics is not entirely uniform or universal. There are differences in the way their influence is practiced in different regions and among different ulama. Although they can play a significant role in shaping opinion and mobilising society, not all ulama have the same strong influence in every region. In this regard, Gus's potential elevation to the status of ulama is likely,

as the pilgrimage to Mecca has become a significant factor in determining ulama status, with many aspiring to the title of *Kiai Haji*. Likewise, *Nyai* can also elevate to be *Nyai Haji* if she conducted pilgrimage to Mecca as well.

Madura's political landscape is often fractured, with ulama aligning with various parties, including the PPP and Golkar. This demonstrates that people's political loyalties are fluid and influenced by factors beyond a single ideology or group, such as family and background. While some ulama may hold significant sway in parts of Sumenep, their influence doesn't extend to the whole of Madura. In Madura, door-to-door campaigning is generally more effective than other strategies. The lower echelons of society are often underserved by aid and programmes routed through official channels or established forums. Ulama's impact is still significant, however, its political influence isn't absolute; not all ulama can effortlessly rally the masses or dictate political decisions.

A prominent Madurese political family, the Bani Cholils, shaped local politics. One of Madura's most influential political families is this one. Originating with Ulama Cholil of Bangkalan, this family has held considerable sway over local Bangkalan, Madura politics from the New Order to the present day. The family's powerful religious influence lends moral and cultural legitimacy to local leaders who are family members. Bani Cholil's influence extends beyond religious matters, reaching into the political sphere where family members

commonly occupy influential positions in local government. The influential Ulama family of Bani Cholil significantly impacted local Madurese politics. This is a politically powerful clan in Madura. Originating with Ulama Cholil of Bangkalan, this influential clan has held a powerful position in Madura's Bangkalan local politics from the New Order era to the present. The family's size and devout faith grant its local leaders considerable moral and cultural influence. The Bani Cholil family's influence is not confined to religion but also significantly impacts local politics, with family members often in powerful governmental roles.

Bani Cholil's political endorsements since the New Order have favoured candidates with familial connections or similar beliefs. Their network of Islamic boarding schools, religious study groups, and other religious communities allows them to garner widespread support and cultivate a loyal following. The political clout of Bani Cholil figures, particularly within religious communities, heavily influences voter support and mass mobilisation. Bani Cholil's strong ties to the central government, cultivated through both formal political parties and informal networks, solidified their influence during the New Order era. Despite shifts in political power following the reformation, the Bani Cholil successfully adapted by mediating between local elites and the community. This created a consistent and sustainable influence in Bangkalan politics. Their role as mediators in social conflicts, leveraging religious authority to mitigate tensions and ensure

political stability, further solidified their influence. Bani Cholil remains a powerful and relevant figure in local politics because of the potent combination of religious charisma, strong social networks, and political savvy.

Fuad Amin is a powerful figure due to his ancestry (a ulama from Bani Cholil), his position as Bangkalan's regent, and his leadership of the blater. This alliance gives him considerable power in Madura. This power extends beyond traditional political borders, enabling total domination of the local political landscape. The 2014 arrest of prominent Bani Cholil figure and former Bangkalan Regent, Fuad Amin Imron, by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) for bribery and corruption severely damaged Bani Cholil's reputation and political standing. Fuad Amin was a highly influential political figure, especially in Madura and Bangkalan. The arrest damaged the reputation of the influential Bani Cholil family, known for their power in religious and political circles.

This arrest jeopardises the family's political standing and public image. The corruption scandal tarnished the family's reputation for integrity and cast doubt on the moral leadership of local politicians. To further complicate matters, his son's involvement increased the family's need to restore public confidence and maintain their strong position in Madura. Bani Cholil remains strong due to its religious ties and historical backing, though this situation necessitates adapting to image concerns and preserving its political and social influence

in the post-Suharto reform era. This situation led to a reassessment and strategic shift to stay relevant in a society increasingly intolerant of corruption and opaque politics.

The dominant political forces in Madura tend to draw support from the community's cultural and religious affiliations. The National Awakening Party (PKB) and the United Development Party (PPP) wield considerable influence, largely because of their strong connections to the pesantren community and its influential religious leaders. Support for these parties is bolstered by the backing of religious leaders, including clerics and members of the Bani Cholil family. Major national parties, including the Democratic Party and PDI Perjuangan, also aim to expand their influence in the area by employing locally adapted strategies that cater to the Madurese community's unique characteristics.

Political Competitions and Struggles in Madura

The varying impacts of local Madurese informal leaders on voter preferences have created tensions across different aspects of the community. As discussed earlier, Maduran politics involves more than just official politicians. Informal leaders like religious figures (ulama) and local strongmen (*blater*) often hold significant sway due to their influence on followers and communities. Madurese politics is a complex interplay of competing power structures constantly negotiating and leveraging their influence, creating a dynamic socio-political environment. Politics plays out in many ways.

Religious and Secular Authority

The central conflict in Madura's politics is the tension between religious and secular authorities. The influence of ulama is substantial, yet it overlaps with the authority of local strongmen (blater) and village leaders. The resulting dynamic fuels competition for influence and domination of political processes. Specifically, young activists frequently act as intermediaries, facilitating communication between village heads and ulama with potentially differing agendas.

Traditional Power Structures vs. Modernity

The struggle between established power structures—represented by figures such as Blatter and influential families like the Bani Cholil—and modernising forces is another key element of the competition. Although traditional networks and relationships are still important, a new generation of activists educated elsewhere and exposed to modern political thought is challenging the status quo. The impact of these young activists signals a possible power shift, introducing new viewpoints and communication methods to politics.

Formal and Informal Politics

In Madura, the political landscape is a complex mix of formal institutions and informal power dynamics. Within this system, *Tojings*—political brokers—exploit their social capital and connections to mobilise support behind chosen candidates or parties. This informal brokerage system can sometimes eclipse formal political processes, leading to concerns about transparency and accountability.

Urban-rural Divide

The data further suggests a growing disparity in political views and power between city and country dwellers. Ulama maintain a strong presence in rural communities; however, their power diminishes in urban areas characterised by higher education levels and exposure to varied political ideologies. This urban-rural divide may result in competing political priorities and preferences, potentially causing fights over resources and representation.

Impact of Corruption

Fuad Amin's corruption case has significantly altered Madura's political scene; Amin is a prominent member of the Bani Cholil family and a former regent. This incident has tarnished the family's reputation and undermined their long-standing political power. This has heightened public awareness of corruption and accountability problems, possibly resulting in increased oversight of political figures and their conduct.

The old informal leaders tend to maintain their influences specially *ulama* through their religious patronages. It faced series of challenges from the incoming new informal leaders in society. This resulted in the dynamic contestation to compete voters. In addition, the contestation also showed the fight for existence remaining influential in Madurese. As the cultural patronage still

saliently important. This made the presence of the informal local leaders will continue in Madura.

CONCLUSION

The Madurese case have showed how the presence of informal leaders still important in the local democracy building. Concurrently, the rise of *gus* and *nyai* has been met with resistance, as they seek to supplant the established informal leadership. As the quality of democracy specially parties' consolidation has been weakening, the informal leaders are needed to shape voters' preference, even they can also mobilise voters. This revealed how patronage worked out that conducted by those informal leaders through their powers. In this regard, ulama/ *ulama* remains important figures due to his religion knowledge and economic resources that become binding power to control people. As a result, *ulama* has been powerful actors in local politics particularly on his commands that can mobilise voters.

However, *ulama* itself face challenges from various local actors that made patronage is not solely under *ulama* but also it has been decentralised to different actors. They have various powers that also can bind people. This occurred during the electoral campaign, each informal leaders fight for voters through their power networking. While *ulama* remains powerful, their legitimacy gradually eroded as the new actors have engaged with people on daily basis. This study revealed that the informal actors at the same time, are needed to drive political participation, but they can also be actors that erode democracy through their patronage powers.

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