

KIAI AND *BLATER* IN MADURA'S LOCAL POLITICS: ISLAMIC AUTHORITY AND THE LIMITS OF DEMOCRATIZATION IN POST-REFORM BANGKALAN

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Abstract: This study explores local politics in Madura, Indonesia, during the early years of regional autonomy following the fall of the New Order, a period marked by the rise of civilian elites in positions previously dominated by the military. It focuses on two influential local actors—*kiai* (Islamic religious leaders) and *blater* (local strongmen)—and examines their role in shaping regional elections (Pilkada) in Bangkalan. The research aims to understand community perceptions of these elites’ involvement and its implications for democratization. Adopting a qualitative, descriptive approach, data were collected through interviews and documentation, involving *kiai*, *blater*, community leaders, party figures, academics, cultural figures, and residents from both urban and rural areas. The study draws on the theoretical frameworks of interest groups and democratization. Findings indicate that *Kiai* engage in politics by running for office, endorsing candidates, campaigning, and issuing religious guidance to mobilize followers, while *blater* employ intimidation and coercion to influence voting behavior. Although both elites are central to local elections, their participation does not advance substantive democracy; instead, it constrains political choice and undermines citizens’ autonomy. The study argues that the entanglement of religious authority and local power structures in Bangkalan illustrates a complex pattern of elite influence, highlighting the challenges of achieving genuine democratization in post-reform Indonesian regions.

Keywords: *Kiai*; *Blater*; Pilkada; Democratization; Post-Reform.

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Introduction

Democratization at the local level in Indonesia began with the approval of Law No. 22 and Law No. 25 in 1999, which were later revised by Law No. 32 in 2004 concerning Regional Autonomy. These laws granted greater authority to local governments to manage their own affairs and resources and aimed to bring governance closer to the people. Following the fall of the New Order regime, the political landscape in Madura, particularly during the early implementation of regional autonomy, saw significant changes. One of the most notable shifts was the emergence of *kiai*, Islamic leaders from civil society, as district heads in regions previously dominated by military figures. In Bangkalan, *Kiai* Fuad Amin won the district election in 2003-2008 and was re-elected for a second term in 2008-2013. Similarly, in Sumenep, *Kiai* Ramdhan Siradj emerged victorious in the 2003 legislative election, while in Pamekasan, *Kiai* Kholilurrahman became the first *kiai* to win a direct election for head of the district in 2008. The political picture in Sampang saw *Kiai* Fannan Hasin become the elected head in 2013. This reflects the strength of *kiai* and their followers, who, unlike during the New Order, are now deeply involved in local politics.

The political dynamics in Madura highlights the strong influence of *kiai* and their followers, who were previously excluded from the political process during the New Order. In addition to their role as district heads, *kiai* and their followers, known as *santri*, have also emerged in legislative and bureaucratic positions across Madura, marking the recognition of their political role. However, the problem lies in the patronage system built between *kiai* and their *santri*, where the political choices of the latter are heavily influenced by the *kiai*'s preferences due to the close religious ties.

Alongside the *kiai*, there is another powerful elite group in Madura: the *blater* (local strongmen and informal brokers).¹ Long before

¹ The term “*blater*” refers to someone who holds power in a village and can provide safety and protection, both physically and spiritually, to the community. See Abdur Rozaki, *Menabur Kharisma Menuai Kuasa* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Marwa, 2004). According to Wiyata, a *blater* is someone whose behavior tends toward criminal actions, such as drinking, gambling, and engaging with women (polygamy/visiting prostitutes). Latif Wiyata, *Carok Konflik Kekerasan dan Harga Diri Orang Madura* (Yogyakarta: LKiS, 2006). In another interpretation, *blater* is understood as a *scoundrel*, that is someone arrogant, rude, boastful, and prone to causing

regional autonomy and direct elections, Madura was familiar with direct forms of leadership selection, such as the election of *kelebum* (village head). Often, *blater* were key figures in these elections, either standing for office themselves or supporting family members and protégés. *Blater* have been especially influential in village head elections in Bangkalan and Sampang, sometimes even more so than *kiai*. The influence of *blater* expanded further with the advent of direct elections for president, governor, and district head, where they played a significant role in supporting certain candidates. For example, in the 2014 presidential election, the *blater* elite in Ketapang, Sampang, managed to secure a 100% victory for the Prabowo Subianto-Hatta Rajasa ticket, an event that drew national attention due to allegations of fraud.

The political picture in Madura illustrates the intertwined influence of *kiai* and *blater* as local elites. *Kiai*, with their *santri* followers, often dictate the political choices of their followers, while *blater* leverage their networks in activities like cockfighting, gambling, and social relationships to exert control over local voters. *Blater* can come from any social background, including the *santri* community, and their rise is often tied to social conflicts, where they gain prominence following a personal victory, such as winning a *carok* (a traditional Madurese duel using sharp weapon until one die). In Pamekasan and Sumenep, where the political landscape is shaped by the *keraton* (royal palace) system and educational institutions, the political power of *kiai* has increasingly merged with that of other elites, especially in recent years.

This dynamic is particularly evident in Bangkalan and Sampang, where both *kiai* and *blater* are deeply involved in local elections. In Bangkalan, *Kiai* Fuad Amin was first elected as district head in 2003 and re-elected in 2008, followed by his son (2013-2018) and his brother (2018-2023), all of whom are descendants of *Kiai* Kholil Bangkalan, a revered religious leader.² Despite the strong influence

disturbances. Activities that have become habitual for a *scoundrel* include gambling, drinking alcohol, cheating, polygamy, visiting prostitutes, robbery, theft, and other forms of deviance. In fact, the behaviors and characteristics described above have become so ingrained in the *blater* identity that it is difficult to distinguish between the two.

² Yanwar Pribadi, "Islam and Politics in Madura: Ulama and Other Local Leaders in Search of Influence (1990-2010)" (Ph.D Thesis--Institute for Area Studies (LIAS), Faculty of the Humanities, Leiden University, the Netherland, 2013);

of *kiai* in Bangkalan, the *blater* have also maintained significant political power, though they have not yet secured a district head position. However, in Sampang, a *blater*, H. Abdullah Hidayat, was elected as vice district head (2019-2024).

Research on the involvement of *kiai* and *blater* in local elections has been extensive, addressing topics such as the power dynamics between *kiai* and *blater*,³ their influence on local elections,⁴ and the impact of these elites on political changes post-1998.⁵ Existing studies have covered areas like *kiai* and political patronage,⁶ *blater* in village elections,⁷ political communication of *kiai*,⁸ and democratization post-Law No. 32/2004 on regional autonomy.⁹ However, few studies have explored the community's perspective on the involvement of both *kiai* and *blater* in the Pilkada and the effects of their participation on democratization in Madura.¹⁰ This study aims to fill

Yanwar Pribadi, *An Abangan-like Group in a Santri Island: The Religious Identity of the Blater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³ Rozaki, *Menabur Kharisma Menuai Kuasa*.

⁴ Moh Syaeful Bahar, *Kiai dan Bejangan: Local Strongman Pasca Orde Baru* (Surabaya: Imtiyaz, 2021); Holilah, "Blater dan Politik di Madura: Studi Kasus Peran Politik Blater dalam Pemilihan Kepala Desa di Kecamatan Tanjungbumi Kabupaten Bangkalan" (Surabaya: UIN Sunan Ampel Surabaya, 2015); Rudi Subiyakto, "Keterlibatan *Kiai* dalam Pilkada," *Jurnal Ilmu Politik dan Ilmu Pemerintahan* 1, no. 1 (2011): 41; Ujang Mahadi, "Komunikasi Politik *Kiai* pada Kampanye Pemilu," *Addin* 9, no. 2 (2015): 229-252.

⁵ Hilal Ramdhani, "Realitas Elit Politik Lokal dan Persepsi Masyarakat dalam Proses Pemekaran Daerah," *JPPUMA: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan dan Sosial Politik UMA* 7, no. 2 (2029): 219-226; Haryanto, "Elit Politik Lokal dalam Perubahan Sistem Politik," *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik* 13, no. 2 (2009): 131-48; Muhammad Fadli et al., "Keterlibatan Elit Lokal dalam Peningkatan Partisipasi Politik Pada Pemilihan Bupati dan Wakil Bupati Kabupaten Toraja Utara Tahun 2015," *Aristo* 6, no. 2 (2018): 301-28.

⁶ Imam Zamroni, "Kekuasaan Juragan dan *Kiai* di Madura," *Karsa: Journal of Social and Islamic Culture* 12, no. 2 (2012): 161-167; Wiwid Adiyanto and Rarashanti Wulandhari, "Kekuasaan *Kiai* dalam Politik: Modal Fuad Amin Sebagai Bupati Terpilih di Kabupaten Bangkalan," *Channel: Jurnal Komunikasi* 8, no. 1 (2020): 59.

⁷ Yanwar Pribadi, "The Klebun, the *Kiai* and the *Blater*: Notes from Western Madura, Indonesia," *South East Asia Research* 23, no. 3 (2015): 303-17.

⁸ Adiyanto and Wulandhari, "Kekuasaan *Kiai* dalam Politik."

⁹ Mohammad Fauzi, "Demokratisasi Politik di Madura Pasca Pemberlakuan Regulasi Otonomi Daerah Tahun 1999 (Studi Perbandingan Kabupaten Bangkalan dan Sampang)" (Master Thesis--Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, 2005).

¹⁰ Abd Hannan, "Agama, Kekerasan, dan Kontestasi Politik Elektoral: Penggunaan Simbol Keagamaan *Kiai* dan Kekuasaan *Blater* dalam Pertarungan Politik Lokal Madura," *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 12, no. 2 (2018): 187; Holilah, "Blater

that gap by investigating the views of the local population regarding the involvement of *kiai* and *blater* in post-reform Pilkada and the impact of their participation on democratization in Bangkalan. This paper also examines how the informal community leaders and figures, i.e. *kiai* and *blater*, create a new patrimonial leadership in the age of democratization of Indonesia.

This phenomenon is of particular interest for two reasons: first, the involvement of both *kiai* and *blater* in local elections reflects the power dynamics of local elites in Bangkalan; second, the participation of both groups in the Pilkada could potentially increase voter turnout and reduce voter apathy (Indonesian: *Golongan Putih*/Golput). However, the question remains whether this involvement has led to substantive democratization in the region.

This study uses a qualitative, field-based approach, employing descriptive research methods. Data is gathered through interviews with key informants, including *kiai*, *blater*, community leaders, political party members, academics, and local residents from both urban and rural areas. Additionally, documentary analysis is conducted to examine relevant electoral materials and records. The theoretical framework applied in this study incorporates concepts from interest group theory and democratization studies to analyze the complex relationships between local elites and democratic development in the context of Bangkalan.

Political Interest Group

In the context of a nation-state, there are various individuals and groups who channel their interests and needs through different mechanisms and systems, which vary significantly from those of other groups. This is done to ensure that the fundamental interests that these groups advocate for are achieved and benefit their members.

An interest group, commonly referred to as a “pressure group,” is a system through which the interests of a specific group of indi-

dan Politik di Madura”; Rizca Putri, “Perubahan Pola Perilaku Memilih Kaum *Santri* dalam Pemilu Daerah Serentak 2020 di Kabupaten Sumenep,” *Politeia Jurnal Ilmu Politik* 15, no. 2 (2023); Ach. Khoiri et al., “The Role of *Kiai* and *Blater* in the Regional Election in Madura: Discourse on Legal Culture,” *Trunojoyo Law Review* 6, no. 2 (2024): 211-33.

viduals are communicated.¹¹ Interest groups serve as a medium for expressing or reinforcing citizens' aspirations and demands within the political system of a state. In this regard, interest groups occupy a strategic position within a nation's political system.

Interest groups are often defined as "a group of persons who share a common cause, which puts them into political competition with other groups of interest."¹² This definition confines interest groups to the aggregation and articulation of societal interests. They are organized groups with shared benefits, consistently active in their efforts to influence government actions.¹³

According to Ramlan Surbakti, an interest group is a collection of individuals who share similar attitudes, characteristics, beliefs, and/or goals, which are mutually agreed upon, and who endeavor to organize themselves to protect and achieve these shared objectives.¹⁴ As an organized group, they not only have a clearly defined membership structure but also possess the financial resources to fund their activities, along with leadership patterns and internal and external communication strategies.

Based on the definitions above, it can be concluded that an interest group is a non-governmental collective formed to address specific needs or interests aimed at protecting and achieving their goals. These interests may either represent the broader public interest (the welfare of society at large) or be focused on the interests of particular groups. In this study, the interest groups under consideration are the *keiai* and *blater*.

Almond and Powell, in their classic work, classified interest groups into four types: (1) Anomic groups, which are spontaneous in nature and oriented toward actions such as protests or demonstrations; (2) non-associational groups, which are loosely organized and have a membership that fluctuates with current and significant

¹¹ Adam William Chalmers, Alfio Puglisi, and Onna van den Broek, "Interest Groups," in *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Interest Groups, Lobbying and Public Affairs*, eds. Phil Harris, Alberto Bitonti, Craig S. Fleisher, Anne Skorkjær Binderkrantz (N.p.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1-7.

¹² Theodore M. Benditt, "The Concept of Interest in Political Theory," *Political Theory* 3, no. 3 (1975): 245-58.

¹³ Kenneth Janda et al., *The Challenge of Democracy: American Government in Global Politics* (N.p.: Cengage Learning, 2017).

¹⁴ Ramlan Surbakti, *Memahami Ilmu Politik* (Jakarta: Gramedia Widia Sarana Indonesia, 1992).

issues. These groups include ethnic, descendant, religious, regional, status, and social class groups; (3) Institutional groups, which are formally structured and engage in continuous activities with strong organizational links and official membership. These groups have significant political and social functions alongside their specific goals; (4) Associational groups, which have a well-organized formal structure, with official or formal membership, and specifically aim to articulate the interests of their members.¹⁵ In this research context, *kiai* and *blater* belong to the non-associational groups due to their affiliation with certain communities under their influence. However, both *Kiai* and *Blater* often gain loyal support from their community due to their informal contribution in protecting the community interest.

Janda et al. classify the strategies used by interest groups to persuade the government.¹⁶ These strategies include: (1) Lobbying, which involves direct communication with politicians or government officials regarding the issues at hand. Wise Cumings defines lobbying as “communication with legislators or other government officials to try to influence their decisions.”¹⁷ Interest groups, particularly those with strong influence, often employ professional lobbyists or hire negotiators with expertise in this field; (2) Media advocacy, where interest groups utilize mass media to attract public attention, thereby influencing government decision-making and policy development based on the desired issues; (3) Grassroots pressure, where interest groups mobilize support from lower social strata to promote strategic issues. In this research context, informal leaders like *kiai* and *blater* often carry out lobbying by offering informal ways to eradicate issues in community, i.e. using their influence although often out of legal procedures.

Frequently, interest groups use all three strategies simultaneously to persuade the government, which can be an effective approach. However, the success of an interest group's efforts in influencing government activities varies. Several factors affect the effectiveness of interest groups, including political aspects, cultural con-

¹⁵ Gabriel Abraham Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics: A Developmental Approach* (New Delhi: Amerind Publishing, 1966).

¹⁶ Janda et al., *The Challenge of Democracy*.

¹⁷ Milton C. Cummings Jr, *Democracy under Pressure: An Introduction to the American Political System* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974).

text, institutional structure, the party system, and the nature and style of public policy-making.

Democracy and Local Democratization

The term “democracy” originates from the Greek word *demokratia*, composed of two elements: *demos*, meaning “people,” and *kratos*, meaning “rule” or “power.”¹⁸ Thus, democracy fundamentally refers to a government of the people, by the people, and for the people. More explicitly, “government of the people” emphasizes that the governance system originates from the populace itself. Meanwhile, “government for the people” underlines the principle that state activities must primarily aim at promoting the well-being and welfare of its citizens.

Nurcholis Madjid outlines several essential values and norms inherent within democracy, which include: 1) awareness and recognition of pluralism; 2) deliberation (*mushāwarah*); 3) consensus-building (*permufakatan*); 4) cooperation; 5) fulfillment of economic aspects; 6) moral considerations; and 7) a supportive education system that fosters democratic values and civic awareness.¹⁹

The effective functioning of democracy requires robust commitment and active participation from state institutions, notably including: 1) an accountable government; 2) a legislative body that genuinely represents various groups and accurately reflects voter preferences through elections conducted fairly, honestly, and confidentially; 3) education and training provided by political parties to their members and constituents; 4) an independent and free press, uninfluenced by pressures from any external entities; and 5) a judiciary that steadfastly upholds justice and the rule of law.²⁰

Local democracy can be viewed as an extension or a natural derivative of the broader democratic system adopted within Indonesia’s political structure. This system grants opportunities for regional governments to establish a closer relationship with their con-

¹⁸ Harjono, *Transformasi Demokrasi* (Jakarta: Sekretariat Jenderal dan Kepaniteraan Mahkamah Konstitusi, 2009).

¹⁹ Nurcholis Majid, *Islam, Kemodernan, dan Keindonesiaan* (Bandung: Mizan Pustaka, 2008).

²⁰ Ni’matul Huda, *Hukum Tata Negara Indonesia* (Depok: RajaGrafindo Persada, 2011).

stituents, effectively acting as extensions of the central government at the local level.²¹

The degree of democratization at the local level can be identified through several key indicators. First, democracy aims for active citizen participation in political processes, notably in selecting their leaders. Direct elections are generally considered superior to representative systems, as they promote deeper democratic involvement. Second, direct local elections allow citizens to directly evaluate and choose leaders who demonstrate a clear understanding of local problems and can adequately represent local interests. Third, local elections encourage active citizen participation, strengthening democracy at the grassroots level, particularly when the citizens' right to exercise their political power remains free from obstruction by other entities.²²

In practice, the implementation of local democracy can be assessed through adherence to the fundamental principles of electoral governance as stipulated in Article 22E of Indonesia's 1945 Constitution. It mandates that elections, including those for regional leadership positions, must be conducted directly, publicly, freely, confidentially, honestly, and fairly, thereby ensuring genuine democratic representation at all governmental levels.

Nevertheless, the local democracy practiced in Indonesia requires improvements across several areas or preconditions to achieve a more effective democratic environment. These necessary conditions include: 1) improving the competencies of Regional Legislative Councils (DPRD); 2) ensuring rigorous and accountable processes for selecting and registering candidates for regional legislative bodies; 3) providing systematic education and training for political party members; 4) increasing political education and awareness among voters; 5) guaranteeing press freedom and independence from external pressures; 6) cultivating strong and critical non-governmental organizations (NGOs) capable of effectively monitoring and influencing local governance; and 7) fostering a well-in-

²¹ Deden Faturahman, "Demokrasi Lokal dalam Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Langsung di Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmiah Hukum* 10, no. 2 (2012).

²² Lili Romli, *Potret Otonomi Daerah dan Wakil Rakyat di Tingkat Lokal* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2007).

formed civil society aware of its rights and obligations, committed to upholding and adhering to existing laws and regulations.²³

To summarize, a healthy democratic system requires active participation from the citizens which goes together with mature rationality. Hence, while the involvement of informal leaders is fine in politics, society should have capability to control whether or not their decisions have strong foundation for common interests.

Relations Between Elites

The term *elite* originates from the Latin word *eligere*, meaning “to select” or “to choose.” In the Indonesian language, it carries a similar connotation of selection or choice. The term “elite” is commonly utilized to describe individuals occupying the highest strata or positions within a society. Its application is broad, encompassing social elites, religious elites, political elites, local elites, and others. The specific use of the term “elite” is contingent upon whom it is assigned, typically individuals situated at the pinnacle of societal structures whose decisions profoundly influence subordinates and broader societal dynamics.

According to Keller, a social theorist, the concept of “elite” initially distinguished a select minority who collectively served society in a socially valuable manner, oriented toward public welfare.²⁴ Importantly, this position was considered temporary, with no inherent purpose for the individual to remain indefinitely in power.²⁵ Those who occupy these top positions possess considerable influence over decision-making processes and policy formulation.

Vilfredo Pareto describes elites through a hierarchical categorization: firstly, the governing elite, composed of individuals in authoritative positions responsible for issuing commands; secondly, the non-governing elite, which refers to influential individuals who nonetheless do not directly wield governmental authority; and lastly,

²³ Mustafa Lutfi, *Hukum Sengketa Pemilukada di Indonesia: Gagasan Perluasan Kewenangan Konstitusional Mahkamah Konstitusi* (Yogyakarta: UII Press, 2010).

²⁴ Suzanne Keller, *Penguasa dan Kelompok Elit: Peranan Elit Penentu dalam Masyarakat Modern* (Jakarta: RajaGrafindo Persada, 1995).

²⁵ Shanti Prasad Varma, *Teori Politik Modern* (Jakarta: Rajawali Press, 2010).

the non-elite, who occupy the lowest positions within society and remain subject to the influence of the first two groups.²⁶

Gaetano Mosca, another influential thinker on elite theory, argues that within society, a distinct division consistently emerges, delineating between a small ruling class and a larger subordinate class.²⁷ The ruling class consists of a minority who occupy political positions, exert authority, and achieve their objectives through the strategic use of power. Conversely, the subordinate class, numerically larger, complies with the direction of the ruling minority. Resistance or disobedience among the subordinates typically leads to punitive consequences facilitated through existing institutional apparatuses and available resources.

Meanwhile, Robert Michels characterizes the elite phenomenon through his concept known as the “iron law of oligarchy.”²⁸ This theory contends that minority groups inherently possess the desire to dominate or exercise control over broader society. According to Michels, such minority elites predominantly emerge within four critical areas: organizational structures, leadership cadres, groups mediating between organizations and the populace, and those involved in governmental power, notably within the bureaucratic frameworks of political parties. This conceptualization underscores the elite as numerically small yet wielding considerable power, capable of steering societal and political directions substantially.

However, elite theories proposed by Mosca and Michels tend to constrain the understanding of elite dynamics, limiting the analysis primarily to institutional contexts without sufficiently recognizing other potential sources or manifestations of elite power. In reality, elites frequently wield influence across multiple domains due to accumulated forms of power, including economic, social, and polit-

²⁶ François Nielsen, “Economic Inequality, Pareto, and Sociology,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 50, no. 5 (2007): 619-38.

²⁷ Leticia Merino, “Rights, Pressures and Conservation in Forest Regions of Mexico,” in *Environmental Governance in Latin America*, eds. de Castro, F., Hogenboom, B., Baud, M. (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 234-56.

²⁸ Edward J. Martin, “Oligarchy, Anarchy, and Social Justice,” *Contemporary Justice Review* 18, no. 1 (2015): 55-67; Thomas Diefenbach, “Why Michels’ ‘Iron Law of Oligarchy’ Is Not an Iron Law – And How Democratic Organisations Can Stay ‘Oligarchy-Free,’” *Organization Studies* 40, no. 4 (2018): 545-62; Jhonathan M. Dias and Geraldo M. Neres, “O Espectro Da Lei De Bronze: Uma Reflexão Sobre a Teoria Política De Robert Michels Por Meio Do Contextualismo Social,” *Tempo Da Ciência* 26, no. 52 (2020): 133-50.

ical capital. Consequently, terms such as political-economic relations, political-legal relations, and political-religious relations emerge. For instance, politically powerful elites within bureaucratic or social organizations can effortlessly impact economic interests. Conversely, economically influential elites may easily influence political decisions. Hence, elite influence extends beyond mere top-down interactions, encompassing broader societal dimensions. This phenomenon explains cases where economic elites transition smoothly into political elites, exemplified by prominent figures such as Donald Trump—a wealthy businessman who assumed the presidency of the United States—or Indonesian entrepreneurs who lead political parties and regional governments, as well as religious leaders (*Kiai*) who become political leaders at the local level.

The strength of inter-elite relationships, as outlined by Mosca, ultimately leads him to challenge the validity of conventional classifications of government into monarchies, aristocracies, and democracies. Instead, he firmly maintains that only one form of government truly exists throughout the history of political life: oligarchy. Following Mosca's perspective, regardless of formal labels—monarchical, aristocratic, or democratic—in practice, power invariably rests in the hands of a small elite group. Although these small groups inevitably stand before large masses of supporters, they essentially constitute an assembly of superior individuals.

Robert Michels identifies several societal factors facilitating the emergence of oligarchic governance. Foremost among these factors are societal apathy, laziness, and submissive attitudes prevalent among citizens, creating favorable conditions for particular groups to utilize political power as instruments of coercion and control. This environment enables the elite to maintain and reinforce their privileged positions effortlessly. Another significant factor sustaining oligarchic rule is societal paternalism, which engenders dependency upon rulers and authority figures. Such paternalistic attitudes effectively prevent citizens from considering actions such as rebellion or revolution, thereby perpetuating oligarchic governance indefinitely.

To contextualize several theories above with sociological and cultural condition in Madura, there are potentials of development of “iron law of oligarchy” due to several factors, including high submissiveness of rural communities towards *kiai* and *blater*, and this

goes along several generations. Although the sense of egalitarianism is now growing among rural-educated youths, their number are relatively small compared to majority of the rural inhabitants. Hence, to develop healthy democracy in Madura is now still in the making.

Community Perspectives on the Involvement of *Kiai* and *Blater*

The reform era in Indonesia opened pathways for the implementation of decentralization, profoundly reshaping the political landscape. The democratization process, notably manifested through decentralization principles applied in local governance, significantly impacted the presence and role of political elites in Madura. Within this era of regional autonomy, competition to attain and sustain positions as political elites in Madura necessitates rigorous contests among individuals aspiring to those roles. This sharply contrasts with the preceding New Order regime, where the central government maintained dominant control, significantly influencing the emergence and roles of local political elites in Madura.

Research on political elites in Madura has previously been undertaken by Abdur Rozaki, who elaborates on the emergence of *blater* as influential local elites, particularly in the regions of Bangkalan and Sampang regencies in Madura.²⁹ A *blater* is widely regarded as a figure characterized by strength, and their pathways to attain positions of prominence are deeply intertwined with maintaining strong relationships with local religious figures known as *kiai*.

To effectively discuss the political culture of Madura, it is essential first to identify the typologies of local elites, including aristocrats (*Aria* or *Sentana*), bureaucrats, local politicians, intellectuals, influential figures known locally as *oréng soghi*, prominent entrepreneurs (*tauke*), business magnates (*juragan*), local strongmen (*bandol* and *blater*), religious leaders (*kiai*), and village heads (*kelebum*). Each category of elite possesses distinct social consequences and plays meaningful roles in shaping community dynamics. Consequently, their involvement distinctly influences the democratic processes at the local level in Madura. For instance, the economic capital controlled by a *juragan* can significantly strengthen power structures and be instrumentalized to mobilize community support toward specific

²⁹ Rozaki, *Menabur Kharisma Menuai Kuasa*.

political objectives. It can therefore be confidently stated that each category of local elite has the capacity to mobilize substantial public support corresponding to their respective spheres of influence and social roles.

Following the collapse of the New Order regime and the subsequent implementation of local democracy in Indonesia, political dynamics at the regional level have become increasingly visible and diverse. One notable phenomenon is the emergence of influential local actors actively seeking power within local executive and legislative institutions. Local elites from various backgrounds have become more prominent, strengthening the implementation of regional autonomy and enhancing popular participation within democratic governance.³⁰

A similar development has occurred in Madura. In the post-reform period, individuals from *kiai* (Islamic religious leaders) and *blater* (local strongmen) backgrounds have frequently assumed positions as regional heads (*bupati*), a phenomenon virtually non-existent during the centralized New Order period. This development is significant because both *kiai* and *blater* are native local figures who deeply understand the cultural context and social characteristics of their respective regions. For instance, in the regencies of Sumenep, Pamekasan, Sampang, and Bangkalan, which were previously governed by military officials or appointees directly sent by the central government, local elites drawn from the ranks of *kiai* and *blater* now predominantly hold leadership positions.

Kiai typically originate from religious families with extensive networks of *santri* (students), alumni, and parents of students dispersed across Madura. Conversely, *blater* elites originate from local strongmen backgrounds, characterized by broad social interactions across various social strata, from lower to upper classes. Their robust community networks provide significant opportunities for political participation in the democratic era. Historically, during the New Order regime, *blater* groups primarily engaged in informal economic activities, many of which bordered on illegal practices such as moneylending, security services, acts of violence, theft, and gambling. However, alongside these illicit activities, many *blater* were legitimately involved in trade, particularly in commodities such as cat-

³⁰ John Harriss, Kristian Stokke, and Olle Törnquist, *Politikasi Demokrasi: Politik Lokal Baru* (Jakarta: Penerbit Demos, 2005).

tle, timber, corn, and tobacco. Politically, when *blater* elites entered formal politics, they predominantly assumed roles as village heads (*kelebung*), a position typically occupied by *blater* given their entrenched local influence. The strong political authority wielded by *blater* at the village level underscores their deep-rooted influence within Madurese society. Nonetheless, during Suharto's regime, it was rare for *blater* elites to advance to higher political positions, such as regency heads. However, the democratization era opened avenues for *blater* elites to ascend to more significant positions at the regency level, including becoming members of Regional Legislative Councils (DPRD) and even deputy regency heads. An illustrative case is H. Ahmad Hidayat, a prominent *blater* figure elected as Deputy Regent of Sampang (2018-2023) through direct local elections.³¹

Meanwhile, the *kiai* currently dominate political leadership at the regency level, particularly in Bangkalan. Virtually all political parties at the regency level in Bangkalan are led by *kiai* elites, primarily due to their substantial following among *santri* communities, alumni, and students' parents. Consequently, political parties actively seek to benefit electorally from *kiai* support. In practice, both senior *kiai* and younger *kiai* (known as *lora*) actively participate as candidates in legislative elections at regency, provincial, and national levels. Many among these *kiai* elites have succeeded in legislative elections, reinforcing their political prominence. Besides their legislative engagements, *kiai* elites regularly compete in regency-level executive elections (*bupati* elections), a pattern consistent across Bangkalan and wider Madura. The pervasive political involvement of *kiai* inevitably leads to intricate political interactions and competitions between individual *kiai* and among their respective *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools). It is not uncommon for rivalries and political alliances among *kiai* to extend from local to national electoral competitions, given that political choices among *kiai* frequently differ, reflecting broader complexities within local political dynamics.

³¹ Rozaki, *Menabur Kharisma Menuai Kuasa*.

Table 1. Factors Behind the Involvement of *Kiai* and *Blater* in Local Elections based upon Observation in 2022

No.	<i>Kiai</i>	<i>Blater</i>
1.	The existence of a strong and trusted trilogy of influence among the Bang-kalan community, namely mother, religious teacher (<i>guru</i>), and wife.	The existence of close relationships between <i>Blater</i> and political candidates or parties.
2.	The <i>kiai</i> holds responsibility as a community role model and serves as a reference for people to consult and seek religious guidance (<i>fatwa</i>).	Political-economic factors, as <i>Blater</i> adopt a pragmatic political approach.
3.	A sense of responsibility in religious preaching (<i>dakwah</i>) and contributing to regional development.	A desire to maintain their relevance and existence, since not being involved would diminish their power to mobilize the masses.
4.	To continue the leadership succession that was previously held by a <i>Kiai</i> or a figure from the <i>Kiai</i> lineage.	A hope for communal welfare, social stability, and ease in managing the community.
5.	To preserve dynastic power from the lineage of Syaikhona Kholil.	-
6.	Pragmatic reasons involving physical needs and short-term interests.	-
7.	Expectation of political returns, such as donations or political contracts.	-

Based on the research findings presented in the table above, it is evident that there are various underlying factors driving the involvement of *kiai* and *blater* in the local elections (*Pemilihan Kepala Daerah/Pilkada*) in Bangkalan. These two elite groups in Madura—*kiai* (religious leaders) and *blater* (local strongmen)—essentially function as civil society actors who play a vital role within the community. Both are often seen as influential intermediaries capable of exerting control over public services such as education, infrastructure, healthcare, and basic administrative needs. Their involvement in negotiating with the government often facilitates improvements in these services. It is not uncommon for *kiai* and *blater* to mediate when conflicts arise between the government and the community. Such disputes are often resolved effectively because the Madurese people hold both figures in high esteem.

However, challenges emerge when these elites deviate from their roles as civil society actors within a democratic context. In such cases, both *kiai* and *blater* may become disconnected from grassroots communities.³² This raises a critical concern, particularly when a *kiai*, who traditionally teaches values such as honesty, trustworthiness (*amānah*), and justice within the *pesantren* context, fails to uphold these principles after entering the realm of public office. In some instances, *kiai* may behave like non-religious political actors, prioritizing political interests over moral integrity.

This presents a dilemma: while some *kiai* enter politics with the initial intention of engaging in *da'wah* (religious outreach) to improve societal structures through political means, they may end up being influenced by the political arena instead. On the other hand, there are *kiai* who consciously choose to stay out of politics, fearing that political involvement may compromise their principles and diminish their role as moral guides who promote honesty, justice, and care for the community.

In conclusion, the involvement of *kiai* in politics is not monolithic. Some see political engagement as an extension of their *da'wah*, while others refrain from political involvement to preserve their moral authority. These differing stances contribute to the diversity of public opinion regarding the participation of *kiai* and *blater* in Bangkalan's local political scene.

Table 2. Community Responses to the Involvement of *Kiai* and *Blater* in the Local Elections in Bangkalan based upon Observation in 2022

No.	Political Elites	In Favor of Participation in Local Elections	Against Participation in Local Elections
1.	<i>Kiai</i>	Historically, <i>Kiai</i> in Bangkalan have always been intertwined with politics.	<i>Kiai</i> should focus more on strengthening the community's spiritual values through religious dakwah.
2.		<i>Kiai</i> at the lower levels (village or sub-district government) cannot refuse requests from their patrons or senior <i>Kiai</i> .	
3.		People believe that a <i>Kiai's</i> choice is the best choice.	

³² Ibid.

4.		Political participation is a basic right for all citizens, including <i>Kiai</i> .
5.		Politics is taught in religion, and <i>Kiai</i> provide a good example of ethical political behavior.
6.		<i>Kiai</i> are involved in building the Bangkalan local government.
7.	<i>Blater</i>	Political participation is a right for all Bangkalan residents, including <i>Blater</i> . <i>Blater</i> are involved in dishonest practices in supporting certain candidates in local elections.
8.		<i>Blater</i> are associated with traditional figures and possess influence.
9.		They help safeguard the electoral process.
10.		<i>Blater</i> have the right to engage in politics, but it should be done in a respectful and ethical manner.
11.		The presence of <i>Blater</i> enables certain individuals to run for local office.
12.		<i>Blater</i> must be involved in elections to represent their group.
13.		Politics is seen as a natural role or occupation for <i>Blater</i> .

The Impact of *Kiai* and *Blater* Involvement in Regional Elections

The public perception of the impact of *kiai* and *blater* involvement in the Pilkada on democratization in post-Reform Bangkalan has elicited diverse responses from the community. Regarding the involvement of *kiai*, some segments of the population believe that their participation has had a significant impact on the democratization process in Bangkalan. This is due to their perceived success in overseeing the democratic process, contributing to the stabilization of social tensions, increasing voter turnout, and providing political

education to the public. However, there are also views that criticize the *kiai*'s role in promoting true democratization. The shift in the *kiai*'s traditional role from spiritual guide to a key political figure, who now serves as a "vote bank" due to having loyal supporters due to patronage and beliefs that they are spiritually guided, has been argued to result in a democracy that lacks substance. This criticism suggests that the *kiai*'s continued influence over the electoral choices of the community, particularly among *santri* and alumni, compromises the authenticity of the democratic process. With the *kiai*'s involvement in the Pilkada, the process is seen as not unfolding in a truly democratic manner, as voters are often pressured into choosing a leader out of coercion.

The involvement of *blater* in the Bangkalan regional election has been seen as having an impact on democratization, as *blater* today is considered to be more effective than in the past. In the present era, *blater*'s communication with the public is more flexible and less intimidating. However, some argue that *blater*'s role does not contribute to democratization in Bangkalan, and may even regress democracy, as *blater* is accused of intimidating the public to vote for the candidates he supports, thereby discouraging people from voicing their opinions. Additionally, there is interference from *blater* in influencing or manipulating the votes. The process of intimidation or coercion often occurs when his wishes are not fulfilled, which leads to the view that *blater*'s presence hinders the democratic process in Bangkalan, as he uses violence, threats, or intimidation to force the public to choose his preferred candidates.

Table 3. the Impact of *Kiai* and *Blater* Involvement on the Realization of Democratization in Bangkalan

Impact	<i>Kiai</i>	<i>Blater</i>
Realization of Democratization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actively overseeing the democratic process in Bangkalan through contributions in calming social unrest. - Played a role in increasing voter turnout. - Provided political education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Has a positive impact on the realization of democracy because modern <i>Blater</i> are seen as more effective compared to the past. - More effective communication with the community, less intimidation.

Failure to Realize Democratization	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- The shift in the <i>Kiai's</i> role from a spiritual guide to a vote bank.- Loss of the community's right to freely choose and express their opinion due to <i>Kiai's</i> fatwas (religious decrees).- A lack of substantive democratization because of the continued influence of the <i>Kiai</i>, particularly on <i>santri</i> (Islamic school students) and alumni, among others.- The democratic process is not genuine because people choose leaders out of coercion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Leads to a regression in democracy, as the community is often intimidated into silence by the <i>Blater</i>.- Election process is not functioning well due to <i>Blater's</i> involvement in manipulating votes; results are often predetermined before the election.- Coercion and intimidation tactics are used against the public when their wishes are not met.- Impedes local democratization processes through the use of violence, threats, or intimidation to force people to vote for candidates they support.
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Based on the findings above, when examining the involvement of *kiai* and *blater* in the Pilkada of Bangkalan in light of the principles governing the conduct of regional elections as outlined in Article 22E of the 1945 Constitution—specifically the principles of direct, general, free, confidential, honest and fair or *Luber Jurdil (langsung, umum, bebas, rahasia, jujur, adil)*—it can be broadly stated that their involvement has yet to result in the realization of substantive democratization. However, it is acknowledged that the participation of *kiai* and *blater* has contributed to increasing political participation among the people of Bangkalan, as each elite group, with their respective influence, optimizes all available resources to support their chosen candidates, thereby encouraging higher voter turnout in the election. The following sections provide an analysis of how these election principles are applied in the Pilkada of Bangkalan.

The directness asserts that voters have the right to cast their votes directly in accordance with their conscience, without intermediaries. This principle has been implemented in Bangkalan's Pilkada since post-Reformation, specifically in the 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018 elections. In the Pilkada 2003, the election of the head of region was conducted through representatives from DPRD Bangkalan. However, from 2008 onward, the elections have been held directly by the people. Despite this, there are still instances where

voting is manipulated, such as when ballots are cast by individuals who are not the rightful voters. This manipulation is often carried out by *blater* when the desired number of votes in a particular area has not been met. In such cases, *blater* work in collaboration with the election organizers to adjust the votes.

The principle of general elections means that every eligible citizen has the right to participate in the election, without discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, race, group, gender, regional origin, or social status. This principle has been largely adhered to in Bangkalan, as there have been no reports of any groups or individuals preventing others from participating in the Pilkada.

The principle 'free' means every citizen with the right to vote is guaranteed the freedom to determine their choice without coercion or undue influence from any party. Citizens' safety is assured to ensure they can vote according to their conscience and interests. However, this principle has not been fully realized in Bangkalan. Many voters are still influenced by *kiai* and *blater*. *Kiai* exert influence through fatwas directed at the community, *santri*, and alumni, while *blater* use intimidation tactics. These threats are often indirect, conveyed through village heads or community leaders. Forms of intimidation include creating insecurity within villages, such as increasing incidents of theft, including livestock, motorcycles, and other valuables.

The next principle, honesty, means that in the conduct of elections, all parties involved—election organizers, the government, political parties, and even voters—must act truthfully and in accordance with applicable laws. In Bangkalan, dishonesty remains an issue, with *blater* colluding with election organizers to manipulate votes. In some cases, the number of votes has been determined before the Pilkada even takes place, undermining the integrity of the process.

'Confidential' guaranteed that voters' choices will remain private and cannot be known by others, in any manner. However, this principle is not fully upheld in Bangkalan. The influence of *kiai*, *blater*, and even the practice of vote buying has led to situations where the secrecy of the vote is compromised.

Sixth, Fairness. In the conduct of elections, every voter and political party should be treated equally, free from manipulation or

fraud. However, in Bangkalan's Pilkada, instances of fraud and manipulation have been reported. *Blater* and election organizers engage in vote-rigging by "conditioning the votes", i.e. manipulating or influencing how people vote in order to favor certain candidates, in a manner that favors certain candidates.

From sociological and political perspectives, the conduct of political exercises in Madura as examined in this paper is heavily informal. The room of democratization after the 1998 Reformasi has not yet ideally achieved due to anthropological factors in region like Madura. Democracy that should go together with the maturity of reasoning from every citizen is still in a to-do list. The room of democratization shows its room for power exercises from previously uninvolved informal parties, e.g. *kiai* and *blater*, creating a neo patrimonial power through the canal of democratic mechanism.³³ The strength of patron-client linkages and resource control enable elites to maintain political influence even amid formal democratic reform.³⁴ Thus, oligarchic domination via patronage and state resource control illustrates how patrimonial power can stabilize oligarchy even in seemingly liberalized environments.³⁵

In conclusion, while the involvement of *kiai* and *blater* has contributed to increasing political participation, it has also hindered the full realization of democratic principles in the Pilkada process in Bangkalan. The manipulation of votes and the coercive influence exerted by these elites undermine the authenticity of the democratic process, making it difficult for substantive democratization to take place.

Conclusion

Based on the discussions presented in the preceding chapter, two main conclusions can be drawn. First, the community of Bangkalan acknowledges the involvement of *kiai* and *blater* in the

³³ Yuki Fukuoka, "Debating Indonesia's *Reformasi*: Bridging 'Parallel Universes'," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 44, no. 3 (2014): 540-552.

³⁴ Robert Yates, "The English School and Postcolonial State Agency: Social Roles and Order Management in Southeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific," *International Theory* 13, no. 1 (2020): 68-96.

³⁵ Maryna Shapovalenko, "Perversions of Political Regimes in the Conditions of Inhibition of Globalization and Dedemocratization," *The Journal of V.N. Karaz'in Kharkiv National University Issues of Political Science* 40 (2021): 8-13.

Pilkada of Bangkalan in post-Reformation era. The involvement of *kiai* in the election process includes running for office as a regional head, supporting a particular candidate, issuing fatwas, campaigning to the community, *santri*, and alumni to follow the *kiai*'s chosen candidate, with political, cultural, social, and economic goals in mind. The political goal is to win the Pilkada and secure victory for the supported candidate. The cultural goal is to perpetuate the patron-client relationship between *kiai* and their *santri*, their families, and the community. The social goal is to assert their status as both religious and community leaders, while the economic goal involves obtaining funds or assistance for *pesantren*. However, the economic goal is not the primary aim for all *kiai* and is only relevant to certain individuals. On the other hand, the involvement of *blater* is manifested in supporting candidates for regional head through threats, intimidation, and instilling fear in the community by creating insecurity, such as orchestrating thefts of livestock, motorcycles, and other valuables. These actions are driven by political, economic, cultural, and social objectives. The economic objective, which is the main priority for *blater*, is to acquire money. The political goal, which aligns with the economic one, is to win the candidate they support by delivering votes in exchange for money from the candidate. The social goal for *blater* is to establish their influence and maintain a fearful reputation in the community, while the cultural goal is to strengthen networks with fellow *blater*.

Second, the community's view on the impact of *kiai* and *blater* involvement in the Pilkada in Bangkalan post-Reformation, when assessed against the principles of election organization as stipulated in Article 22E of the 1945 Constitution—which mandates that elections be conducted in accordance with the values of direct, general, free, confidential, honest, and fair or *Luber Jurdil*—indicates that substantive democratization has not yet been achieved in Bangkalan. The involvement of *kiai* and *blater* in the Pilkada has slowed the progress of democracy in the region. The roles of *kiai* and *blater* that hinder democratization can be observed in the political manipulation and the coercive influence they exert over the electorate. This influence leads to the erosion of the public's rights to freely express opinions and make independent choices. Furthermore, the intimidation tactics employed by *blater* towards voters have contributed to the slow pace of democratic development in Bangkalan. The pro-

cess of guiding voters towards certain candidates, often under pressure or duress, prevents the full realization of a democratic election. Consequently, the democratic process in Bangkalan is impeded, reflecting a delayed and incomplete realization of democratic ideals.

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