

# Governing in a Hybrid Space: The Nexus of Islam, Culture, and Power in Probolinggo, East Java

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## Abstract

*Probolinggo, East Java, represents a hybrid space where Islam, local culture, and political power intersect, shaping socio-political dynamics. The region blends Javanese and Madurese traditions, fostering flexibility in religious practices and political strategies. Using a qualitative approach, this study examines historical, socio-cultural, and religious factors influencing leadership and governance. Findings reveal that political legitimacy is shaped not only by democratic mechanisms but also by religious and cultural authority. Pilgrimages to religious graves and affiliations with *pesantren* play vital roles in political networking and community relations. This study argues that Probolinggo's hybridity offers a model for understanding the interplay of Islam, culture, and power in local democracy. It highlights how religious and cultural flexibility serves as a political strategy to maintain legitimacy in governance. This research contributes to discussions on multicultural societies and governance in Indonesia and similar contexts.*

**Keywords:** Hybrid Space, Local Islam, Political Culture, Governance, Probolinggo

## INTRODUCTION

Probolinggo is a regency in East Java Province that serves as a transit and connecting region for other areas in eastern East Java (Purwanto, 2023). The socio-political landscape of Probolinggo is unique, characterized by a hybrid identity known as *Pandhalungan* (Retsikas, 2007a: 970). This term reflects the fusion of Javanese and Madurese cultures (Sutarto, 2006: 1; Yuswadi, 2005: 101), shaping a distinctive socio-political environment that influences governance, electoral dynamics, and power relations (Chalik, 2010: 109). Unlike regions dominated by either Javanese or Madurese culture, Probolinggo is situated at a cultural crossroads where no single identity is dominant (Retsikas, 2007b), resulting in a complex political landscape that integrates Islamic influence, local traditions, and governmental structures.

Islam plays a crucial role in shaping the political and social structures in Probolinggo. The presence of numerous *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) strengthens religious influence in local politics, making Islam a primary factor in political legitimacy and governance (Bruinessen, 2008). At the same time, cultural traditions rooted in the *Pandhalungan* identity remain deeply embedded in political practices, creating a complex interaction between religious and cultural authority. These two main forces Islam and local culture continuously shape political leadership, electoral outcomes, and governance strategies in the region.

The concept of a "hybrid space" in governance not only describes cultural identity (Zainal et al., 2024: 155) but also illustrates the political dynamics of Probolinggo. Historically, before Indonesia's democratic reform, regional governance was dominated by military leaders who ensured political stability through centralized control (Yosarie & Kosandi, 2023: 83). However, with the introduction of direct regional head elections (*pilkada*) after the reform era, power structures shifted, allowing local leaders to emerge through electoral competition (Perdana, 2015: 23). Despite this transition, governance in Probolinggo remains deeply intertwined with Islamic institutions and traditional cultural frameworks, demonstrating a continuous negotiation between modern democratic mechanisms and traditional authority structures.

Several studies have highlighted the intersection of Islam, local culture, and governance in Indonesia. Akmal et al. (Akmal et al., 2024: 117) discuss the significant influence of religion and politics in Indonesia, despite ongoing

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challenges in maintaining pluralism and tolerance. Firdaus (2019: 193) examines the relationship between Islam and the state, identifying two major currents: cultural Islam and political Islam. Abduh Wahid (2019: 138) further elaborates that this relationship produces three political visions: Islam as a political culture, Islam as political ethics, and Islam as a political ideology advocating for the implementation of *sharia* in governance.

Previously, the relationship between religion and politics was also explored by Hefner (1999), who emphasized the role of Islamic institutions in shaping democratic processes in Indonesia, particularly through *pesantren* as a base for political mobilization. Makhasin (2017) analyzed patronage politics and piety in regional elections by examining the role and dilemmas faced by *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU), the largest Muslim organization in Indonesia, in regional election contests. Meanwhile, Pertiwi & Widodo (2021) explored post-Suharto regional political dynamics, revealing that patron-client relationships persist despite democratic reforms. They noted that kinship-based politics remains dominant in almost all regions and has intensified in the 2020 regional elections (*Pilkada*). This phenomenon is attributed to the continued reproduction of power through family networks and local elites.

While these studies provide important insights into the role of Islam and local traditions in Indonesian politics, research specifically examining how hybrid socio-political identities such as *Pandhalungan* influence governance remains limited. Probolinggo presents a unique case where Javanese and Madurese identities are not entirely dominant, creating a fluid political space that continuously negotiates between religious legitimacy, cultural traditions, and formal governance structures. Unlike studies that focus on regions with predominantly Islamic or ethnically homogeneous populations, this research highlights how governance operates within a hybrid socio-political space through ongoing negotiations, adaptations, and power contestations.

This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the interaction between Islam, local culture, and governance in Probolinggo. By examining historical trajectories, electoral dynamics, and governance structures, this research contributes to a broader understanding of how hybrid socio-political spaces function within Indonesia's decentralized democracy. Additionally, this study provides insights into the continuous power negotiations in regions where religious and cultural identities remain deeply intertwined with political authority.

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive approach to analyze the dynamics of the relationship between Islam, local culture, and power in Probolinggo. Data is collected through in-depth interviews with various stakeholders, including the regent, members of the Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), religious leaders, community figures, and local residents, to gain a comprehensive perspective on leadership patterns and governance in the region. Additionally, this research utilizes relevant historical, cultural, and religious data to understand the socio-political context that shapes the hybrid space of Probolinggo. The study is conducted over 12 months in 2024, involving direct observations at various strategic locations that serve as centers of political and religious activity. By combining interview techniques and document analysis, this research provides deeper insights into how leadership legitimacy is constructed and how local traditions influence political strategies at the regional level.

## **RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

### **Hybrid Identity and Political Space in Probolinggo**

As a region with a hybrid identity commonly referred to as *Pandhalungan*, Probolinggo was shaped through a long and complex historical process. Before the 19th century, this area was predominantly inhabited by Javanese Hindus, particularly during the Majapahit and Blambangan Kingdoms. At that time, Hindu influence was strong (Ricklefs. M.C., 2010). However, over time, the dominance of Javanese-Hindu inhabitants declined due to various wars that took place in the region. These included the two-century-long conflict between the Blambangan Kingdom in the east and the Mataram Kingdom in the west (Hefner, 1987: 537), as well as more than a century of resistance against the Dutch and Mataram rule in Central and East Java, which caused significant losses for the local population. These losses were marked by a drastic decline in population, to the point where the region was nearly uninhabited (Ricklefs. M.C., 2010: 222).

By 1800, Probolinggo remained sparsely populated and economically underdeveloped, except for surrounding areas like Besuki, which had begun to flourish due to successful land management. At that time, Probolinggo's economic output was minimal, generating only 2,000 Spanish dollars annually, along with approximately 70 *kepyan* of rice, a few bird nests, and small amounts of coffee and teakwood (Lekkerkerker, 1931: 12). When Marshall Herman Daendels served as Governor-General between 1806 and 1815, he initiated efforts to develop the land in Probolinggo. This included leasing and even selling land to the *peranakan* Chinese community (the Han family) to enhance productivity. The Han family played a crucial role in the local economy, becoming landlords and regional rulers with noble titles such as *Rangga*, *Tumenggung*, and *Bupati* (Margana, 2007: 210).

For example, in 1810, Governor Daendels sold the land of Probolinggo including present-day Lumajang and Kraksaan to Han Tik Ko. The land was sold on credit for 1 million *Rijksdaalders*, payable in installments over ten years. Payments were made every six months at 50,000 *Rijksdaalders* per installment. Since Daendels was in urgent need of funds at that time, he issued a "Credit Letter" (*papieren van credit*) worth 1 million *Rijksdaalders*, fully guaranteed by the Dutch government, with semi-annual repayments of 50,000 *Rijksdaalders* (Budiman, 2023).

Following the transaction, Han Tik Ko officially took control of Probolinggo in 1811 and served as *Bupati* from 1811 to 1813. He was granted the title *Mayor Jenderal Chineezen en Landheer van Probolinggo* (Great Chinese Leader and Landlord of Probolinggo). He was allowed to reside in the luxurious *Bupati* residence and was granted the authority to form an armed force and even print new banknotes. These privileges enabled him to act like a Javanese feudal ruler. His power was equivalent to that of the previous *Bupati*, Raden Tumenggung Joyodiningrat (Ardanawari & Teguh, 2021), who was reassigned to Sedayu, Gresik (Lekkerkerker, 1931, p. 16). Furthermore, he was honored with the title *Tumenggung*, and the people of Probolinggo referred to him as "Babah Tumenggung." The term *Babah* was used to describe Chinese individuals who held a good reputation in the Dutch East Indies (Budiman, 2023).

Under Han Tik Ko's leadership, Probolinggo was expected to develop, especially given the Han family's renowned expertise in land management. However, this expectation did not materialize. Han Tik Ko's rule faced severe challenges, and he remained in power for less than three years. On May 18, 1813, a rebellion known as *Keproek Tjina* or the *Kedopok War* erupted, targeting Han Tik Ko as both *Bupati* and landlord. The uprising was triggered by his harsh governance and the social pressures he imposed (Margana, 2007: 222). Han Tik Ko was killed during the rebellion, along with several visiting British officials, including Lieutenant Colonel James Fraser and Captain James McPherson (McKinnon, 1996: 53).

This incident drew significant attention, leading the Dutch East Indies government to dismiss Daendels from office and appoint Johannes van den Bosch as the new Governor-General. Bosch introduced a new governing approach and, in 1830, implemented the infamous *Cultuurstelsel* or the Cultivation System. This policy heavily exploited the Javanese population by requiring them to allocate 20% of their land to grow export commodities such as tea, coffee, and cocoa. The harvested crops had to be sold to the Dutch government at predetermined prices and fully handed over to colonial authorities. Villagers who did not own land were required to work for 75 days a year equivalent to 20% of their time on government-owned plantations as a form of taxation (Wikipedia.com, 2006).

The implementation of this policy once again led to a wave of migration, as Javanese residents moved to higher-altitude areas to escape the harsh colonial labor demands. Many regions in the easternmost part of Java, including Probolinggo, experienced severe labor shortages due to a significant decline in population (Hefner, 1987: 537). To address this issue, the Dutch government introduced a new policy: the large-scale migration of Madurese and Central Javanese people to the region (Retsikas, 2007a: 976). This effort aimed to restore and strengthen the rural workforce, which had been weakened by the *Cultuurstelsel* and previous wars. According to Kumar (Kumar, 1979: 191), this policy was designed to boost agricultural productivity and ensure social and economic stability in the region.

The Dutch efforts proved successful; the majority of the Madurese population, who were primarily rural farmers, migrated to sparsely populated areas of East Java, including the Probolinggo region. They worked in agriculture and plantations, as did people from Central Java. These migrants settled and cultivated land over a

long period of time. This wave of migration became a key factor in changing the demographic, ethnic, and cultural composition of Probolinggo, while also driving an assimilation process that eventually gave rise to a mixed society.

This long and gradual process led to the formation of a new community generally referred to as *Pandalungan*. The term describes a society that emerged from the intermixing of two distinct ethnic groups, namely the Madurese and the Javanese (Yuswadi, 2005: 101; Sutarto, 2006: 1). Over time, they intermarried (Kusnadi, 2021) and had children. Retsikas describes this mixed society as the result of a “long metamorphosis” between the Javanese and Madurese communities living in Probolinggo (Retsikas, 2007b: 183; Retsikas, 2007a: 970). This metamorphosis shaped their social interactions, characteristics, as well as their unique language and dialect. They developed a new identity with distinct traits fundamentally different from their ancestral roots (Prasisko, 2016: 9), despite acknowledging their lineage from Madura and Central Java.

These fundamental differences are reflected in their nature and character, which, according to Retsikas (Retsikas, 2007b: 187), represent a blend of refinement and roughness. Refinement (*halus*) is associated with Javanese culture, which emphasizes high-level Javanese language, complex social etiquette, and a preference for rice-based meals. The Javanese are also regarded as the epitome of gracefulness, especially in Central Javanese royal courts like Yogyakarta and Surakarta. In contrast, the Madurese are perceived as more direct or rough (*kasar*), with a language considered less melodious, a distinctive style of dress, and a diet traditionally based on corn, which is often seen as nutritionally inferior.

This fusion of refinement and roughness has resulted in a Probolinggo society characterized by a balance between opposing values, while maintaining adaptability in various situations. The people of Probolinggo can exhibit politeness and grace when necessary, yet under pressure or in conflict, they may respond with firmness or even bluntness (Retsikas, 2007b: 188).

This 50:50 balance in character extends into the political sphere as well. Their flexibility is evident in their ability to adapt to shifting power dynamics and political strategies. The Javanese-like adaptability is reflected in their pragmatic networking and negotiation skills, while the Madurese-like assertiveness is seen in their bold and direct leadership style. This combination has created a unique political dynamic, where local politics is often transactional but remains deeply rooted in strong loyalty to leaders or specific groups, such as *kiai* (religious scholars). As a result, politics in Probolinggo is not only influenced by structural factors like the economy but also by the hybrid cultural values that shape their interactions with power. This uniqueness is reflected in their political stance: they do not seek unnecessary conflict, such as through frequent protests and demonstrations, but they also do not remain passive in the face of governance issues. As the Javanese proverb says, *nrimo ing pandum, makaryo ing nyoto*—accepting fate while working diligently (Nisa & Wulandari, 2017: 134).

### **The Role of Islam in Politics and Governance**

The socio-political dynamics of the Probolinggo community are closely related to geographical and demographic factors. Similar to its neighboring region, Pasuruan, Probolinggo is divided into three main zones (Hefner, 1987: 536): the highlands (mountainous areas) inhabited by the Javanese community, culturally and linguistically classified as the Tengger sub-variant, known as the Tenggerese community. This area is recognized as an important center of Shiva worship (Retsikas, 2007b: 973), where the tradition of explicitly non-Islamic priests has been preserved since the fall of major Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms. The middle slopes (hilly areas) are inhabited by a mixed Muslim community of Madurese and Javanese descent, who still adhere to Javanese ancestral worship. Meanwhile, the lowlands (coastal areas) serve as the center of traditional Islam and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU).

In the highlands, governance and power structures are more influenced by customary traditions and local wisdom. Leadership traditions in this region tend to be collective, with village heads and traditional leaders playing a key role in maintaining social stability and governance. Unlike the lowlands, which are heavily influenced by Islamic politics, the Tenggerese community prioritizes harmony and the continuity of traditions in their governance system. In contrast, in the middle slopes or hilly areas, political dynamics tend to be more fluid. The Muslim community residing in these areas consists of a mix of Javanese and Madurese ethnic groups,

with a syncretic inclination in their religious practices (Beatty, 2003: 239). This detachment from religion in the political context often makes this region more open to various political ideologies, including those not directly affiliated with traditional Islamic groups. However, family- and community-based political networks remain the dominant factor in shaping support patterns for certain candidates.

In the lowlands, which serve as the center of traditional Islam, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) holds significant influence over the local political landscape. The *kiai* (Islamic scholars) and *santri* (students of Islamic boarding schools) from various *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) play an essential role in political decision-making, whether in regional head elections or policy formulation. They share the view that Islamic sharia should be applied in all aspects of life, similar to the perspective in Madura (Pribadi, 2013: 1). The presence of this Islamic organization has fostered a patronage-based leadership pattern (Siswanto & Yulita, 2019: 87), where political support is often determined by the blessing of a *kiai* or a prominent religious figure.

This phenomenon has its roots in the 19th century and has continued into the reform era with the establishment of the National Awakening Party (Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa or PKB), which serves as the political representation of NU members. The role of *kiai* and *santri* has long been central to the elite social structure, reflecting the significant position of Islam within the region's social and cultural framework. Islam in this area functions not only as a belief system but also as a pillar in shaping social and political identities. Its influence is evident in clothing styles, especially for women who wear Muslimah attire, as well as in the dynamics of local politics (Hefner, 1999: 13).

Historically, prior to the events of 1965, NU and its groups actively opposed the expansion of the Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia or PKI), which sought support from farmers and laborers (Hefner, 1999: 13). During the New Order era, NU briefly allied with the United Development Party (Partai Persatuan Pembangunan or PPP) but later withdrew in 1983 (Bruinessen, 1996: 26) and established PKB during the reform era (Adryamarthanino & Ningsih, 2022). The emergence of PKB as a traditional Islamic-based party further reinforced NU's influence in local politics, with *kiai* and religious figures, often referred to as *gus*, playing a central role in shaping public opinion and determining regional policies (Bush, 2009). The close relationship between *kiai* and the community creates a unique political landscape (Jannah, 2015: 158), where political decisions are not solely based on electoral calculations but are also influenced by deeply rooted traditional religious networks within Probolinggo society.

In its development, Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as a social organization (*ormas*) and *pesantren* as a religious educational institution have played an increasingly significant role in practical politics, even surpassing their traditional function as centers of religious education. This complements what Pribadi (2013: 28) has stated. *Kiai* and *gus* are no longer merely spiritual leaders but have also assumed strategic roles in both regional and national governance. This reflects the transformation of NU and *pesantren* from centers of Islamic preaching into key actors in an entrenched political patronage network, especially in the post-New Order era (Siswanto & Yulita, 2019: 87).

For instance, the 2024 simultaneous regional elections reaffirmed the relevance of NU and *pesantren* in local politics. The involvement of NU elites and the core families of *pesantren* in running for regent and deputy regent positions in several regions demonstrates that the dominance of NU *pesantren* is not merely a historical legacy but a continuously adapting force within contemporary political dynamics. The victory of Gus Haris Damanhuri Romli, the caretaker of Pesantren Zainul Hasan Genggong, in the regional election and his subsequent appointment as the Regent of Probolinggo (Musleh, 2025) is concrete evidence of how *pesantren* play a central role in local politics. A similar pattern can be seen in the cases of Ra (Gus) Abdul Hamid Wahid (Bahri, 2025), Gus Fahmi Abdullah Haq (Wardhana, 2024), and KH. Kholilurrahman Wafie (Seta, 2024), who come from the core families of Pesantren Nurul Jadid and have successfully secured strategic positions as the Regent of Bondowoso, Deputy Regent of Probolinggo, and Regent of Pamekasan, respectively.

The success of several *pesantren* alumni in holding strategic positions in the bureaucracy and legislature whether as members of regional parliaments (DPRD) or as heads of the Ministry of Religious Affairs (Depag) offices at the district and provincial levels also indicates the consolidation of socio-religious power, which has been

transformed into political capital. Consequently, pesantren no longer merely function as centers of religious education but have evolved into institutions that influence policymaking and local power structures.

Furthermore, the integration of pesantren into politics illustrates that cultural Islam in Probolinggo is not only a religious doctrine but also an instrument of social and political legitimacy. The role of NU in electoral politics and the dominance of *kiai* in shaping regional policies demonstrate the intricate relationship between religion and power in governance dynamics. The pesantren-based patronage system, which connects religious elites with society through traditional networks, further strengthens the position of Islam within the local political structure. Hefner's (1999 ; 1987) findings affirm that pesantren and traditional ulama networks play a significant role in shaping policies and political direction at the regional level, with Probolinggo serving as a concrete example of this phenomenon.

However, the dominance of pesantren in politics is not without contradictions. On one hand, their involvement in electoral politics enhances the social legitimacy of *kiai* and pesantren within the government. On the other hand, it risks narrowing the political space for groups that are not affiliated with traditional Islamic networks. Additionally, the engagement of pesantren in practical politics raises dilemmas between the idealism of Islamic preaching and the pragmatism of political power. Can pesantren maintain their moral authority while becoming increasingly involved in politics? Or will they experience a shift in character due to the demands of power?

The answers to these questions will unfold over time. However, what is certain is that the ongoing dynamics indicate that Islam in Probolinggo is not merely a spiritual doctrine but also a political force that shapes and directs the local power structure.

### **The Role of Local Traditions in Politics and Governance**

Local traditions and culture play a crucial role in various aspects of political life in Probolinggo. Political contests and governance practices in this region often integrate elements of Islam with local traditions, creating a unique political dynamic. Despite the strong presence of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU)-based Islamic traditionalism in Probolinggo, the local community continues to uphold distinctive religious traditions that reflect the acculturation of Islamic teachings with local values. Rituals such as *tablilan*, *yasinan*, *kenduren*, and *kirim doa* (A. Kurniawan, 2012) are not merely religious practices but also serve as means to strengthen social solidarity and cultural legitimacy within the community. The continuity of these traditions demonstrates that Islam in Probolinggo is not only present in normative and doctrinal forms but also in social expressions that shape the religious identity of the people.

Furthermore, belief in the supernatural remains an integral part of the local community's life. One manifestation of this belief is the trust in *karomah*, or the spiritual privileges possessed by certain *kiai* (Islamic scholars) (BSU, 1992: 43). *Kiai* who are perceived to have "extraordinary abilities" (Chamami, 2016) are not only regarded as religious leaders but also as figures with spiritual and social authority. People frequently seek their blessings, prayers, or guidance on various personal matters (BSU, 1992), including business, health, and even political affairs.

This phenomenon illustrates that *kiai* are not merely spiritual leaders but also influential figures in the social and political structure. The deep emotional bond between the community and *kiai* forms a pattern of patronage that intertwines with local political dynamics. In electoral politics, the endorsement and support of a *kiai* often serve as decisive factors in winning public sympathy. Thus, the belief in *karomah* is not only an individual and spiritual matter but also has political implications that reinforce the role of *pesantren* and the network of *ulama* in shaping the power structure in Probolinggo.

One practice that reflects the integration of religious traditions and politics is the custom of political actors visiting the graves of deceased *kiai*. These pilgrimages are not merely acts of respect for religious figures who have contributed to the community but also reflect the belief that the *karomah* of a *kiai* endures even after their passing (Chamami, 2016). In Islamic tradition, visiting graves is encouraged as a means of contemplating death and engaging in spiritual reflection (Farihin, 2011). According to the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (KBBI, 2024),

a pilgrimage (*ziarah*) is defined as a visit to a place considered sacred or honorable, such as a grave or other holy site.

However, in the context of local politics in Probolinggo, visiting the graves of *kiai* carries a broader dimension. For political actors, this ritual has become part of their political and spiritual strategy to seek blessings and success in their careers. When asked about their reasons for undertaking these pilgrimages, they often state that the ritual is a means of obtaining *barokah* (blessings) from the deceased figures. The concept of *barokah* in this context refers to divine favor, which can be material or non-material (Jamhari, 2000, p. 87). Materially, *barokah* may be understood as political success, career advancement, or the achievement of specific ambitions. Non-materially, it may manifest as inner peace and spiritual merit that benefits one's afterlife.

Furthermore, political actors' visits to *kiai*'s graves can also be interpreted as a subtle means of concealing personal motives (Pemberton, 2018: 365). By framing their visits within a spiritual and cultural context, this practice provides religious legitimacy to political ambitions that are inherently pragmatic. Therefore, these rituals are always conducted with great reverence and solemnity, not only to preserve tradition but also to enhance the spiritual image of politicians in the eyes of the community.

Politicians in Probolinggo believe that the figures they honor through these pilgrimages possess *karomah*, a divine privilege granted to certain individuals during their lifetime. This *karomah* does not fall within the framework of prophethood but is viewed as a sign of a person's closeness to God, capable of bringing blessings and good fortune to visitors (A. F. Kurniawan et al., 2019: 302–303). This belief is rooted in the view that the graves of renowned figures continue to hold strong spiritual energy, as the spirits of these figures are thought to remain present in some form. Even though these spirits exist in a different realm, they are believed to serve as intermediaries between humans and God.

From an anthropological perspective, the relationship between humans and ancestral or religious figures is complex, resembling a patron-client dynamic based on protection and influence. Bubandt (Bubandt, 2009: 302) notes that the spirits of these figures are often positioned as mentors or guardians, not only in spiritual matters but also in practical aspects of life, including politics. Thus, visiting the graves of *kiai* or revered figures is not merely a religious practice but also a political strategy to gain legitimacy and spiritual protection.

Interestingly, these pilgrimages are carried out at specific times believed to hold high spiritual energy. Thursday nights, especially *Malam Jumat Manis* (Jumat Legi), and the month of *Syuro* are the most commonly chosen moments for visiting sacred graves. In Javanese-Islamic tradition, *Malam Jumat Manis* is considered a time of great blessing, while the month of *Syuro* holds sacred significance related to safety and good fortune. Additionally, political actors often undertake pilgrimages before crucial events, such as registering with the Regional General Election Commission (KPUD) as candidates for regent or deputy regent. By making these visits at such times, they hope to receive divine approval and spiritual protection that could enhance their chances in political contests.

Even more intriguing is that the graves visited are often far from the pilgrim's hometown or village. This belief stems from the idea that sources of blessing tend to exist in places far from one's daily life (Pemberton, 2018: 365), as they are considered more sacred and spiritually meaningful. One informant provided an interesting analogy regarding this phenomenon: "*A sacred grave far from one's home is like a mountain that appears grand and beautiful when seen from a distance. However, for those who live near the mountain, its beauty becomes something ordinary and no longer special*" (Interview with Pak Ahyar, 15 Desember, 2024).

Each political actor follows a different pilgrimage route depending on their affiliation with Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) or their connection to specific religious educational institutions. For example, alumni of *Pondok Pesantren Zainul Hasan Genggong* typically begin their pilgrimage at the grave of their deceased parents (if applicable) or proceed directly to the tomb of *Kiai Hasan Genggong*, followed by visits to the tombs of *Kiai Abdul Hamid Pasuruan* and *Sunan Ampel* in Surabaya. Meanwhile, individuals from Javanese-majority regions often include visits to the tombs of past leaders, such as *Kiai Ronggo* or *Kiai Jojolelono*. For alumni of *Pondok Pesantren Nurul Jadid*, the journey usually starts at the tombs of *Pondok Nurul Jadid* founders, often extending to *Sukorejo*,

the tomb of *Kiai Syamsul Arifin* in Situbondo, followed by *Kiai Abdul Hamid Pasuruan* and *Sunan Ampel* in Surabaya.

This phenomenon highlights the ongoing relevance of pilgrimage traditions in three key aspects. First, the religious or spiritual aspect, where the graves of *pesantren* founders or early Islamic preachers serve as symbols of faith and spirituality. The tombs of *Kiai Mohammad Hasan* and *Kiai Hasan Sepuh*, for instance, are not merely final resting places but also spiritual centers that provide moral guidance for visitors. Second, the historical or political aspect, evident in the tombs of past leaders who played influential roles in local power structures. The grave of *Kiai Djajolelono*, for example, represents a legacy of leadership that continues to be honored by the community. Third, the intersection of both aspects—tombs of figures revered in both religious and historical-political contexts, such as *Kiai Ronggo*.

This reflects the nature of leadership in a hybrid space, where the ability to navigate complex social relationships is crucial. Authority is not solely determined by electability in elections but also by proximity to values respected by the community. The tradition of pilgrimage has thus become a political practice that reinforces spiritually-based leadership, fosters closeness with constituents through religious symbols, and affirms one's position within local power structures.

## CONCLUSION

Probolinggo serves as an example of how hybrid identity shapes governance, where Islam, local culture, and power intertwine to create a complex political dynamic. Within this hybrid space, governance is not solely determined by formal democratic mechanisms but also by cultural and religious legitimacy. The presence of *pesantren* and *ulama* as influential social forces demonstrates that authority is built not only through electoral processes but also through deeply rooted spiritual and traditional values.

Political practices such as pilgrimages to the graves of revered religious figures illustrate how political actors navigate this hybrid governance system. This practice is not merely a spiritual ritual but also a means of strengthening leadership legitimacy, maintaining social cohesion, and building political networks. Thus, leadership in Probolinggo requires an adaptive approach that integrates religious, cultural, and political dimensions to sustain authority and public trust.

By examining governance within this hybrid space, this study provides insights into the intricate relationship between Islam, culture, and power in local democracy. The findings highlight how political actors must continuously negotiate between modern governance frameworks and traditional values to remain relevant and influential. In this context, Probolinggo serves as a valuable case study, illustrating how governance evolves at the intersection of belief, tradition, and contemporary political structures.

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