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Reconstruction of Religious Authority in the Digital Era: Knowledge Criteria, Sanad, Muru'ah, and Da'wah Ethics in the Perspective of Bahtsul Masail LBM PCNU Temanggung

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ABSTRACT

The transformation of the religious public sphere through digital media has altered how religious authority is constructed, recognized, and consumed. Popularity, follower counts, rhetorical skills, and algorithmic visibility increasingly shape how religious figures are recognized, while depth of knowledge, scholarly transmission, moral integrity, and exemplary conduct risk being marginalized. This article aims to reconstruct the concept of religious authority based on classical Islamic scholarship and contemporary studies of digital religion. It employs a qualitative library-research approach with normative-interpretive analysis of the decision issued by the Bahtsul Masail forum of LBM PCNU Temanggung on 11 July 2026. Classical primary sources include *Bulghat al-Tull*, *al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir*, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Tafsir Ibn Kathīr*, *al-Majmū' Sharh al-Muhadhdhab*, *Tafsir al-Baghawī*, *Tafsir al-Qurtubī*, *al-Tafsir al-Munir*, *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif*, and *Adab al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn*. Contemporary sources consist of scholarly studies published between 2022 and 2026 on digital religion and religious authority in Indonesia. The findings show that religious authority in the pesantren tradition rests on at least four dimensions: epistemic competence, scholarly transmission, moral integrity, and pedagogical-da'wah capacity. Digital media need not be seen as a threat to ulama authority, but as a new arena that requires adaptation without abandoning its epistemic foundations. This article proposes an Integrative Religious Authority (IRA) model connecting 'ilm, sanad, muru'ah, hikmah, and digital adaptation — a framework NU can use for religious literacy, preacher curatorial, pesantren strengthening, and the development of a digital da'wah ecosystem.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Religious authority is a key foundation of Muslim social life. Through it, communities decide whom to learn religious knowledge from, whom to consult on legal

questions, who deserves to be emulated, and how Islamic teaching translates into social life. In the classical Islamic tradition, authority did not arise merely from public-speaking ability. It was tied to the quality of one's knowledge, scholarly transmission, moral integrity, learning experience, and recognition by the scholarly community [1].

Indonesia's pesantren tradition inherited this pattern. A *kiai* is not only a preacher but also a teacher, mentor, guardian, legal reference, and moral exemplar. A *kiai*'s authority is built through a long process—studying under teachers, reading and examining texts, gaining recognition from the scholarly community, teaching, mentoring students, and demonstrating moral consistency in social life. Traditional religious authority is thus both relational and epistemic [2].

Digital technology has since brought fundamental change. Religious knowledge is no longer obtained only through mosques, pesantren, madrasah, study circles, or direct teacher-student relationships. YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, podcasts, and other digital platforms have become new spaces for producing and distributing religious knowledge. Studies on the digitalization of da'wah in Indonesia show that digital technology enables religious consumption unbounded by space and time, and increases the dependence of a figure's authority on public electability [3].

This shift does not by itself mean the disappearance of ulama authority. Research on village *kiai* in East Java shows that *kiai* authority remains socially significant, built through social closeness and exemplary conduct in resolving community problems [4]. Other research shows that traditional and digital authority intersect and are negotiated rather than replaced in a linear shift from ulama to influencer [5].

The issue grows more complex when digital metrics—follower counts, view counts, likes, comments, and engagement—begin to be read as indicators of religious competence. Online, a person can gain wide influence without going through the same religious-education process as a traditional scholar. Contemporary research shows a shift from *sanad*-based legitimacy toward legitimacy increasingly shaped by visibility and algorithms [6].

This raises an epistemological question: can popularity measure religious authority? A further question follows: what distinguishes a scholar (*ulama*) from a religious communicator? This becomes even more pressing as titles such as *kiai*, *ulama*, *ustadz*, religious teacher, *da'i*, and *muballigh* are used loosely in society.

On 11 July 2026, the Bahtsul Masail of LBM PCNU Temanggung identified this phenomenon as "the degradation of religious titles' meaning." The decision emphasized four main issues: the criteria for *kiai* and *ulama*, scholarly capacity and moral integrity, da'wah strategy, and the steps religious organizations should take to educate the public.

Academically, this decision is notable for bringing together two different epistemological traditions: first, the classical-normative tradition that grounds authority in knowledge, *sanad*, practice, reverent fear of God (*khasyah*), and moral dignity (*muruhah*); second, the digital tradition that constructs authority through visibility, interaction, performativity, and algorithms [7].

Recent studies reinforce the relevance of this issue. [8] found that digital media has produced fragmentation and democratization of religious authority in Indonesia, with

digital religious figures bypassing traditional institutional structures to build direct relationships with audiences via YouTube and Instagram. Other studies on the transformation of religious authority show that digital legitimacy is increasingly shaped by communicative performativity and algorithmic visibility—and that this transformation has even entered the domain of Islamic legal authority, with digital platforms not only distributing sermons but also mediating fatwas and religious decisions. The issue, then, is not merely "da'wah through social media" but a change in the very structure of religious knowledge's legitimacy [9].

Nonetheless, a research gap remains. Much contemporary scholarship focuses on how digital media changes religious authority but has not sufficiently integrated that change with the normative criteria for scholarship found in fiqh, tafsir, scholarly ethics (*adab*), and the Nusantara pesantren tradition. In other words, studies of digital religious authority often explain how authority changes, but not what kind of authority ought to be preserved normatively and how it should adapt in digital space [10].

This article addresses that gap.

The research aims are: first, to reconstruct the scholarly and moral criteria for an *ulama* or *kiai* based on classical Islamic scholarship; second, to analyze the transformation of religious authority within the digital ecosystem; third, to formulate a da'wah strategy that preserves scholarly weight while remaining communicative; and fourth, to develop a strategic model NU can use to address the changing landscape of digital religious authority.

7 2. METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach combining library research with normative-interpretive analysis.

The primary object is the decision issued by the Bahtsul Masail of LBM PCNU Temanggung on 11 July 2026, "The Degradation of Religious Titles' Meaning," treated as a socio-religious document articulating religious norms within the NU community.

Primary sources comprise the classical texts referenced in the decision: *Bulghat al-Tullāb*, *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, *al-Majmū' Sharḥ al-Muḥadhdhab*, *Tafsīr al-Baghawī*, *Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, *al-Tafsīr al-Munīr*, *'Awārif al-Ma'ārif*, and *Adab al-Dunyā wa al-Dīn*.

Secondary sources comprise scholarly articles from 2022–2026 on religious authority, digital religion, digital da'wah, pesantren, *kiai*, and the transformation of religious legitimacy [12].

Analysis proceeded in four stages: (1) bibliographic verification of sources; (2) identification of key concepts; (3) comparison between classical concepts and digital phenomena; and (4) synthesis to build a conceptual model.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Kiai and Ulama: Two Non-Identical Concepts

One of the most important issues is distinguishing "kiai" from "ulama."

Ulama has direct roots in Islamic linguistic and scholarly tradition — morphologically, '*ulama*' is the plural of '*ālim*'. In the Qur'anic context, the concept of *ulama* is tied to knowledge that produces *khasyah* toward God.

Kiai, by contrast, is a Nusantara socio-cultural category. It has no single sharia-based definition the way '*ālim*', *faqīh*, or *mujtahid* do. It is therefore inaccurate to treat "kiai" as a "sharia title" carrying universal fiqh requirements [13].

This does not mean, however, that using the term "kiai" is free of ethical constraint. *Bulghat al-Ṭullāb* states that it is impermissible to bestow the title "kiai" on an ignorant person, because the term denotes a learned teacher (*al-ustadz al-ālim*).

Attaching the title "kiai" to someone becomes problematic under sharia when the title implies scholarly authority the person does not actually possess, thereby misleading public perception [14].

3.2 Religious Authority Is Not the Same as Having Much Knowledge

Al-Nawawi offers a crucial formulation for a teacher's fitness: that his fitness is complete, his religiosity manifest, his knowledge verified, and his integrity and standing well known.

Notably, al-Nawawi does not stop at "an abundance of knowledge" (*kathrat al-ilm*). He states explicitly: "It is not sufficient, for fitness to teach, that a person merely have much knowledge."

He then lists further elements: cross-disciplinary knowledge of the sharia, experience, sound religion, good character, intelligence, and adequate mastery.

This carries an important methodological consequence: religious authority combines *competence* and *character*.

A figure who has memorized many hadith but lacks the ability to understand their legal context is not necessarily fit to serve as a reference for fatwas. Conversely, someone with exceptional rhetorical skill but no scholarly capacity cannot gain epistemic legitimacy simply because their following is large [15].

3.3 Sanad: Not Merely a Chain of Names, but a Verification Mechanism

In the pesantren tradition, *sanad* is often reduced to a chain of teachers' names. Its meaning is in fact broader — *sanad* signifies the transmission of knowledge connected to a living tradition of learning. Al-Nawawi warns against taking knowledge solely from "the belly of a book" without reading it before a qualified teacher; someone who learns only from books is prone to misreading, textual corruption (*taṣhīf*), error, and distortion of meaning [16].

In the digital context, this principle gains new relevance. The internet makes texts, fatwas, hadith, and tafsir widely available—but access to information is not the same as mastery of knowledge.

A person may access thousands of texts without understanding their historical context, chapter structure, differences among juristic opinions, the strength of evidence, methods of legal inference, abrogation, technical terminology, or the limits of a given opinion's application. Digitalization should therefore expand access to knowledge, not eliminate the teacher's role.

3.4 Ulama as an Integration of 'Ilm, Khasyah, and 'Amal

Ibn 'Āshūr's tafsir of QS. Fāṭir [35]:28 is highly relevant: an *ulama* is one who knows God and His sharia, and that knowledge produces *khasyah* proportionate to the knowledge itself.

Thus 'ilm (knowledge), khasyah (reverent fear), and 'amal (practice) form an essential epistemological chain. Knowledge that produces no moral change loses part of its core function.

Al-Ghazali warns of "scholars of this world" — those who use knowledge to gain status, honor, and worldly pleasure — noting that knowledge can be a source of salvation or of ruin depending on whether it is accompanied by practice [17].

In the digital context, this can take a new form: 'ilm, content, engagement, and popularity. This chain is not inherently wrong—the problem arises when engagement replaces *khasyah* as the measure of success.

3.5 Popularity as Pseudo-Authority

Social media operates on the logic of visibility: widely watched content is more likely to be recommended; highly interactive content receives wider distribution. The result is algorithmic visibility. However, visibility is not proportional to authority. A well-known person is not necessarily learned. A widely watched person does not necessarily follow sound scholarly methods. A humorous person is not necessarily unscholarly—and conversely, someone teaching texts seriously may not be skilled at content production.

Studies on the transformation of religious authority in Indonesia show that scholarly legitimacy now interacts with digital visibility, performative communication, and algorithms.

Maulidia et al. [18], for example, found that digital tafsir content tends to be shaped by short-form, motivational, emotional formats and mechanisms of virality—in which the authority of interpretation can shift from sanad and competence toward visibility and engagement.

This is the core of what may be called *epistemic degradation*.

3.6 Humor in Da'wah: Not the Enemy, but It Must Function as a Method

The Bahtsul Masail decision does not reject humor outright. This matters. In the *Iḥyā'*, al-Ghazali distinguishes between excessive humor and proportionate humor. What is reprehensible is excess and habituation, which can produce excessive laughter, erode dignity, and divert attention from more important goals.

The Prophet ﷺ, by contrast, joked but never made falsehood the substance of a joke.

The real question, then, is not "May a preacher be funny?" but "Does humor remain a means of da'wah, or has it become the goal of da'wah?"

If humor captures the audience's attention before substantive content, it functions as a pedagogical strategy. However, if 60–80 percent of a gathering's time is spent on humor while scholarly content becomes merely supplementary, the educational function inverts.

Here, al-Mawardi's principle on the ethics of speech is relevant: speech must have a purpose, be delivered at the right time and place, suit the need, and be expressed in proper language [19].

3.7 Hikmah as a Model of Religious Communication

QS. al-Nahl [16]:125 offers three methods: *al-hikmah* (wisdom), *al-maw'izah al-hasanah* (good exhortation), and *al-jidāl bi allatī hiya aḥsan* (the best manner of dialogue).

Al-Baghawī explains *hikmah* as the Qur'an or firmly-grounded speech; *maw'izah hasanah* as gentle counsel; and dialogue as something that must be conducted in the best manner (al-Baghawī, n.d., 5:52). Al-Qurtubi likewise emphasizes gentleness and avoidance of harshness in da'wah [20].

The quality of da'wah therefore has two dimensions that must operate together: content quality + communication quality. Content without communication is hard to receive; communication without content produces popularity without depth.

3.8 Digital Da'wah and the Verification Crisis

One of the most serious problems in digital da'wah is how quickly information circulates. An unverified story can reach millions of viewers within hours. A weak hadith can be cited as authentic. Stories about scholars can be reproduced without scrutiny. Passages of texts can be stripped of context. Fatwas can be reduced to a single sentence.

For this reason, the classical principle of *tahqīq* (verification) is more important than ever. Al-Ghazali warned against preachers who mix falsehood and religious innovation into their sermons, and affirmed the obligation to denounce (*inkār*) preachers who spread falsehood, and to avoid attending gatherings of innovation except to correct such errors [21].

In the digital context, this principle translates as follows: every viral religious claim requires epistemic verification.

3.9 From Traditional Authority Toward Hybrid Authority

[22] shows that digital space does not entirely replace traditional authority but creates a meeting point between old and new forms of authority. The same pattern appears in studies of pesantren: digitalization can expand pesantren da'wah without necessarily destroying traditional scholarly structures.

Research on hybrid pesantren shows that pesantren engagement with digital media produces changes in educational practice and the construction of religious authority [23].

The right framing is therefore not "pesantren versus digital" but pesantren + digital—with the caveat that digitalizing the medium must not mean digitalizing (i.e., diluting) the scholarly standard.

3.10 The Integrative Religious Authority Model

Based on a synthesis of classical sources and contemporary findings on ³⁷the transformation of religious authority in digital space, this article proposes the Integrative Religious Authority (IRA) Model. The model assumes that religious authority should not rest on a single form of legitimacy—popularity, rhetorical skill, follower count, or digital visibility. Robust religious authority instead emerges from the interconnection of scholarly competence, continuity of knowledge transmission, moral integrity, pedagogical ability, and the capacity to adapt to the digital environment.

First element — 'ilm: epistemic competence in Islamic studies. Religious authority requires mastery²³ of the tools needed to understand, explain, and responsibly apply religious teaching — not limited to general religious knowledge but including the instrumental disciplines of understanding religion: theology (*'aqīdah*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), tafsir, hadith, legal theory (*uṣūl fiqh*), and Arabic linguistic sciences. The ability to speak about religion is not by itself equivalent to religious scholarly authority; the Islamic scholarly tradition places scientific capacity as the primary foundation of one's fitness to serve as a religious reference.

Second element — sanad: the continuity of transmission and scholarly verification. In Islamic tradition, knowledge is not merely information individually acquired from books or media, but knowledge transmitted through a process of learning, correction, guidance, and recognition by a competent teacher. In this model, sanad is understood not narrowly as a formal chain of transmission alone, but as an epistemic mechanism ensuring that religious knowledge is acquired through an accountable process of learning — consistent with the classical scholarly emphasis on taking knowledge from someone with fitness, knowledge, sound religion, integrity, and teaching capacity [24].

Third element — muru'ah: moral integrity and ethical fitness. Extensive knowledge does not automatically make someone a worthy authority; religious authority requires alignment between knowledge, speech, and action. A religious figure is expected to guard his honor, avoid conduct that damages fairness and credibility, and put his knowledge into practice. Authority, then, is measured not only by *what one knows* but by *how one lives what one knows* — bringing together 'ilm with khashyah and 'amal, as affirmed in the tafsir and scholarly-ethics literature.

Fourth element — hikmah: pedagogical ability to convey religious knowledge accurately, contextually, and appropriately to the audience's capacity. Correct knowledge alone is not enough; it must be transformed into a message that can be understood and ²⁹benefits society—consistent with the da'wah framework of QS. al-Nahl [16]:125 (*al-hikmah, al-maw'izah al-ḥasanah, and al-jidāl bi al-latī hiya aḥsan*). Gentle communication is not a substitute for depth of knowledge, just as depth of knowledge is not an excuse to ignore how it is delivered; the two must work together.

Fifth element — digital adaptability: the capacity of a religious authority to adapt to the changing digital communication ecosystem without losing religious epistemic and ethical standards. Digital adaptation does not mean following every logic of social-media popularity. Instead, digital capability should expand access to religious knowledge, improve communication quality, verify information, and build credible spaces for religious

learning. Recent research shows that digital media has changed how religious authority is formed and recognized: visibility, audience interaction, communication style, and algorithmic logic increasingly determine who gains public attention [25].

This shift shows that digitalization does not automatically erase traditional ulama authority, but changes the social mechanisms through which such authority is recognized, negotiated, and sustained. The central challenge is not whether ulama should enter digital space, but how that digital presence remains grounded in adequate scholarship and integrity. Studies on the transformation of digital religious authority in Indonesia also show a shift from legitimacy rooted mainly in scholarly relationships and institutions toward legitimacy increasingly shaped by visibility, self-branding, and digital performativity [26].

On this synthesis, Integrative Religious Authority (IRA) can be understood as authority arising from the interaction of five dimensions — 'ilm, sanad, muru'ah, hikmah, and digital adaptation — none of which stand alone. 'Ilm provides the epistemic foundation; sanad provides transmission legitimacy and a verification mechanism; muru'ah provides moral legitimacy; hikmah enables knowledge to be transformed into effective religious education; and digital adaptation allows that authority to remain relevantly present within the contemporary communication ecosystem.

Conceptually, this relationship can be expressed as:

$$\text{Integrative Religious Authority} = \text{'Ilm} \times \text{Sanad} \times \text{Muru'ah} \times \text{Hikmah} \times \text{Digital Adaptation}$$

This is not a mathematical formula intended to produce a quantitative score, but a conceptual metaphor for the integrative nature of religious authority. The multiplication sign signals that the five dimensions reinforce one another and cannot fully substitute for each other. Someone with very strong digital-communication skills does not automatically possess strong religious authority if it is not accompanied by scholarly competence and moral integrity. Likewise, someone with deep knowledge and a strong sanad still faces difficulty reaching contemporary society without pedagogical ability and adaptation to changing media.

This model also corrects the reduction of religious authority to popularity. Follower counts, views, likes, the ability to produce viral content, or skill at self-image-building indicate social visibility, not the validity of religious authority. Research on platformized religious authority shows that algorithmic logic can shift public attention toward actors with high performativity and audience engagement, so that popularity can acquire a legitimating function even when it does not always correlate with scholarly competence [27].

In the Indonesian context, this matters greatly, since digital space has become a primary arena for the production, distribution, and consumption of religious knowledge. Studies on digital tafsir, for instance, show that interpretive authority is increasingly negotiated through media visibility, communication style, audience trust, and algorithmic circulation, alongside scholarly credentials and traditional sanad (Asriadi et al., 2026). Similarly, studies on digital fatwa show that platform logic can interact with established fiqh-authority mechanisms, producing hybrid forms of authority between classical scholarly legitimacy and digital visibility [28].

Digital adaptation in the IRA model must therefore not be positioned as a dimension superior to 'ilm, sanad, and muru'ah. It functions as an instrument for extending the reach of authority, not as the sole source of religious legitimacy. This principle is essential so that the digitalization of da'wah does not end in the platformization of authority—a condition in which algorithmic mechanisms indirectly determine who is regarded as authoritative based on visibility and audience engagement.

The IRA model thus stakes out a position distinct from two extremes. On one side, it does not reject digital media or insist that religious authority is legitimate only within traditional institutions. On the other, it does not accept the assumption that digital popularity can replace sanad, scholarly competence, and moral integrity. Ideal religious authority lies at the meeting point between continuity with scholarly tradition and the ability to respond to a changing communication ecosystem.

Within this framework, the central issue facing society is not merely the emergence of "digital ustadz" or the shift of religious teaching from the pulpit to the platform, but a change in the social criteria for recognizing authority. The IRA model proposes returning that recognition process to more substantive indicators: does a figure possess adequate knowledge, obtained through an accountable process of transmission; does he have moral integrity; can he convey knowledge with wisdom; and does he use technology responsibly. Popularity can be a vehicle for spreading a message, but it must not become a substitute for scholarly and moral legitimacy.

The main contribution of the IRA model, then, lies in integrating Islamic scholarly epistemology, the ethics of authority, da'wah pedagogy, and the dynamics of digital media into a single conceptual framework — one that can serve as a basis for future empirical research testing how these five dimensions shape public trust in religious figures, particularly amid the transformation of religious authority in Indonesia.

The call to "return to the kiai" matters within the pesantren context, but it is academically insufficient because the younger generation lives in a digital ecosystem.

If ulama are absent from digital space, that space does not remain empty; it will quickly be filled by other figures. NU's strategy, therefore, should not be to pull society out of social media, but to bring scholarly standards *into* social media.

This gives rise to the concept:

Digitalization of authority without digitalization of the standard of authority.

In other words: texts can be digitalized; teaching sessions can be digitalized; sanad can be documented; fatwas can be published; study sessions can be broadcast — but scholarly standards must never be determined by algorithms.

3.11 Implications for the Titles "Kiai" and "Ulama"

Four categories should be distinguished:

1. **Ulama** — those with deep scholarly competence in religion, who understand the sharia, possess *khasyah*, and practice their knowledge.
2. **Kiai** — religious figures with cultural and social legitimacy, particularly within pesantren or community settings, based on a combination of knowledge, exemplary conduct, service, and community recognition.

3. **Ustadz/Da'i** — those who teach or preach religion; not every ustadz is **automatically** an ulama.
4. **Religious content creator** — those who produce and distribute religious content; such a person may also be an ulama, but being a content creator is not itself proof of scholarly standing.

This distinction matters so that society does not fall into category confusion.

4. CONCLUSION

The degradation of religious titles' meaning in the digital era is not merely a matter of language but a matter of epistemic authority. When popularity, visibility, and rhetorical ability become the primary measures of religious standing, society risks confusing figures with genuine scholarly authority with figures who merely possess public-communication skills.

Classical Islamic scholarship shows that religious authority is not built through breadth of information alone. Al-Nawawi emphasized scholarly fitness, sound religion, character, experience, and transmission from a teacher. Ibn 'Āshūr linked scholarly standing to knowledge of God, the sharia, and *khasyāh*. Ibn Kathir affirmed integrating legal knowledge with fear of God. Al-Ghazali added the crucial dimension of practice and freedom from worldly orientation.

In this light, sanad is not merely a chain of teachers' names but a mechanism of transmission and verification. *Muru'ah* is not mere social courtesy but part of the integrity that makes a person trustworthy. Da'wah, too, must not be reduced to rhetorical performance — the principles of *ḥikmah*, good exhortation, and the best manner of dialogue demand a balance between substance and method.

Digital media need not be viewed as a threat to ulama authority. Contemporary research shows that traditional and digital authority are being negotiated and hybridized; the problem arises when algorithms and popularity replace scholarly competence as the basis of legitimacy.

This article therefore proposes the Integrative Religious Authority (IRA) Model, comprising 'ilm, sanad, *murū'ah*, *ḥikmah*, and digital adaptation — a model that allows pesantren and NU to enter digital space without losing their epistemological character.

The task ahead is not simply "returning society to the kiai," but building a digital ecosystem in which society can recognize *why* a kiai or ulama deserves trust.

Popularity can extend the reach of da'wah, but it does not by itself produce scholarly authority. Digitalization may change the medium of knowledge transmission, but it must never erase the standards of knowledge, sanad, *murū'ah*, and practice.

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