

CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE REPRESENTATION OF SANTRI IDENTITY IN TAJ YASIN'S DEBATE SPEECHES DURING THE 2024 CENTRAL JAVA GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION

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ABSTRACT

Identity politics grounded in *pesantren* culture has long shaped electoral competition in Central Java, yet little attention has been paid to how *santri* identity is discursively constructed within formal political debate arenas. This study addresses this gap by examining the representation of *santri* identity in three official debate speeches delivered by Taj Yasin during the 2024 Central Java gubernatorial election, using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework. Rather than cataloguing campaign rhetoric, the study foregrounds how *santri* identity is strategically produced across textual, discursive, and sociocultural dimensions within a highly regulated and publicly scrutinized communicative setting. The findings demonstrate that *santri* identity functions as a deliberate political resource, articulated through the selective deployment of *pesantren*-based moral language, genealogical authority, visual performativity, and the normalization of religious values as legitimate foundations for public policy discourse. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on candidate debates as sites of multimodal identity construction, revealing how *santri* identity operates not merely as inherited religiosity but as an integrated discursive strategy that converts cultural and religious capital into electoral legitimacy. By situating religious identity formation within formal debate discourse, this study contributes to critical political communication scholarship and advances understanding of the evolving role of Islamic identity in Indonesia's local democratic practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Identity politics is one of the most prominent phenomena in contemporary political dynamics, including within Indonesia's electoral context. Collective identities whether based on religion, ethnicity, class, or culture have been shown to play a major role in shaping voting behavior and political mobilization processes, often surpassing

programmatic considerations or policy rationality. A growing body of research indicates that elections are not merely arenas for the competition of ideas, but also social spaces in which identity symbols are produced, negotiated, and contested (Anisa et al., 2023; Arifin et al., 2025; Ibrahim et al., 2024; Irfan Achfandhy et al., 2024; Yani et al., 2022). Under such conditions, candidates' success is determined not only by their ability to offer rational programs, but also by the extent to which they can articulate identities that resonate with voters' cultural and religious identities.

In the Indonesian political context, Islamic religious identity constitutes one of the most influential factors shaping political behavior. Religious symbols, the authority of *kiai*, *pesantren* networks, and socio-religious organizations such as *Nahdlatul Ulama* frequently function as effective instruments of political communication. The deployment of symbols of piety, representations of Islamic morality, and genealogical claims to religious authority has become a widely used strategy for candidates to build emotional, moral, and cultural intimacy with voters. This phenomenon is observable across both local and national political contests, reinforcing the view that religious identity serves as a crucial source of political legitimacy (Anisa et al., 2023; Hasan Susanto, 2019; Lubis et al., 2024a; Widian et al., 2023; Yani et al., 2022).

Within the landscape of Indonesian Islamic politics, *santri* and *pesantren* occupy a strategic position and function as central sites for the formation of religious and cultural identity. *Pesantren* operate not only as Islamic educational institutions, but also as social institutions that transmit moral values, ethical principles, and Islamic scholarly traditions deeply embedded in community life (Ismail, 2011; Jati, 2012; Syahrudin et al., 2025). Central Java, in particular, represents one of the largest *pesantren* bases in Indonesia. Data from Statistics Indonesia (2025) indicate that the province hosts 5,226 active *pesantren* with more than 502,004 *santri* distributed across various districts. This high concentration renders *santri* identity both a social symbol and a highly relevant form of political capital in Central Java's electoral contests.

Existing studies on *santri* identity politics have addressed various aspects, such as the commodification of religious symbols, the role of *pesantren* elites in electoral politics, and the influence of Islamic identity on voting behavior (Abidin & Dong, 2020; Jati, 2012; Lubis et al., 2024). However, research that directly examines how *santri* identity is represented through candidates' discourse particularly within official political debate contexts remains relatively limited. This gap is notable given that candidate debates constitute highly strategic formal forums, serving as arenas of discursive production observed by a broad public, where identity narratives are articulated more explicitly and performatively than in conventional campaign materials.

At the same time, the meaning of "*santri*" in contemporary social developments has undergone significant transformation. *Santri* no longer refers narrowly to individuals studying in *pesantren*, but has evolved into a moral and cultural identity encompassing values of simplicity, piety, and populist ethics. This process of meaning expansion, often described as the *santrification* of society, has rendered *santri* identity increasingly flexible and broadly articulable within political discourse. *Santri* identity has gained further legitimacy through the institutionalization of National *Santri* Day and the growing representation of *pesantren* figures in formal politics (Abidin & Dong, 2020; Subair, 2015). Consequently, *santri* identity has shifted from a purely cultural identity to a political symbol with strong electoral appeal, particularly in regions with large *nahdliyyin* constituencies such as Central Java.

From a sociocultural perspective, Central Javanese society is shaped by the intersection of Javanese cultural traditions and deeply rooted Islamic religiosity. Within Geertz's (1960) framework, the *santri-abangan* cleavage remains relevant for understanding political orientations in Central Java. Although the boundaries between these categories have become increasingly fluid due to societal *santrification* and intensified religious expression in the public sphere, these differing value horizons continue to influence how voters interpret morality, symbolism, and political leadership. In this context, *santri* identity possesses broad resonance not only among normatively religious voters, but also among segments of society that perceive *santri* as symbols of simplicity, populism, and the continuity of Javanese Islamic tradition, making it a potent form of cultural capital for candidates seeking emotional proximity and political legitimacy.

In the context of the 2024 Central Java gubernatorial election, Taj Yasin Maimoen represents a political figure who is genealogically and culturally embedded in *pesantren* tradition. As the son of KH. Maimoen Zubair, one of the most influential *Kiai* within *nahdliyyin* circles, Taj Yasin possesses substantial symbolic capital as a representative of *santri* identity. This genealogical capital is further reinforced through narratives, diction, and representational strategies displayed in official debate forums. Candidate debates, therefore, function not merely as platforms for conveying visions and programs, but as strategic arenas of political discourse production saturated with efforts to construct candidate image and legitimacy. Prior studies have shown that public debates are inherently persuasive spaces where candidates display personal qualities, values, and leadership styles through structured discursive strategies (Shanti et al., 2025). Consequently, debates operate as non-neutral discursive practices in which language and identity representation play a central role in shaping public trust and voter perception.

Despite the growing literature on identity politics and Islamic political communication in Indonesia, several analytical gaps remain evident. First, existing research largely prioritizes campaign strategies, elite networks, or voter behavior, while offering limited attention to formal political debates as discursively structured arenas of identity construction. Second, *santri* identity is often treated as a static social category or electoral constituency, rather than as a dynamic identity that is actively produced, performed, and legitimized through language, symbols, and institutional settings. Third, few studies employ a critical discourse analytical approach that systematically connects micro-level linguistic practices with meso-level discourse production and macro-level sociocultural structures within local electoral contexts. As a result, the discursive mechanisms through which *santri* identity is transformed into political legitimacy in formal debate settings remain underexplored.

Accordingly, this article aims to analyze how *santri* identity is discursively constructed in three official debate speeches delivered by Taj Yasin during the 2024 Central Java gubernatorial election using Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework. Specifically, this study examines how *santri* identity is articulated at the textual level, how it is produced and circulated within the institutional context of candidate debates, and how it is embedded within the broader sociocultural landscape of Central Java's *pesantren*-oriented society. By addressing these objectives, this research contributes to scholarship on Islamic identity politics and discourse-based political communication by demonstrating how religious identity operates as a strategic discursive resource within formal democratic forums.

METHOD

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative approach aimed at developing an in-depth understanding of how *santri* identity is represented in Taj Yasin's debate speeches during the 2024 Central Java gubernatorial election. This approach is selected because it enables the researcher to examine discursive phenomena through the interpretation of meaning, context, and linguistic structures employed by political actors in public forums. By focusing on the content analysis of debate speeches, the qualitative method is particularly appropriate for capturing ideological, symbolic, and representational nuances that cannot be adequately measured through quantitative approaches (Sugiyono, 2013).

To analyze the construction of discourse within the debate speeches, this study employs Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Fairclough (1992, 1993, 2010) conceptualizes language as a form of social practice imbued with power relations, ideology, and meaning production. This framework consists of three levels of analysis. First, textual analysis examines linguistic elements such as diction, lexical choices, sentence structures, rhetorical patterns, and other semiotic features present in the debate speeches. Second, discourse practice analysis explores the processes of production and circulation of the debate speeches. Third, sociocultural practice analysis links discursive findings to the broader socio-political context of Central Javanese society, *pesantren* culture, religious authority, and the electoral dynamics surrounding the emergence of *santri* identity discourse. This analytical model has been widely applied in political communication studies due to its capacity to bridge textual analysis and social structures (Hanan, 2020; Irfan Achfandhy et al., 2024).

The unit of analysis in this study is the discursive representation of *santri* identity as articulated in Taj Yasin's debate speeches. More specifically, the analytical units include: (1) lexical units and key diction associated with *pesantren* culture and Islamic moral discourse; (2) argumentative and narrative structures through which *santri* values are framed, legitimized, and connected to public policy issues; and (3) symbolic and performative references embedded in the discourse that reinforce religious identity representation. These units are analyzed across the three debate sessions as interconnected texts, enabling both intra-textual and inter-textual comparison to identify patterns, consistency, and shifts in identity construction.

The primary data of this study consist of three official video recordings of the 2024 Central Java gubernatorial debates obtained from public documentation and the official channels of the election organizers. All verbal statements delivered by Taj Yasin across the three debate sessions were fully transcribed and organized as textual data for analysis using Fairclough's CDA framework. The selection of the three debate sessions is based on the consideration that public debates constitute highly performative and institutionalized spaces in which candidates can explicitly and observably construct political identities.

In addition to the primary data, this study utilizes supporting data in the form of candidate profile documents, online media coverage, and scholarly literature on *pesantren* culture and *santri* identity. These supporting materials serve to enrich contextual understanding of discourse production and to ensure that interpretations are grounded within a robust socio-political context.

The analytical technique follows a systematic and theory-driven procedure aligned with Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model. The analysis was conducted through several stages. First, full transcription and data verification of the three debate sessions were carried out to ensure textual accuracy. Second, key themes related to the representation of *santri* identity were identified based on recurring lexical choices, rhetorical strategies, and narrative patterns. Third, linguistic findings were categorized according to the three levels of CDA analysis: textual, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. Fourth, these findings were interpreted by linking micro-level linguistic features to the institutional context of debate production and to macro-level socio-political structures within Central Java.

To strengthen data validity and analytical rigor, this study applies analytical triangulation by comparing textual findings with supporting materials, including media coverage and candidate background information. In addition, theoretical triangulation is employed by situating the discourse analysis within broader scholarship on identity politics, *santrinitis*, and Islamic political communication (Abidin & Dong, 2020; Fairclough, 1992, 1993, 2010; Ibrahim et al., 2024). The consistency of discursive patterns identified across the three debate sessions further enhances reliability, as recurring representations are interpreted as deliberate identity construction rather than incidental rhetorical choices.

Through the explicit definition of units of analysis and the application of a structured analytical technique, this study ensures methodological transparency and reinforces the credibility of its findings regarding the discursive construction of *santri* identity in Central Java's electoral politics.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Discursive Construction of *Santri* Identity

The analysis of the three official debate sessions of the 2024 Central Java gubernatorial election shows that Taj Yasin consistently constructs *santri* identity as the core discursive foundation of his political communication. This construction is articulated explicitly through *pesantren*-based lexical choices, moral assertions, prophetic narration, visual symbolism, performative expressions, and genealogical references, all of which are observable in his spoken discourse during the debates.

At the textual level, *pesantren*-specific diction functions as the most salient linguistic marker of *santri* identity. In the first debate, Taj Yasin formulates his leadership vision by stating: "*visi misi kami adalah nglakoni dan ngopeni.*" The terms *nglakoni* and *ngopeni* are *pesantren*-rooted ethical concepts that signify consistent moral practice and

responsible care. These terms recur systematically across the debates. In the second debate, Taj Yasin explicitly extends this diction to environmental governance, stating “*komitmen ngopeni bumi sudah kami lakoni.*” In the third debate, the same lexicon structures his education policy discourse when he states “*pesantren dan sekolah keagamaan akan kita openi.*” The repeated and consistent use of ngopeni across governance, ecology, and education demonstrates that *santri* identity operates as a moral framework structuring diverse policy agendas.

Moral discourse is articulated directly as a prerequisite for political leadership and bureaucratic reform. In the first debate, Taj Yasin explicitly rejects purely procedural governance by stating: “*Bukan hanya memperbaiki SOP, tapi juga akhlak ASN harus diperbaiki agar korupsi dan penyelewengan tidak terjadi.*” This statement positions akhlak as a foundational principle of state administration and aligns governance with *pesantren* moral pedagogy.

Moral authority is further legitimized through a complete prophetic narrative recounted by Taj Yasin in the first debate. He states: “*Ketika Rasulullah hijrah dari Mekah ke Madinah, beliau merasa dahaga dan bertemu Ummu Ma’bad. Saat itu Ummu Ma’bad memiliki seekor kambing yang kurus dan tidak mengeluarkan susu. Rasulullah kemudian memerah kambing tersebut, dan dengan izin Allah susu itu keluar dengan banyak. Rasulullah kemudian memberikan susu itu terlebih dahulu kepada Ummu Ma’bad dan sahabat sebelum beliau sendiri meminumnya.*” He then explicitly draws a leadership conclusion from this narrative by stating “*itulah ciri khas pemimpin, tidak mengedepankan dirinya sendiri, tetapi mengedepankan masyarakat.*” Taj Yasin subsequently aligns himself with this moral model through the declaration “*maka kami berdua akan menjadi suri tauladan yang baik.*” Through these statements, leadership is discursively framed as self-restraint, service, and moral responsibility, core values of *santri* ethics.

Santri identity is also reinforced through visual and performative discourse. Throughout all three debates, Taj Yasin consistently wears a *sarung* (traditional garment) and *songkok* (black cap), visual symbols strongly associated with *pesantren* culture. These symbols are activated discursively when he states: “*bersama kyai kami ngopeni pesantren mencari ridho Allah.*” The coherence between visual appearance and verbal articulation strengthens the *pesantren*-based political persona he constructs.

Performative expressions further consolidate this identity. In the first debate, chants of shalawat from supporters created a religious atmosphere aligned with his discourse. In the second debate, Taj Yasin concluded his statement by singing “*Lir Ilir, lir ilir, tandure wis sumilir, tak ijo royo-royo, tak sengguh temanten anyar,*” a work attributed to Sunan Kalijaga and a key icon of Javanese Islamic aesthetics which he explicitly framed as a reminder of simplicity, gratitude, and collective effort. In the third debate, he closed with a prayer, stating: “*robbij’al hadza baladan aamina. Ya Allah jadikan masyarakat Jawa Tengah makmur sejahtera lahir batin, gemah ripah loh jinawi. Semoga kami diberi keikhlasan berjuang untuk masyarakat Jawa Tengah.*” This prayer synthesizes Islamic supplication with Javanese cosmological ideals, reinforcing *santri* identity as culturally embedded and locally resonant.

The genealogical dimension constitutes a central source of symbolic authority. In the third debate, Taj Yasin explicitly invokes his father’s teachings by stating: “*Almarhum Mbah Maimoen mengajarkan kepada kami keikhlasan dalam berjuang.*” He further reinforces this inherited moral framework through the ethical maxim: “*suro diro jayaningrat lebur dening pangastuti.*” These quotations activate the moral charisma of KH. Maimoen Zubair and transform genealogical lineage into a discursively articulated source of political legitimacy.

Santri Identity as Discursive Political Capital

Drawing on Norman Fairclough’s conception of discourse as a form of social practice, this study conceptualizes *santri* identity not as a pre-discursive sociological attribute but as a form of discursively enacted political capital produced through language within institutionalized communicative events (Fairclough, 1992, 2010). In this framework, identity is understood as an outcome of discursive processes that both reflect and reproduce relations of power, ideology, and legitimacy, rather than as a fixed background variable.

At the level of textual analysis, Taj Yasin's debate discourse is characterized by the systematic selection of pesantren-based lexical items, moral evaluations, and prophetic narratives. These textual choices function ideologically by embedding specific value orientations piety, moral restraint, and ethical leadership into the grammatical and semantic structure of political speech. As Fairclough argues, ideology operates most effectively when it is embedded in taken-for-granted textual forms that present particular meanings as natural and self-evident (Fairclough, 1992). In this sense, the repeated articulation of santri moral vocabulary does not merely signal religious identity, but works to normalize religious morality as an unquestioned prerequisite for political authority.

This process is further reinforced through recontextualization, whereby elements of religious discourse are selectively relocated into the domain of public governance (Fairclough, 2010). Moral concepts originating in pesantren pedagogy are discursively reformulated to structure policy discussions on bureaucracy, education, environmental governance, and social welfare. Through this recontextualization, santri identity becomes an organizing discourse that aligns religious ethics with administrative rationality, producing a hybrid political discourse that legitimizes governance through moral credibility rather than procedural competence alone.

At the level of discourse practice, candidate debates function as institutionalized sites of discourse production characterized by formal rules, media mediation, and public scrutiny. Within this institutional context, discourse does not merely express identity but actively produces and stabilizes it through repetition, intertextual continuity, and performative coherence (Fairclough, 1992). The sustained reproduction of santri discourse across multiple debate sessions indicates a deliberate discursive strategy aimed at consolidating identity as a stable interpretive frame. In Fairclough's terms, such institutional discourse plays a central role in the reproduction of social power by privileging certain meanings and identities as legitimate while marginalizing alternatives.

At the level of sociocultural practice, the discursive construction of santri identity must be situated within broader configurations of power, religion, and cultural authority in Central Java. Fairclough emphasizes that discourse both shapes and is shaped by wider social structures, including historically sedimented moral orders and dominant cultural norms (Fairclough, 2010). Within this context, santri identity functions as a culturally authoritative discourse that aligns political leadership with socially dominant moral values. Its effectiveness lies precisely in its ideological capacity to present particular religious norms as universally relevant and culturally natural, thereby masking their contingent and political character.

The invocation of genealogical authority further illustrates Fairclough's argument that power does not reside inherently in social positions but is activated through discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Genealogical lineage attains political significance only insofar as it is discursively articulated, morally framed, and aligned with dominant leadership narratives. Through narrative activation and evaluative framing, inherited religious authority is transformed into performative legitimacy, demonstrating that symbolic capital becomes politically effective only when discursively realized.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that santri identity operates as discursive political capital through its continuous production across textual structures, institutional discourse practices, and sociocultural conditions. In line with Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, candidate debates function as ideological arenas in which religious values are normalized and institutionalized as legitimate foundations of political leadership. Santri identity, therefore, should be understood not as a static identity category, but as the outcome of sustained discursive labor that converts cultural and religious resources into political legitimacy within formal democratic institutions (Fairclough, 1992, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This study examines the discursive construction of *santri* identity in the three official debate sessions of the 2024 Central Java gubernatorial election and demonstrates that *santri* identity is not merely an inherited religious attribute attached to Taj Yasin's personal background, but a strategically enacted political identity produced through

discourse. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, the findings show that *santri* identity is consistently articulated through *pesantren*-based diction, moral and prophetic narratives, genealogical invocation, visual symbolism, and performative practices. These elements operate together to position *santri* identity as a moral and cultural framework that legitimizes leadership and structures policy arguments across education, sharia-based economic development, environmental governance, and social welfare.

At the level of discourse practice, Taj Yasin constructs *pesantren* not as marginal religious institutions but as socially productive actors relevant to contemporary regional development. *Santri* values are extended beyond the moral domain to function as organizing principles for governance, integrity, ecological responsibility, and community-based economic empowerment. This indicates that *santri* identity is mobilized not in opposition to modern governance, but as a discursive bridge between religious ethics and technocratic development agendas.

At the sociocultural level, the construction of *santri* identity resonates strongly with the religious and cultural configuration of Central Javanese society, which is characterized by a dense *pesantren* infrastructure and a historically rooted *nahdli* tradition. In this context, *santri* identity functions as symbolic and cultural capital that enhances emotional proximity and moral credibility among voters, while remaining compatible with narratives of inclusivity, pluralism, and cultural hybridity. The findings illustrate how religious identity can be articulated in ways that are socially integrative rather than polarizing within local electoral politics.

Theoretically, this study contributes to identity politics scholarship by conceptualizing *santri* identity as a form of discursively enacted political capital produced within institutionalized debate arenas rather than through informal mobilization or organizational brokerage alone. While previous studies on Islamic and *santri* politics in Indonesia have predominantly emphasized *pesantren* networks, kiai authority, and religious organizations as structural determinants of political behavior, this research demonstrates that identity legitimacy is actively generated through performative coherence across language, moral narration, visual symbolism, and embodied practice within televised candidate debates. By foregrounding debates as regulated communicative spaces, this study shifts analytical attention from identity as a pre-given sociological category to identity as a situationally stabilized outcome of discursive labor conducted under institutional constraints. In doing so, it extends critical discourse approaches to identity politics by showing how religious identity is normalized, authorized, and rendered electorally meaningful through formal political communication.

Practically, the findings offer important implications for political campaigning and the organization of candidate debates. For political actors and campaign strategists, the study highlights that effective electoral communication in religiously grounded societies requires consistency between linguistic choices, visual presentation, moral narratives, and performative conduct. Identity articulation that lacks coherence across these dimensions risks appearing symbolic or opportunistic. For electoral management bodies and debate organizers, the study underscores that candidate debates function not only as platforms for policy comparison but also as arenas of identity performance, where cultural and religious symbols play a decisive role in shaping public perceptions of leadership and legitimacy.

This study also points to directions for future research. Comparative analyses across regions, candidates, or electoral levels would further illuminate how *santri* identity is discursively adapted to different sociopolitical contexts. Additionally, audience reception studies could deepen understanding of how voters interpret, negotiate, or contest religious identity representations in formal political forums. Such inquiries would further enrich scholarship on the evolving relationship between religion, discourse, and democratic practice in Indonesia.

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