Contesting Religious Authority in the Post-Truth Era through a Case Study of Fatwas Issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council and Online Preachers

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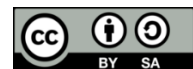
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the transformation and contestation of religious authority in Indonesia's post-truth era through a qualitative case study of fatwas issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and the interpretive narratives of online preachers. The post-truth era—where emotion and personal belief often overshadow factual or scholarly legitimacy—poses unique challenges to institutional religious bodies. Utilizing a qualitative approach with in-depth interviews of three informants—an MUI fatwa commission member, an online preacher, and a Muslim academic—this research investigates how authority, authenticity, and credibility are constructed, perceived, and contested in the digital age. The findings reveal that MUI continues to maintain doctrinal legitimacy through its procedural and scholarly rigor, yet it struggles to compete with the affective appeal and immediacy of online religious influencers. Online preachers, empowered by digital platforms, reshape religious discourse through personalization, storytelling, and interactivity, often appealing to emotion rather than jurisprudential authority. Meanwhile, academics view this transformation as both an opportunity for religious democratization and a challenge to theological coherence. The study concludes that religious authority in Indonesia is shifting from institutional centralization to networked pluralism, where credibility is negotiated between traditional expertise and popular visibility. This shift calls for a renewed ethical and communicative framework that bridges scholarly authenticity with digital accessibility in order to preserve the integrity of Islamic knowledge in the post-truth era.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital landscape, the post-truth era has become a major challenge to traditional institutions of authority, including religious ones. In this context, emotional appeal and personal belief often outweigh factual accuracy and rational deliberation, reshaping public opinion and weakening institutional legitimacy. Religious authority once grounded in scholarly consensus now faces contestation from

alternative interpretations emerging online. Social media and digital platforms have democratized religious discourse, allowing individual preachers, influencers, and content creators to construct their own theological narratives and attract large audiences. This transformation is evident across faiths, including Islam and Christianity, where digital arenas have redefined how authority is expressed and perceived. On platforms like Instagram, virtual communities such as the "e-Ummah" in Indonesia challenge traditional interpretations, with accounts like @indonesiabertauhidofficial gaining notable influence [1]. Similarly, in the Russian Orthodox Church, Ahilla.ru—founded by a former priest—offers alternative religious narratives that critique centralized authority [2]. The post-truth environment blurs truth and fiction, prioritizing emotional resonance over factual accuracy and enabling narratives that deviate from orthodox teachings [3]. The digital era further amplifies this trend by accelerating content dissemination and audience interaction [4]. Consequently, the decentralization of religious authority compels institutions to adapt, demanding a multidisciplinary understanding of digital religious discourse to sustain relevance and influence [5].

Indonesia, as the world's largest Muslim-majority country, offers a compelling context for understanding the transformation of religious authority in the digital age. The Indonesian Ulema Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) has long served as the central institution for issuing fatwas and guiding Muslim practices, yet the digitalization of religious communication has redefined how Islamic teachings are accessed, interpreted, and legitimized. The rise of online preachers, or ustadz digital, many of whom lack formal training in Islamic jurisprudence, has democratized but also fragmented religious discourse, as platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok blend religious instruction with entertainment and personal branding. This shift challenges traditional authority structures like the MUI and raises questions about authenticity, credibility, and

interpretation in Indonesian Islam. The proliferation of social media has contributed to the fragmentation of religious authority, with populist and millennial ustadz increasingly appealing to younger audiences through relatable communication styles [6]. In the post-truth era, traditional Ulama face growing challenges as digital platforms offer instant, persuasive religious narratives that overshadow established scholarly authority, further exacerbated by limited digital literacy among traditional scholars [7]. The democratization of Islamic discourse also introduces ethical and theological dilemmas, including misinformation, loss of scholarly oversight, and ideological polarization [8]. Moreover, the emergence of "new ustadz" lacking deep religious scholarship risks contributing to doctrinal confusion and social friction [9], underscoring the evolving contestation over authority, credibility, and interpretation in Indonesia's Islamic landscape.

The post-truth condition intensifies the transformation of religious authority in Indonesia by eroding the distinction between verified religious knowledge and popular opinion. In a media landscape saturated with competing narratives, emotional resonance and relatability often outweigh scholarly rigor, making traditional fatwas issued by the Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) appear less accessible or relevant compared to the visually engaging and personalized religious messages spread by online figures. This dynamic has created a new arena of contestation where institutional authority and digital influence intersect, sometimes in direct conflict. The traditional authority of Indonesian Ulama is increasingly compromised by limited digital literacy, which restricts their ability to engage effectively with online platforms, while the public's superficial understanding of religion—shaped by instant access to simplified religious content—further diminishes their role [7]. Simultaneously, the rise of the "new ustadz," who often gain religious authority without formal scholarly training, risks generating confusion and

friction within society as they lack the scientific depth traditionally required for issuing fatwas [9]. The broader post-truth environment, marked by hoaxes and emotionally charged rhetoric, destabilizes democratic discourse and blurs the line between fact and opinion [10], [11], while religious sentiments are increasingly manipulated for political ends, further complicating Indonesia's religious landscape and challenging established Ulama authority [11].

This study seeks to explore how religious authority is challenged and negotiated in Indonesia's post-truth era through a qualitative case study of fatwas issued by the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) and the discursive responses of online preachers. By focusing on three key informants—an MUI fatwa commission member, a digital Islamic preacher, and a Muslim academic—the research aims to reveal how each actor perceives and constructs religious legitimacy amid evolving media environments and shifting audience expectations. The study's significance lies in its contribution to understanding how technology transforms not only the dissemination of religious knowledge but also the criteria through which believers assess authenticity, credibility, and moral authority. Within the broader framework of post-truth discourse, it also underscores the risks of emotional manipulation, misinformation, and theological fragmentation that increasingly shape contemporary Islamic communication.

Ultimately, this research provides valuable insights into how institutional and individual actors navigate the changing terrain of religious authority in Indonesia. It argues that while traditional institutions like MUI retain doctrinal legitimacy, they must adapt their communicative strategies to remain influential in a digital ecosystem defined by immediacy, personalization, and emotional engagement. Conversely, online preachers—despite their growing popularity—must recognize the ethical responsibilities inherent in their platforms, ensuring that their interpretations uphold the

integrity of Islamic scholarship rather than eroding it. In essence, this study addresses a pressing question of the digital age: how can religious authority remain credible and relevant when truth itself is often shaped by emotion, visibility, and digital popularity? By examining the intersection between institutional fatwas and online religious discourse, this research offers a nuanced understanding of authority transformation, communication ethics, and faith negotiation in Indonesia's post-truth context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Post-Truth Era and Information Disorder

The concept of post-truth, which gained prominence in the mid-2010s, refers to a sociopolitical environment where emotions and personal beliefs overshadow objective facts in shaping public opinion, profoundly affecting how religious knowledge is produced and received. In this era, emotional appeal often prevails over factual accuracy, altering the perception and dissemination of religious teachings [12], [13]. Traditional authorities such as the Indonesian Ulema Council now face challenges from charismatic online preachers who use social media to reach vast audiences, gaining credibility through relatability and emotional resonance rather than theological rigor [12]. Social media algorithms further amplify emotionally charged content, fostering echo chambers that reinforce selective belief systems and enabling preachers to engage followers through personalized interpretations of religious texts [14]. Consequently, the post-truth condition undermines

established religious hierarchies by promoting alternative sources of authority and democratizing religious discourse, allowing diverse voices to contest traditional interpretations and institutional dominance [3].

2.2 Religious Authority in Islam

The evolution of religious authority in Islam illustrates a dynamic interplay between traditional and charismatic forms of authority, particularly in the era of modern media and digital platforms. Historically, the ulama have held traditional authority rooted in their mastery of Islamic jurisprudence and scriptural interpretation, serving as custodians of the Qur'an and Sunnah to guide the Muslim community [15]. Their legitimacy has long been sustained through scholarly lineage and institutional continuity, which help preserve religious and social order [16]. Institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) exemplify efforts to formalize and centralize religious authority within the framework of modern nation-states [16]. However, the rise of digital preachers, or media du'ā, has introduced a new form of charismatic authority characterized by personal appeal, accessibility, and communicative skill [17]. Figures like Ismail Al-Ascholy exemplify this synthesis by blending traditional scholarship with charismatic engagement through social media, fostering interactive and participatory religious discourse that resonates deeply with Muslim youth [17], [18]. Consequently, the proliferation of digital platforms has created a more pluralistic and fragmented religious landscape, where diverse voices coexist and compete for influence, shaping a more flexible and responsive form of authority attuned to social dynamics and audience needs [16], [18].

2.3 Digital Religion and Online Preachers

The concept of digital religion, as discussed by Campbell, emphasizes how digital media transforms religious practices and authority by creating "networked publics" where believers actively produce and circulate religious knowledge beyond traditional gatekeepers. In Indonesia, this has resulted in the rise of "Islamic cyber-publics," where figures like Ustadz Abdul Somad utilize platforms such as YouTube and Instagram to reach wide audiences and blend traditional scholarship with modern performative techniques [19], [20]. These digital preachers embody hybrid authority, combining piety with storytelling, humor, and visual appeal to connect with younger followers [8], [21]. While social media has democratized Islamic discourse and fostered interactive religious communication, it has also opened space for oversimplified interpretations and the spread of unverified content due to algorithmic amplification [8]. Consequently, the digital sphere has become a competitive "marketplace of religious ideas," where authority and credibility are increasingly determined by visibility, popularity, and

emotional engagement rather than theological depth [21].

2.4 Fatwas and Religious Communication in Indonesia

The Majelis Ulama Indonesia (MUI) has long served as a central institution in shaping Islamic legal authority and guiding both religious and socio-political life in Indonesia, issuing fatwas that significantly influence public and governmental discourse [22], [23]. Employing an eclectic epistemological approach, MUI integrates diverse methodologies to contextualize Islamic law within Indonesia's social realities, thereby contributing to the development of contemporary Islamic jurisprudence despite criticisms of alignment with state interests [23], [24]. However, in the digital era, MUI's authority faces increasing challenges as online preachers and social media platforms enable instant commentary, reinterpretation, and critique of its fatwas [24], [25]. This shift has democratized religious discourse, blurring the boundaries between scholars, influencers, and lay audiences, and fostering a more participatory model of religious engagement [24]. Consequently, MUI's fatwas are now subject to public negotiation and reinterpretation, reflecting an evolving, pluralistic religious landscape in Indonesia's post-truth environment where institutional authority, charismatic figures, and participatory publics continuously redefine legitimacy and influence [22], [25].

2.5 Theoretical Framework

This study integrates theories of media sociology, religious authority, and post-truth communication to examine the dynamics of Islamic authority in Indonesia. Drawing on Weber's typology of authority to contrast institutional and charismatic forms, Foucault's (1980) concept of discourse and power to explain how truth claims are produced and contested, and Campbell's (2013) digital religion framework to analyze how online platforms mediate religious interactions, the research situates authority within evolving media and cultural contexts. Through these theoretical lenses, religious authority is understood as a socially negotiated construct shaped by media logics, affective engagement, and participatory culture. In the post-truth era, this negotiation increasingly blurs the boundaries between expert and lay interpretations, emphasizing emotional resonance and visibility as new sources of legitimacy.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative case study design to illuminate how religious authority is constructed and contested in Indonesia's digital age. The qualitative paradigm prioritizes meaning, context, and interpretation over numerical measurement, enabling close attention to the complex social and communicative processes through which authority is negotiated. Guided by [26], the case study centers on the interaction between institutional fatwas issued by the MUI and religious narratives propagated by online preachers, using multiple sources of evidence (interviews, documents, and online materials) to examine how post-truth dynamics shape perceptions of religious authority.

Empirically, the research focuses on Indonesia's diverse Muslim population and vibrant digital religious ecosystem, where the MUI functions as the official issuer of fatwas while unaffiliated online preachers command large followings on social media. Three contemporary fatwas were selected for their relevance to digital-era debates and online resonance—Fatwa No. 24/2017 (ethical use of social media), Fatwa No. 24/2018 (hoaxes and hate speech), and Fatwa No. 116/2019 (fintech and cryptocurrencies). Purposive sampling yielded three key informants representing distinct perspectives on authority: (A) a member of the MUI Fatwa Commission, (B) a well-known digital ustadz, and (C) a Muslim academic and media scholar. The study aims to explore how MUI constructs and communicates authority, how online preachers interpret or challenge MUI fatwas, and how digital audiences shape legitimacy through engagement, emotion, and participation without adjudicating which authority is "right" or "wrong."

Data were gathered via semi-structured, in-depth interviews (60–90 minutes each, conducted May–July 2025, face-to-face or online) and through document/media analysis of official MUI fatwas, online sermons, YouTube videos/transcripts, social media posts, and comment threads. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic framework familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining/naming themes, and writing up supported by NVivo to systematize coding and ensure traceability. Triangulation across interviews and digital texts strengthened credibility and produced a coherent narrative linking empirical patterns—such as institutional authority, digital charisma, audience engagement, and truth negotiation—to the study's theoretical lenses.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis revealed four major themes that illustrate the dynamic interplay between institutional and digital religious authority: (1) the institutional legitimacy and traditional authority of the MUI, (2) the charismatic authority and emotional engagement of online preachers, (3) the negotiation of truth and authenticity in digital religious discourse, and (4) the implications of post-truth communication for Islamic understanding and social cohesion. Together, these themes demonstrate how religious influence and legitimacy are being reshaped within a digital environment characterized by emotional narratives, participatory communication, and shifting patterns of public trust.

4.1 Institutional Legitimacy and Traditional Authority of the MUI

Informant A, representing the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI), emphasized that the Council's authority is rooted in institutional legitimacy, scholarly consensus, and procedural rigor. Every fatwa issued by MUI undergoes collective deliberation among experts in fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), ethics, and contemporary social issues to ensure theological consistency. As Informant A explained, "A fatwa is not a personal opinion. It is the result of ijtima' (collective reasoning) among scholars who base their judgment on the Qur'an, Hadith, ijma', and qiyas. The process ensures that it represents Islamic orthodoxy rather than individual interpretation." This underscores MUI's central role in maintaining doctrinal coherence and guiding the Muslim community, especially in responding to modern socio-technological challenges. For instance, Fatwa No. 24/2017 on the Ethical Use of social media warns Muslims against spreading hoaxes and hate speech, reinforcing that moral responsibility in digital interaction is an essential aspect of Islamic ethics (akhlaq).

Nevertheless, Informant A acknowledged an increasing "credibility gap" between institutional fatwas and public perception, particularly among younger Muslims who engage with religion primarily through social media. He noted, "We issue fatwas based on deep scholarly consideration,

but many young people today prefer quick, emotional, and visual content. Our challenge is not the substance of authority, but how to communicate it effectively." This observation reflects Weber's (1978) distinction between traditional and charismatic authority, highlighting a shift in legitimacy from institutional recognition to personal appeal and digital accessibility in the post-truth era.

4.2 Charismatic Authority and Emotional Engagement of Online Preachers

Informant B, a prominent online preacher, described how digital platforms have democratized access to religious discourse by allowing preachers to directly engage vast audiences through relatable and emotionally resonant content. Using platforms such as YouTube and Instagram, he reaches millions with short sermons that address everyday concerns—from mental health to social relationships. He explained, "People today don't want to be preached at; they want to feel understood. When I speak, I use stories and emotions because that's what connects hearts, not just minds." This statement reflects the transformation of religious communication from formal, text-based authority to affective and participatory engagement, where legitimacy is derived from charismatic authority—anchored in personal authenticity, emotional appeal, and audience trust rather than institutional endorsement.

However, Informant B also acknowledged that digital preaching can blur the line between religious education and entertainment. He cautioned, "Sometimes followers treat ustadz like celebrities. That's a risk. We must remind ourselves that our role is to guide, not to perform." His reflection underscores [27] concept of digital religion, in which religious instruction, identity formation, and media culture increasingly overlap. While this convergence enhances accessibility and emotional connection, it also carries the risk of oversimplifying or distorting complex theological concepts in pursuit of engagement and popularity.

4.3 Negotiation of Truth and Authenticity in the Post-Truth Context

All three informants agreed that the post-truth condition has significantly altered how audiences interpret and validate religious messages. Informant C, a Muslim academic, noted that many Muslims today struggle to distinguish between verified religious knowledge and persuasive rhetoric. He stated, "In social media, truth becomes a matter of emotional resonance. A statement that feels right often outweighs one that is factually or theologically accurate." This shift is intensified by algorithmic visibility, where emotionally charged content gains greater reach and credibility than scholarly or nuanced discussions. As a result, fatwas that demand deeper reflection and contextual understanding often lose visibility to simplified or sensationalized interpretations promoted by online preachers seeking engagement.

Informant C further emphasized that digital audiences are no longer passive recipients of religious instruction but active participants in shaping religious meaning through comments, shares, and online discussions. This participatory dynamic aligns with [28] notion of the "objectification of Islamic knowledge," where religious discourse becomes a public and negotiable domain. In such spaces, authority is no longer monopolized by institutions but is co-constructed by scholars, influencers, and audiences who collectively shape the direction and interpretation of Islamic thought in digital contexts.

In practice, this negotiation of authority manifests through three key patterns. First, reinterpretation, where online preachers simplify and adapt fatwas into layman's terms—sometimes altering their intended meaning to meet audience expectations. Second, critique, where digital figures openly question MUI's relevance or accuse it of political bias, thereby challenging its institutional legitimacy. Third, adaptation, where certain preachers attempt to align

fatwas with modern realities, positioning themselves as mediators between orthodoxy and contemporary life. Together, these patterns illustrate how post-truth communication fosters pluralization of authority while eroding centralized control over religious interpretation in Indonesia's evolving digital landscape.

4.4 Media Visibility and the Economy of Attention

An important finding from the data concerns the centrality of visibility and attention in defining contemporary religious authority. Informant B emphasized that digital visibility is both empowering and perilous, explaining, "If you don't appear on people's screens, they forget you exist. But to stay visible, you must constantly produce content that people want to watch — and that can be dangerous if we start prioritizing clicks over truth." This reflects what [29] terms the "economy of attention," where authority becomes tied to visibility and popularity rather than depth of knowledge or scholarly credibility. Informant C expanded on this idea by noting that algorithms reward emotional and sensational content, stating, "Platforms like YouTube or TikTok are not neutral. Their algorithms push emotional, dramatic, or controversial content, and that inevitably influences how religion is communicated."

This algorithm-driven environment reshapes the very nature of religious discourse, privileging immediacy, entertainment, and emotional resonance over theological rigor. In contrast, the MUI's formal and deliberative communication style, grounded in procedural legitimacy, struggles to adapt to these rapid digital dynamics. Consequently, while MUI fatwas continue to hold doctrinal authority, they often fail to gain significant traction among online audiences who favor accessible, emotionally engaging, and visually driven narratives. This divergence underscores the growing tension between institutional authority rooted in tradition and the new digital charisma sustained by visibility in Indonesia's post-truth religious landscape.

4.5 Religious Authority as a Negotiated Space

Across all informants, there was consensus that religious authority is no longer a fixed attribute but a negotiated social construct shaped by interaction and context. Informant A viewed online preachers as complementary rather than competitive, as long as they operate within ethical and doctrinal boundaries, while Informant B expressed openness to collaboration with MUI, suggesting that "official scholars provide depth, while digital ustadz provide reach." Informant C integrated these views by asserting that the post-truth condition does not eliminate authority but transforms it: "What we see is not the decline of authority but its redistribution. Authority now emerges from interaction, not imposition." This perspective resonates with [30] concept that power and knowledge are diffuse and continuously reproduced through discourse rather than centralized institutions. Consequently, the relationship between MUI and digital preachers should not be perceived as adversarial but as part of a broader reconfiguration of religious communication and legitimacy in Indonesia's digital era.

4.6 The Ethical and Social Implications

The study's findings reveal pressing ethical concerns surrounding the dissemination of religious content in the digital age. The ease of producing and sharing information online enables rapid circulation of misinformation and selective interpretations. Informant A cautioned that "religious misguidance is not just an intellectual issue, but a moral one," underscoring the shared responsibility of institutions and individuals to preserve integrity in religious communication. Informant C further warned that post-truth dynamics risk fragmenting Islamic understanding, leading Muslims to follow personalities rather than principles, thereby

fostering echo chambers and ideological polarization within the ummah. To address these challenges, the informants collectively proposed three strategies: implementing digital literacy programs to help Muslims verify religious sources and detect emotional manipulation; fostering collaboration between MUI and online preachers to present fatwas in more accessible formats; and establishing ethical guidelines for digital da'wah that balance creativity with theological accountability.

4.7 Discussion

The findings of this study reinforce and expand existing scholarship on the transformation of Islamic authority in the digital era. Traditional religious figures such as ulama and teachers are experiencing a reconfiguration of their roles due to the rise of new media, which facilitates the emergence of modern religious authorities through online platforms like websites and blogs [31]. Even traditional leaders, such as Sufi figures, have adapted by maintaining and extending their influence through digital media, demonstrating that established forms of authority remain resilient and capable of transformation in the digital context [32].

Technology plays a crucial role in mediating this shift, as new media platforms create spaces for spiritual interaction and legitimize emerging forms of religious authority [31]. Platforms such as YouTube have become powerful tools for preachers like Ustaz Abdul Somad to expand their reach and reinforce legitimacy through consistent digital engagement [20]. The emotional and participatory nature of digital media allows religious messages to be packaged in ways that are more accessible and appealing, particularly to younger audiences. This aligns with the post-truth culture, where emotional resonance and relatability often take precedence over scholarly verification [21], [33].

Overall, the study confirms that Islamic authority is inherently plural and increasingly mediated by technology. The MUI represents rational-traditional authority, while online preachers embody charismatic-digital authority, and both coexist within a shared ecosystem where legitimacy is co-constructed through audience participation and emotional connection. The post-truth condition intensifies this process by shifting trust from expertise to affective engagement. Yet rather than viewing this as a crisis, the study interprets it as a transitional phase in Islamic communication—one that democratizes access to knowledge and broadens participation, provided that ethical standards and scholarly integrity are preserved.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that the post-truth era has profoundly reshaped the configuration of religious authority in Indonesia. Traditional institutions such as the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) continue to uphold formal and scholarly legitimacy within Islamic jurisprudence, yet their influence is increasingly contested by online preachers who attract vast digital audiences through emotional engagement, visual appeal, and accessible religious narratives. In this new media environment, credibility is no longer anchored solely in institutional recognition or formal education but also in relatability, responsiveness, and perceived authenticity. While MUI's fatwas remain vital as official sources of moral and legal guidance, their effectiveness is often constrained by bureaucratic communication styles and limited digital outreach, particularly among younger, tech-savvy Muslims. Conversely, online preachers use social media to convey religious messages in rapid, interactive, and emotionally resonant ways, expanding inclusivity and engagement but also risking oversimplification, emotional manipulation, and the erosion of scholarly rigor.

Viewed collectively through the perspectives of the three informants—MUI cleric, online preacher, and academic—religious authority in Indonesia is no longer singular or hierarchical but plural and fluid. The MUI representative stresses the

preservation of theological integrity through structured scholarship, while the online preacher values accessibility and emotional connection, and the academic situates these tensions within a broader transition from institutional to networked forms of religious communication. This transformation calls for institutional adaptation: MUI and similar bodies must adopt digital communication strategies that present fatwas more interactively and engagingly without compromising depth, while online preachers must embrace ethical standards that ensure their teachings remain grounded in credible theology rather than digital popularity. Ultimately, the contestation between institutional and digital forms of authority reflects a wider reconfiguration of power within Indonesia's post-truth landscape, where the future of Islamic legitimacy will depend on balancing authenticity with accessibility and maintaining intellectual depth amidst a culture increasingly driven by emotion and visibility.

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