



# EDUKASIA ISLAMIKA

## Jurnal Pendidikan Islam

Vol. 11, No. 1, 2026, pp. 70 – 91  
P-ISSN: 2548-723X; E-ISSN: 2548-5822

### Kiai Leadership and Islamic Boarding School Cultural Strategies in Strengthening Religious Moderation in Indonesia

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DOI: <a href="https://doi.org/10.28918/jei.v11i1.2604">https://doi.org/10.28918/jei.v11i1.2604</a>			
Received: 19 January 2026	Revised: 1 May 2026	Approved: 22 May 2026	Available Online: 30 June 2026

#### Abstrak

Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menganalisis secara mendalam peran unik kepemimpinan Kiai dalam menginstitutionalisasi dan menyebarluaskan narasi moderasi beragama di lingkungan pesantren, serta mengidentifikasi strategi kultural yang digunakan pesantren sebagai benteng efektif dalam upaya deradikalisasi. Metode yang digunakan adalah kualitatif-interpretatif dengan pendekatan studi kasus di beberapa pesantren salaf dan modern yang dikenal memiliki peran sentral dalam promosi toleransi di Banyuwangi, Indonesia. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam dengan para kiai dan santri senior, observasi partisipatif terhadap kegiatan belajar-mengajar, serta analisis dokumen internal pesantren. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kepemimpinan Kiai di Blokagung bersifat kolegial-karismatik yang unik, berhasil menginstitutionalisasi moderasi beragama melalui integrasi salaf-modern dan pendirian UIMSYA. Strategi kultural utamanya adalah menanamkan nilai Aswaja (tawazun, tasammuh) sebagai vaksin ideologis. Kiai/Nyai menjadi perekat yang membangun resiliensi sosial berbasis kepedulian dan mengarahkan politik akhlaqi. Ini menjadikan pesantren benteng efektif deradikalisasi, menyebarluaskan narasi moderat secara terstruktur dan terlegitimasi. Kontribusi penelitian ini adalah menyediakan kerangka teoretis yang mengontekstualisasikan kepemimpinan tradisional Kiai sebagai model indigenous leadership dalam counter-extremism, menawarkan wawasan berharga bagi kebijakan publik global dalam memanfaatkan institusi pendidikan berbasis komunitas untuk penguatan kohesi sosial dan kontra-radikalisme.

**Kata Kunci :** *Kepemimpinan Kiai, Moderasi Beragama, Pesantren, Strategi Budaya*



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## Abstract

The present study aims to showcase in depth the unique role of Kiai (Islamic scholars) leadership in institutionalizing and disseminating the narrative of religious moderation in pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), and to explore the cultural strategies these schools use as effective bulwarks in deradicalization efforts. This study was designed with a qualitative, interpretive case study of several traditional and modern pesantren that played a central role in promoting tolerance in Banyuwangi, Indonesia. Data were gathered through in-depth interviews with Kiai and senior santri (pesantren students), participant observation of teaching and learning activities, and documentation of Islamic boarding school records. Study findings demonstrate that the Kiai leadership in Blokagung was uniquely charismatic and collegial, successfully institutionalizing religious moderation through the integration of the Salaf and the modern era and the establishment of UIMSYA. His primary cultural strategy was to instill the values of Aswaja (tawazun, tasammuh) as an ideological inoculation. The Kiai/Nyai became actors who built social resilience grounded in concern and guided the politics of akhlaqi. This made the Islamic boarding school an effective bastion of deradicalization, disseminating moderate narratives in a structured and legitimate manner. The study provides a theoretical framework that contextualizes traditional Kiai leadership as a model of indigenous leadership in counter-extremism, offering valuable insights for global public policy on the use of community-based educational institutions to foster social cohesion and counter-radicalism.

**Keywords:** *Cultural Strategy, Kiai Leadership, Pesantren, Religious Moderation*

## INTRODUCTION

The leadership of Kiai (Islamic scholars) is based on spiritual authority and a scientific chain of command that cannot be replaced by formal academic degrees (Karim et al., 2023; Widiastuty et al., 2025). In the Nusantara Islamic tradition, the validity and truth of teachings depend heavily on the *sanad* (a trustworthy chain of teachers) that traces back directly to previous scholars and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Kiai are seen as the link between this chain (Muhtar & Novita, 2023). The teaching of yellow books in Islamic boarding schools is always accompanied by an emphasis on the *ijaza* (teaching permit) from the previous Kiai teacher, making the Kiai the main filter against deviant or literal-extremist interpretations of religion (Husnaini & Fuady, 2023; Mu'awanah et al., 2025; Mujahid, 2021). This *sanad*-based authority provides Kiai with moral legitimacy to interpret religious texts contextually and moderately, making them a natural antidote to radical ideologies that generally lack a strong traditional *sanad*.

Islamic boarding schools serve as models of inclusive communities that practice the principle of living together across socio-economic backgrounds

(Mariyono, 2025; Qizam et al., 2025; Roqib, 2021). Students from various regions, tribes, and economic levels live together in boarding schools and are subject to the same rules (Arifin, 2022; Hastasari et al., 2022). Daily activities such as queuing for food, sleeping together, and discussing *mubadalah* (exchanging views) require students to interact and resolve conflicts directly, fostering practical tolerance and empathy. The Kiai's leadership, which upholds equality under the Islamic boarding school's laws, effectively fosters collective awareness of plurality (Dian et al., 2024; Fitria, 2025), ensuring that the narrative of moderation is not just a theory but a deeply rooted daily experience.

Kiai actively integrates religious values with nationalism and local wisdom of 'Love of the Homeland' (Faisal et al., 2022; Susanto & Basid, 2024). Islamic boarding schools, especially those affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), uphold the principle that defending the nation (Indonesia) is part of religious teachings (*Hubbul Wathan Minal Iman*) (Anzaikhan, 2022; Huda, 2024; Supriyanto et al., 2022). The implementation of flag ceremonies, the reading of Pancasila, Indonesia's official state ideology, and the teaching of the history of the ulama's struggle for Indonesian independence is carried out alongside religious activities, and even the Kiai often serve as protectors of the minority communities around them (Faisal et al., 2022). This fact shows that Kiai's leadership succeeded in creating a harmonious dual identity (devout Muslim and loyal citizen), closing the gap for transnational ideologies that reject the concept of the nation-state.

Kiai's leadership created a massive, loyal social network through alumni (*santri* associations), who served as agents of moderation across various sectors of society (Karim et al., 2023; Mulyana et al., 2025). The emotional and spiritual bond between the students and the Kiai (Rabithah Kiai-Santri) remains intact after the students graduate (Pratama, 2024; Wahab & Umar, 2024). *Pesantren* (Islamic boarding school) alumni are widely spread as teachers, politicians, bureaucrats, and even businessmen. They often return to the *pesantren* to seek the advice of the Kiai, and collectively, they form organizations that regularly disseminate fatwas and the moderate views of the Kiai in their regions (Ibrahim et al., 2024; Muhammad et al., 2024; Sabila et al., 2024). This alumni network extends Kiai's influence from Islamic

boarding schools into the public sphere, making Kiai's narrative of moderation the mainstream of religious discourse in the wider community.

In many cases, the role of the Nyai (the Kiai's wife or female leader in a female Islamic boarding school) reinforces the narrative of moderation through detailed and personal character education (Hemay et al., 2025). Nyais, through their personal touch and focus on the education of *santriwati* (female students in *pesantren*), ensure a holistic and non-rigid religious understanding. Nyai are often directly responsible for the *akhlaq* (ethics) and life skills curriculum, teach a gender-sensitive understanding of *fiqh* (Islamic law), and emphasize women's social leadership in both domestic and public contexts. (Kurdi, 2024). The presence of dual leadership (Kiai-Nyai) ensures that moderation is taught not only through the formal authority of the Kiai, but also through the cultural and affective approach of the Nyai (Burga & Damopolii, 2022). The leadership strengthens the teaching process and makes it more relevant to all members of the community.

International academic literature widely acknowledges that Kiai leadership in Islamic boarding schools is a unique, charismatic-transformative leadership model (Subaidi et al., 2023), distinct from the Western leadership model because it is rooted in moral authority, a scientific chain of command, and spiritual example (Siddiqua, 2025). Contemporary research increasingly highlights the role of Islamic boarding schools not only as traditional educational institutions but also as agents of religious and political socialization, crucial to the sustainability of democracy and social cohesion in Indonesia (Badrun, 2024; Huda, 2024; Jaenullah et al., 2022). Specifically, in the context of the challenge of extremism, several studies have underscored the strategic role of Kiai in promoting Islam Nusantara—a narrative of moderation that integrates Islamic values with culture and nationality—as an effective cultural strategy in counter-terrorism and deradicalization (Khoirunnisa & Effendi, 2025; Muhammad, 2024) because the authority of the Kiai can legitimize inclusive interpretations of religion and reject radical transnational ideologies.

This research offers significant innovation by going beyond studies of Kiai leadership that generally focus on aspects of charisma and institutional management. The innovation lies in an in-depth analysis of how Kiai leadership is culturally conceptualized and operationalized as a preventive, structural deradicalization

mechanism, rather than simply a reaction to extremism. Specifically, this research introduces a framework that integrates three crucial dimensions: the authority of the Kiai's *sanad* as an ideological filter, the cultural strategy of Islamic boarding schools in practicing daily tolerance (living together), and the role of the *santri* network as a social agent of moderation, which collectively form the Indonesian indigenous leadership model in counter-extremism. This contribution fills a gap in the literature by presenting strong empirical evidence that the success of religious moderation in Indonesia is highly dependent on the legitimacy and resilience of traditional institutions led by Kiai, a perspective often overlooked in the global counter-terrorism literature, which is dominated by formal security approaches.

This research is critically urgent given the increasing polarization of religious ideologies and the global spread of extremist content through digital platforms, which directly threaten social cohesion and national stability in Indonesia. Despite the efforts of the government and security agencies, deradicalization efforts often fail to address the root of the problem due to a lack of moral legitimacy and cultural connection. Therefore, exploring the leadership role of Kiai (Islamic clerics) is crucial, as Kiai are the most trusted non-state actors and possess the charismatic authority to interpret religious texts moderately and guide millions of students and followers. This study will demonstrate how the cultural strategies of *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools)—as models of indigenous leadership—function as a formidable social bulwark in instilling moderation from an early age, which is a crucial contribution to counter-extremism soft power policies and offers an effective model for other countries facing similar threats of radicalization. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to analyze in depth the unique role of Kiai leadership in institutionalizing and disseminating narratives of religious moderation within *pesantren*, and to identify the cultural strategies used by Islamic boarding schools as effective bulwarks in deradicalization efforts.

## **METHODS**

The selection of Pesantren Darussalam Blokagung, Banyuwangi, East Java, Indonesia, as a research site has high methodological and substantive urgency, as this institution serves as an ideal socio-religious laboratory for studying contemporary Kiai leadership. Blokagung uniquely integrates the Salaf tradition (books in Arabic

script used in *pesantren*) with modern education (formal and university education), providing a rich context for analyzing how Kiai/Nyai collegial leadership balances ideological and curricular polarization. Furthermore, this *pesantren* has an extensive alumni network and public influence, as evidenced by its active role in national issues and Akhlaqi politics, as well as its cultural strategy in spreading religious moderation (Aswaja principles). Therefore, research in Blokagung can yield robust empirical findings on the resilience of traditional institutions in confronting the challenges posed by radicalism and modernization.

The use of a qualitative approach is essential because this research aims to analyze in depth (interpretatively) and holistically the unique role, cultural strategies, and institutional mechanisms of the narrative of religious moderation by Kiai/Nyai Leadership, which is a complex and context-bound social phenomenon. This phenomenon requires exploring meaning, understanding the scientific chain of command, and interpreting charismatic authority that cannot be measured numerically. The selection of a case study research type (at the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School) allows the researcher to conduct an intensive investigation into the ambiguous boundaries between formal, cultural, and spiritual leadership in an integrated environment (*salaf*-modern-university), providing a rich and detailed contextual description of how the system operates as a bulwark against deradicalization.

The primary reason for using in-depth interviews was to explore the meaning and ethical values of Kiai/Nyai (*akhlaqi*) and the philosophical reasons behind charismatic moderation strategies, which are impossible to measure quantitatively. Participant observation was chosen to obtain empirical evidence on cultural strategies and the practical implementation of moderation narratives (*tawazun*, *tasammuh*) in social interactions and daily activities at the *pesantren*, validating the Kiai's claims with actual behavior. Meanwhile, documentary studies were used to provide historical, structural, and formal validity context for the curriculum and institutional policies, ensuring that these three techniques triangulate to produce rich, in-depth, and verified findings regarding the role of leadership in Darussalam Blokagung.

The interactive model was chosen as the data analysis technique because it is highly suitable for qualitative case study research, particularly for triangulation and depth of context. This model allows for a cyclical, simultaneous analysis rather than a sequential one. This means researchers can continuously move interactively between data reduction (selecting and focusing data from interviews, observations, and documents), data presentation (organizing and condensing findings), and conclusion drawing/verification. This interactive approach is crucial because it allows researchers to continuously test initial Kiai/Nyai findings, e.g., claims of moderation, against field observations, e.g., cultural strategies, and official documents. Thus, this model ensures that the final interpretation of Kiai leadership's role as a bulwark of deradicalization is supported by integrated, robust data and has high internal validity.

Triangulation as a data validation technique is vital in this qualitative case study to ensure the credibility of the findings regarding Kiai leadership. Specifically, this study employed methodological triangulation and source triangulation. The methodological triangulation (combining in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis) ensured that findings regarding Kiai's moderation strategies were based not only on what was stated (interviews) but also on what was practiced (observations) and institutionalized (documents). Meanwhile, source triangulation (involving Kiai, Nyai, senior *santri*, and alumni) enabled comparisons of views from various levels of the *pesantren's* social hierarchy. Through this cross-comparison process, researchers were able to minimize bias from a single source or method, ensure data consistency, and produce a robust, verified final interpretation of Kiai leadership's role as a bulwark against deradicalization.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Charismatic Collegial Leadership in Salaf-Modern Collaboration**

Leadership at the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic boarding school is held collegially by a family of Kiai (Islamic scholars), uniquely able to collaborate and balance the traditional Salafi curriculum with formal/modern education (public schools). The charismatic authority of the Kiai/Nyai serves as a glue, preventing conflict between the two systems and ensuring that students receive both in-depth religious knowledge

and relevant general knowledge. This is as explained by the following senior *ustadz* (teachers):

“We don’t feel any conflict between studying the Fathul Mu’in in the morning and studying Physics in the afternoon. That’s because the Kiai and Nyai themselves set the example. They master both. When there’s a problem at the Islamic school, we go to the Kiai for spiritual advice. When there is a problem on campus, there’s a Ning or Gus with a formal degree who helps us understand the modern context. This reassures us that Islam is broad and not narrow”.

This quote demonstrates that the success of this Islamic boarding school in integrating traditional and modern systems is rooted in the charismatic authority of the Kiai/Nyai, who act as role models. Students do not perceive a dichotomy because the leaders personally exemplify mastery and appreciation of both religious knowledge (Fathul Mu’in) and general knowledge (Physics) (Saada, 2022; Suryani & Muslim, 2024). Furthermore, the description reveals an adaptive collegial leadership structure in which the Kiai provides spiritual advice on *diniyah* (religious) issues. In contrast, the formally educated Ning (a salutation for the daughters of Kiai) or Gus (a salutation for the sons of Kiai) provides a modern context for campus issues (Mukarromah et al., 2024). This empirical evidence shows that the leadership has succeeded in institutionalizing intellectual moderation, fostering students’ belief that Islam is broad rather than narrow, thereby making the narrative of moderation a firmly held belief (Gazali et al., 2023; Huda, 2024).

In an effort to realize adaptive, forward-looking charismatic leadership in this moderate Islamic boarding school, a comprehensive model for integrating Salaf and modern systems in the context of leadership is presented in the following figure, culminating in inclusive intellectual modernization.

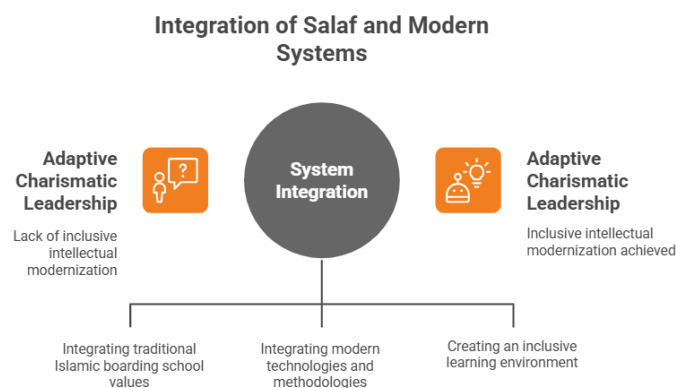


Figure 1. Integration of Salaf and Modern Systems

Figure 1 illustrates that based on the integration model of the Salaf and Modern systems, this moderate Islamic boarding school in Banyuwangi factually implements this model through a multi-level education system that combines in-depth *Salafiyah* (traditional) education with modern formal educational institutions (starting from early childhood education to higher education) in one integrated environment, which started from the *Salafiyah* system and transformed into a semi-modern Islamic boarding school, which shows the charismatic leadership of the kiai in providing for the needs of the community according to the demands of the times and exemplary in mastering religious and general knowledge (Nasith, 2024; Wahab & Umar, 2024). This approach aims to overcome the Salaf-Modern dichotomy by producing students who have a strong understanding of religion (*turāth*) while also possessing skills and competencies relevant to modern needs (such as digital literacy and soft skills), so that they can contribute effectively in society (Viinikka et al., 2022; Warsah & Istan, 2025).

### **Utilizing Higher Education Institutions as Moderation Hubs**

The presence of KH. Mukhtar Syafa'at University (UIMSYA), under the auspices of the Islamic boarding school, demonstrates the Kiai's use of higher education institutions as strategic hubs to expand the reach of moderation. This leadership recognizes the role of PTKIS (private Islamic higher education institutions) in maintaining religious moderation while providing access to higher education, ensuring that moderate narratives are taught not only at the elementary level but also at a globally competitive academic level. This is as narrated by the following Islamic boarding school leader:

“Establishing UIMSYA is not simply about pursuing a formal degree. Our strategy is to expand the chain of moderate Islamic teachings. If our narrative stops at the level of madrasas or yellow books, we will lose out in the global discourse. With UIMSYA, we ensure that our scholars and future professionals—whether in the Faculty of *Tarbiyah* (Education), Sharia (Islamic Law), or elsewhere—bring the values of *Aswaja* and moderation to campus and the workplace. This campus is our strategic hub for producing competitive moderate agents.”

This quote clearly reveals Kiai's leadership vision, which transcends traditional educational institutions, demonstrating that establishing UIMSYA is a

proactive, essential strategy for maintaining religious moderation in the contemporary era. Kiai views higher education not merely as an academic formality but as an extension of the *sanad* (chain of scholarly authority) of moderation, which is key to overcoming competitive disadvantage in global discourse (Nasir & Rijal, 2021). By instilling the values of *Aswaja* and moderation to scholars and aspiring professionals (through faculties such as *Tarbiyah* and Sharia), Kiai consciously uses UIMSYA as a strategic center (hub) to produce moderate agents who are globally competitive, ensuring that the narrative of *wasathiyah* (moderate) Islam can survive and spread in non-*pesantren* sectors (Ashoumi et al., 2023; Latif, 2023; Zainudin et al., 2025).

The following figure shows that religious moderation continues to be built by Islamic boarding schools in South Banyuwangi, in collaboration with various parties, including the Wahid Foundation, in the context of the declaration of a peace village.



Figure 2. Declaration of Peaceful Village by UIMSYA and Ms. Yeni Wahid

Figure 2 captures a significant moment in the Islamic boarding school's institutional modernization initiative or in its external collaboration, represented by the Rector of UIMSYA, one of the universities it manages. In addition to the Darussalam Polytechnic and the Darussalam Islamic Boarding School, this initiative is a concrete manifestation of the Islamic boarding school's efforts to move beyond the Salafist-Modern dichotomy and engage constructively with external parties (the government or the private sector) to develop the institution. Ceremonial moments such as the signing of this document demonstrate that under its distinctive charismatic and collegial leadership, the Islamic boarding school focuses not only on the study of the yellow books (Salafists), but also actively participates in

contemporary programs relevant to the development of modern society, in keeping with the spirit of intellectual modernization, which states that Islam is broad and not narrow (Arrohmatan et al., 2022; Karim et al., 2025; Wahab & Umar, 2024).

### **Social Resilience and Community-Based Care**

The Kiai's leadership implements a value-based approach to community and social responsibility to build community resilience in the face of social challenges and crises, such as pandemics or disasters. The Islamic boarding school serves as a driving force for social solidarity, where the Kiai exemplifies responsiveness and cooperation, preparing students to become caring leaders in the community. This was emphasized by the alumni chairman, as follows:

“When a disaster occurs, whether at the Islamic boarding school or in the surrounding community, we immediately take action. This has become a culture under the guidance of Kiai. For example, when there is a fire or flood in Banyuwangi, we form a team of student volunteers. We are taught that togetherness is worship. Kiai always says, “Don't just focus on Fathul Mu'in; also care about the community's condition. Experiences like these are what shape our social solidarity and make us ready to face anything.”

This quote emphasizes that the social resilience of Islamic boarding schools is not a theoretical concept but an institutionalized organizational culture grounded in the example and direct instructions of the Kiai (Fitria, 2025; Jaenullah et al., 2022). Social concern has been elevated to the status of a theological value equal in importance to the study of the main scriptures (Fathul Mu'in). Kiai explicitly teaches that spiritual focus should be balanced with social responsibility (Mukarromah et al., 2024). As a result, real-life crisis experiences (such as forming a volunteer team during a flood) serve as a practical curriculum that effectively builds social solidarity and prepares students to become responsive and resilient leaders in society.

The following figure emphasizes the social and community dimensions of the role of the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic Boarding School through the distribution, represented by the Darussalam Alumni (*Al-Adab*) management, wearing the *Beluntas* (plant used for traditional medicine in Indonesia) batik uniform, typical of Blokagung alumni.



Figure 3. Distribution of Food and Medical Supplies by Blokagung Alumni

Figure 3 shows the social and national role of this Islamic boarding school as one of the large Islamic boarding schools that is strongly affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), not only focusing on internal education, but also carrying out *khidmatul ummah* (the function of service and social care) as a form of practicing the Islamic values of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* (Mau, 2024; Idris et al., 2023). This humanitarian action reflects part of the broader collegial leadership of the Islamic boarding school, where students are educated to become active social agents who are sensitive to the problems of the community and the environment, emphasizing that the knowledge taught (Salaf and Modern) is integrated to provide real impact and positive contributions to the community outside the Islamic boarding school environment, especially when disasters occur.

### **Integration of *Aswaja* Values of *Tawazun*, *Ta'adul*, *Tasammuh*, and *Tawassuth***

The Kiai's leadership systematically instills the values of *Ahlussunnah Wal Jama'ah* (*Aswaja*) of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) through four main pillars (*tawazun*, *ta'adul*, *tasammuh*, and *tawassuth*). These four pillars are not only taught as theological dogma but also implemented as an ethical framework for decision-making and daily social interactions within the Islamic boarding school environment, directly serving as an ideological vaccine against extremist thinking. This is as stated by the following statement from the Islamic boarding school leader:

“The pillars of *Aswaja*—especially *Tawassuth* (moderation) and *Tasammuh* (tolerance)—are not just theological lessons at the Islamic boarding school. They are the methodology of life here. When there are disputes between students, we always guide them to find the path of *Tawazun* (balance), not to be extreme left or extreme right in their opinions. The Kiai ensures that these

values are infused into every decision-making process and daily social interactions. This is our most powerful ideological vaccine; if they are accustomed to balance and tolerance from the time they are in the Islamic boarding school, they will be difficult to uproot by radical ideologies outside.”

The quote reveals that Kiai’s leadership in Blokagung successfully transformed *Aswaja’s* theological principles into a living methodology and operational ethical framework within the *pesantren* environment. *Tawassuth* (moderation) and *Tasammuh* (tolerance) were not only taught in class but also required in decision-making and conflict resolution (*Tawazun*). The Kiai consciously used these practices as the most effective “ideological vaccine.” This reinforces the finding that Kiai systematically institutionalized religious moderation by accustoming students to a balanced, tolerant attitude from an early age (Fitria, 2025; Huda, 2024) to tackle radicalism and violent extremism. See Table 1 as follows.

Table 1. Institutionalization Strategy of Religious Moderation at Blokagung

Key Concepts	Operational Mechanism	Results/Impacts Achieved	Theological & Strategic Relevance
Theological Principles of <i>Aswaja</i>	Transformed into a living methodology and operational ethical framework in the Islamic boarding school environment	Values become mandatory practice, not just classroom theory	Turning dogma into behavior (internalization)
Required Core Values	1. <i>Tawassuth</i> (Moderate) 2. <i>Tasammuh</i> (Tolerance)	Required in decision-making and conflict resolution Required in decision-making and conflict resolution	Creating balanced attitudes and actions. Creating an environment that embraces diversity.
<i>Tawazun</i> (Balance)	Practical implementation of <i>Tawassuth</i> and <i>Tasammuh</i> in real situations (conflicts/decisions).	Accustoming students to a balanced and tolerant attitude from an early age	It is the operational basis of religious moderation.
Kiai's strategy	Using the practice of these values consciously as the most powerful “Ideological Vaccine”.	Building students’ internal immunity against external radical ideologies	Prevent radicalism systematically and preventively.

Table 1 depicts that the Kiai’s leadership in this Islamic boarding school has systematically institutionalized religious moderation by transforming the theological principles of *Aswaja*, especially *Tawassuth* (moderation) and *Tasammuh* (tolerance),

into a life methodology and operational ethical framework that must be applied by students, especially in decision-making and conflict resolution (*Tawazun*). This practice is deliberately used by the Kiai as the most powerful “ideological vaccine” aimed at accustoming students to a balanced attitude from an early age, thus successfully creating an effective internal immunity against the penetration of radical ideologies from outside, making the Islamic boarding school a resilient institution in maintaining moderate national and religious values (Badrun, 2024; Huda, 2024).

### **The Obligation of Kiai Authority in Maintaining the Characteristics of Political Morals**

The leadership of the Kiai holds strong authority in determining the political characteristics of the Islamic boarding school, which tends to be influenced by *akhlaqi* (ethical) thinking, such as that of Imam Al-Ghazali, who emphasized that the destruction of a nation begins with the corruption of its leaders. The Kiai provides political advice and guidance oriented toward moral goodness and public ethics, guiding students' and alumni's political affiliations within the boundaries of nationalism and integrity. The following Islamic boarding school leader explains this:

“This Islamic boarding school has a responsibility, not only to produce religious scholars, but also moral leaders. We always emphasize that politics must be based on morality, as taught by Imam Al-Ghazali. The Kiai authorities here are obliged to guide students and alumni so that they are not mindlessly passionate about politics. We allow them to participate in politics, but on one condition: never damage integrity and nationalism. The destruction of a nation often begins with the loss of morality of its leaders.”

This statement confirms that the leadership of the Kiai in Blokagung consciously and actively expanded the mandate of the Islamic boarding school from merely producing religious scholars to producing moral leaders. This was realized through an emphasis on Moral Politics, inspired by the teachings of Imam Al-Ghazali, who emphasized that ethics must be the foundation of politics (Muthoifin, 2024; Alhaib & Alsandi, 2022). The Kiai uses his strong authority as a moral filter for students and alumni, requiring them to avoid *ghirah* (‘blind passion in politics’) and establishing integrity and nationalism as absolute conditions for political involvement (Fitria, 2025; Wahab & Umar, 2024). Thus, the Kiai position

themselves as the primary guardians of public ethics, convinced that the morality of the leaders they produce is the key to preventing the destruction of the state (Hamdanah et al., 2025; Aimah et al., 2024).

## CONCLUSION

The leadership role of the Kiai/Nyai at the Darussalam Islamic boarding school in Blokagung is unique and profound, institutionalizing and disseminating the narrative of religious moderation while also serving as an effective bulwark against deradicalization. This uniqueness lies in the charismatic collegial leadership that successfully integrates the traditional and modern educational systems, ensuring that students have a depth of religious knowledge (*Aswaja*, which is based on the principles of *tawazun*, *ta'adul*, *tasammuh*, *tawassuth*) and the relevance of general knowledge (including through the establishment of UIMSYA as an academic hub for moderation). The Kiai's cultural strategy extends beyond the curriculum. However, it extends to the social realm (social resilience based on concern) and politics (characteristics of *akhlaqi* politics that uphold public ethics), ensuring that the narrative of religious moderation in Blokagung is internalized as an adaptive, resilient, and legitimate institutional identity to counter the ideology of extremism.

The main limitation of this research is its focus as a single case study on *Pesantren* Darussalam Blokagung, so the findings regarding the leadership role of Kiai/Nyai, cultural strategies, and deradicalization mechanisms may have a limited level of generalization to other models of *pesantren* with different affiliations or traditions, e.g., Muhammadiyah *pesantren*, or pure *salaf pesantren* outside Java. Therefore, further research is recommended to conduct comparative research involving various types of *pesantren* in various regions of Indonesia, e.g., West Java or Sumatra, to validate, enrich, and measure variations in the implementation of religious moderation narratives, as well as to test the effectiveness of Kiai leadership in dealing with other contemporary issues such as climate change or digital literacy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The researchers would like to express their deepest gratitude and respect to the leadership of the Darussalam Blokagung Islamic boarding school for granting permission and providing openness to conduct this research. Their guidance and

access were invaluable in capturing the strategic role of Kiai leadership and the *pesantren's* cultural strategy as a bastion of religious moderation. May this ongoing charity bring blessings to the development of science and the advancement of the *pesantren*.

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