Mitigating Political Conflict Based on Local Wisdom through the *Kiai* Religious Authority in Village Head Elections in Pamekasan Regency

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Abstract. This study examines the mitigation of political conflicts through local wisdom, as mediated by the religious authority of *kiai*, in village head elections in Pamekasan Regency. This study is a field research conducted using qualitative methods with a phenomenological approach. Research data were obtained through observation, in-depth interviews, and field documentation. After analyzing the field data based on Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge, this study found that the utilization of local wisdom in efforts to mitigate and resolve political conflicts in village head elections in Pamekasan Regency, Madura, was carried out by involving local religious figures. In the context of Madurese society, these local religious figures refer to *kiai* and the religious authority associated with them. In general, the role and influence of these *kiai* stem from their possession of sufficient social capital, which encompasses the aspects of authority, knowledge, and ideology. Armed with these three forms of social capital and their religious authority, the *kiai* are able to position themselves as intermediaries and carry out conflict-intervention functions, thereby ensuring that the processes and efforts to mitigate political conflicts in the village head elections in Madura proceed effectively and optimally.

Keywords: Political Conflict Mitigation, Local Wisdom, Religious Authority of *Kiai*, Village Head Election, Pamekasan-Madura

1 Introduction

The political process of village head elections in Madura possesses distinctive socio-political characteristics compared to other regions in Indonesia in general. This is because village politics in Madura takes place within an environment shaped by patronage relationships, religious social networks, group solidarity, and the authority of religious figures embodied by the *kiai* (religious leader) [1]. In this context, the *kiai* occupies a crucial position as an informal leader who not only possesses religious legitimacy but also exerts influence over the formation of the community's sociopolitical attitudes and

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behaviors. The claim that the *kiai* serves as a local leader in Madura, one whose role and influence significantly shape the dynamics of village politics, is clearly reflected in the local social culture. This social culture refers to the general tendency of the Madurese people to frequently regard the *kiai* as a reference or role model in their daily social lives, thereby eliciting a high degree of compliance from their community. Interestingly, based on findings from a study by Pribadi, this compliance extends not only to religious-social aspects but also permeates other social spheres, including the political realm [2].

The strong role and influence of *kiai* figures in the dynamics of village politics in Madura have sparked a range of pros and cons. Some view this positively, as it can serve as an effective bridge for aspirations, education, and the strengthening of political morality, fostering honest and fair election processes and activities. Conversely, others argue that the dominance of *kiai* in village politics in Madura appears inappropriate, as it does not reflect their true identity as religious leaders, who should focus on guiding the community in matters of faith [3]. Nevertheless, regardless of these differing views, the fact that *kiai* play a significant role and wield considerable influence in village political contests in Madura to this day remains undeniable. In fact, according to a study by Syarif, the presence of *kiai* in Madura village politics is quite fundamental, given that the tone and atmosphere of such political events in Madura have long been known to be tense and heated [4]. In many cases, these events have even sparked conflicts and divisions within the community. In this situation, given his reputation and charisma, the *kiai* becomes a crucial figure, serving as a mediator and often the only cultural figure capable of intervening in such conflicts.

At the academic level, studies on the role of *kiai* in local politics in Madura have been conducted to date. Based on a review of previous studies, research on this topic can be categorized into three major themes. First, studies on *kiai* and local politics in Madura have primarily focused on their roles and influence within the context of the political dynamics of regional head elections. The broad geographical scope and social context of the research often make it difficult to conduct focused data collection and fully explore the phenomenon [5], [6], [7]. Consequently, the resulting studies often fail to draw sharp conclusions because the information gathered is too diverse, superficial, and poorly managed. Second, studies on the role of *kiai* in local politics in Madura are frequently discussed from the perspective of political actors or participants who are directly involved in power struggles, whether as candidates or as political party officials [3], [8]. From this perspective, researchers have been fairly successful in describing and analyzing the existence, role, and influence of *kiai* in their capacity as political actors. Meanwhile, studies on their social role as actors in the management of sociopolitical conflicts in Madura remain limited, particularly those that specifically address this in the context of village head (*Pemilihan Kepala Desa/Pilkades*) elections in Pamekasan Regency.

This study aims to address several shortcomings in previous studies by focusing on political conflict mitigation based on local wisdom through the religious authority of *kiai* in village head elections in Pamekasan Regency. The structure of this study is designed to answer three research questions: 1) What are the forms and dynamics of po-

litical conflict in village head elections in Pamekasan Regency? 2) How does local wisdom function in mitigating political conflict, and 3) how is the religious authority of the *kiai* utilized as a mechanism for mitigating political conflict in village head elections in Pamekasan Regency? This study is urgently needed to reveal how the religious authority held by *kiai* figures is, in fact, one of the values of local wisdom in Madurese society. The existence and social-religious role of the *kiai* play a crucial function as a strategic instrument for managing village head election conflicts, particularly in conflict intervention.

This research is significant because political conflicts at the village level do not end with the voting process but can leave behind polarization, fractured social relationships, and community fragmentation in daily life. In Madurese society, which possesses strong socio-religious networks, the presence of the *kiai*, as a figure who holds both social and religious legitimacy, represents a potential source of social capital for fostering reconciliation, communication, and acceptance of election outcomes [9], [10]. Therefore, this study is expected to provide a theoretical contribution to the development of local political studies and conflict resolution by positioning religious authority and local wisdom as social resources in conflict mitigation. In practice, this study can serve as a reference for village governments, religious leaders, and community actors in establishing more contextual, participatory mechanisms for preventing political conflict that are aligned with the sociocultural character of the Pamekasan community.

2 Method

Figure 1 shows the research locations: Batubintang Village and Bujur Barat Village in Batumarmar Subdistrict, Pamekasan Regency. The selection of these locations was based on field observations, as one of the village head elections in Pamekasan Regency, which was marred by violent conflict resulting in casualties occurring in these two villages. Conflicts regarding village head elections in Batubintang and Bujur Barat villages occurred almost simultaneously in 2022 and 2023, taking the form of clashes between supporters that resulted in the death of one of the village head candidates (Calon kepala desa/Cakades). Based on field data analysis, within Pamekasan's political dynamics, Batubintang and Bujur Barat villages are identified as areas at relatively high risk of political conflict, particularly at the village level. Furthermore, village head elections in Batu Marmar Subdistrict are deeply entrenched in patronage practices rooted in bhejingan (local strongman) power dynamics, which, within the local cultural context, are associated with violent practices such as carok (armed fight/cleaver fight) and similar acts.

The research was conducted using a qualitative research method with a phenomenological approach. The choice of qualitative research was based on the research objectives, namely to understand, identify, and analyze how the presence of the kiai plays a strategic role and functions as an instrument for mitigating political conflict during village head elections in Pamekasan.

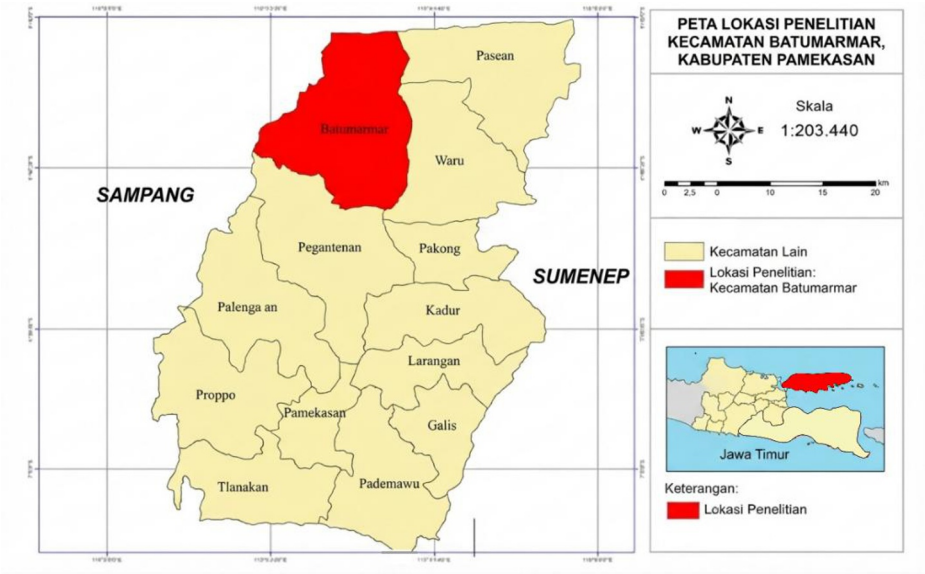


Figure 1. Research Location Map

These strategic roles and functions center on the religious authority of the *kiai*, a key aspect of Maduran local wisdom that readily commands compliance from the local community. The use of a phenomenological approach in this study is grounded in the primary research objective: to understand the profound meaning of the *kiai*'s lived experiences and how they subjectively perceive the phenomenon of village head election conflicts in Pamekasan. The use of this approach will enable the researcher to explore and understand the consciousness and essence of the actors (*kiai*) from their direct perspectives. At the same time, they were involved in managing the conflict over the village head election in Madura.

The data in this study were obtained through three methods: observation, interviews, and documentation. Specifically, Batubintang Village and Bujur Barat Village, Batumarmar District, Pamekasan Regency. All data from these observations were then used by the researchers as a preliminary framework to formulate and confirm the key research questions. The researchers then conducted in-depth interviews with informants, including both key and supporting informants. The in-depth interviews were conducted using a semi-structured approach with five informants whom the researchers had previously selected. Informants were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The researchers divided the informants into four groups: government officials (at both village and regional levels), religious figures or *kiai*, local elites (*bhejing*), and academics. The documentary data was intended to supplement the primary data, observations, and in-depth interviews. The documentary data consisted of photographs of interviews with informants, the research location, group photos with *kiai*, the Pamekasan Regency government, Batumarmar village officials, and *bhejing* or *blater*.

Regarding data analysis techniques, the researcher employed the Miles and Huberman data analysis model. According to Miles and Huberman, the data analysis technique for qualitative research involves three stages: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. To ensure the credibility and validity of the data collected during field research, the researcher conducted a data validity test using source triangulation by comparing data obtained from various informants, including key, supporting, and primary informants.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1 Political Conflict in the Village Head Elections in Batumarmar and Bujur Barat

Incidents of violent conflict during the village head election process in Pamekasan Regency occurred in the villages of Batubintang and Bujur Barat, Batumarmar Subdistrict. These bloody incidents are relatively recent, having occurred just before the scheduled 2023 simultaneous village head elections in Pamekasan Regency. Although the elections were ultimately postponed due to a local government policy extending the terms of village heads, the conflicts in these villages add to the grim record of village politics in Pamekasan, which has frequently been marred by conflict year after year [11]. The village head election process, which should have been democratic and peaceful, in reality turned into a battleground of competing factions that culminated in acts of violence involving sharp weapons such as machetes. Ironically, this violent incident not only resulted in injuries but also led to a fatality.

Interestingly, based on field data analysis, these two cases occurred almost simultaneously within a relatively short timeframe leading up to the simultaneous village head elections, which were previously scheduled for 2023. Regarding the timing of these incidents, it is clear that the acts of violence in Bujur Barat Village and Batu Bintang Village are strongly linked to the political dynamics of the village head elections in these two local villages [12]. Moreover, it has become a common phenomenon that the dynamics of political competition in Madura's village head elections do not peak only during the actual voting process. The atmosphere of political contestation actually begins to heat up one to two years before the *Pilkades*, typically marked by the formation of support factions, intensified grassroots political mobilization, and increased rivalry among groups within the village community, particularly involving supporters and loyalists.

As is typical of village political contests in Madura, the political struggle leading up to the *Pilkades* in Batu Bintang Village and Bujur Village is framed by competition among supporters of the village head candidates and their loyalists [13]. The competition and disputes do not center on ideas, visions, and programs, but rather focus on prestige and personal moral stakes. That is why the village political process in Madura requires significant capital, both material and social. In material terms, the political costs of the village head elections are quite high, as reflected in the buying and selling of votes at the grassroots level, with amounts ranging from Rp300,000 to Rp500,000. Socially, village head elections in Madura serve as a test of personal honor, given that

the position of village head is considered prestigious within Maduran culture. Those elected as village heads are automatically regarded as the 'elders' of the local village community; they are respected and revered by the surrounding community as one of the local power figures. Consequently, every village head candidate will go all out to advance their political interests to secure the position of village leader, even if it means incurring significant costs or, in extreme cases, risking their very lives. It is this kind of motivation and mindset that drives candidates in the village head elections in Batu Bintang Village and Bujur Village, Batu Marmar Subdistrict, Pamekasan, leading to violence and conflict in these two villages.

In the case of the village head election in Bujur Barat Village, the conflict surrounding the election was marked by an attack in which a resident was slashed with a sharp weapon, specifically a machete, on March 20, 2022, just a few days before the simultaneous village head elections were held [14]. The victim sustained injuries to the back of the neck and had to be treated at a hospital. Based on field data collected from secondary sources, the incident was initially believed to be related to a dispute over the village head election process. The victim was identified as a supporter of a candidate for village head (*Cakades*) in Bujur Barat Village, Batumarmar Subdistrict, Pamekasan Regency, East Java. Conversely, the perpetrator, who incidentally is from the same village as the victim, was a supporter of another candidate. The Bujur Barat case also demonstrates that the political situation leading up to the village head election in Pamekasan at that time was quite volatile. Bujur Barat Village itself was an area receiving special attention from security forces due to previous conflicts.

Similar to the village head election in Bujur Barat, the election in Batu Bintang Village was also marred by acts of violence. Compared to the violence in Bujur Barat Village, the intensity of the conflict during the Batu Bintang Village election was significantly higher, as it resulted in the death of one of the victims, who was a candidate for village head of Batu Bintang. According to the chronology of events, the case began with the murder of Miarto, one of the candidates for village head (*Cakades*) of Batu Bintang Village, Batumarmar Subdistrict, Pamekasan Regency, ahead of the village head election in April 2022. On 1 March 2022, Miarto and his wife were riding a motorcycle on their way home from his in-laws' house. In the Ponjanan Barat Village area, Batumarmar Subdistrict, the victim was cut off by a pickup truck [12]. After the victim stopped, the perpetrator got out of the vehicle and attacked Miarto with a machete. As a result of the slashes from the sharp weapon, the victim sustained severe injuries to his neck and abdomen and ultimately died in his wife's arms. Interestingly, based on field data analysis, the perpetrator of the stabbing was identified as the victim's neighbor, who held opposing political views to the victim.

Thus, referring to the two incidents above, it is evident that the village head election conflict in Pamekasan has escalated seriously, ranging from political differences, tensions between supporters, interpersonal conflicts, to physical violence resulting in loss of life. This demonstrates that local political conflicts do not always remain confined to the electoral sphere but can spill over into the social fabric of the community. The issue becomes even more complex and intractable because these incidents often occur within communities characterized by strong social bonds, kinship ties, patronage networks, and political loyalties. Consequently, confrontations that initially arose from

differing political support for specific village head candidates naturally develop and expand into other areas of social conflict. In fact, they often become protracted conflicts passed down from one generation to the next.

3.2 Local Wisdom as a Mitigation Strategy for Village Head Election Conflicts: A Conceptual Analysis

Before conducting a theoretical analysis of how to establish village head election conflict mitigation based on local wisdom through the religious authority of the *kiai*, it is important first to provide a conceptual explanation of each of the terms mentioned above, starting with the concepts of mitigation, conflict, and local wisdom. This is essential to provide readers with a comprehensive explanation of the focus of the issues examined in this study.

Conceptually, mitigation refers to a systematic series of efforts aimed at minimizing the risks that may be caused by a specific disaster or threat. The concept of mitigation was originally synonymous with natural disaster management, with the process focusing on preventive measures to minimize risks and negative impacts on victims. However, as knowledge of disaster management has evolved, the concept of mitigation has shifted and broadened in meaning [15]. The term 'mitigation' is no longer limited to natural disasters; it has also been adopted across many sectors as part of managing social disaster dynamics. Thus, the term 'social disaster mitigation' refers to a series of actions aimed at suppressing, controlling, reducing, and preventing all forms of risk arising from social tensions, conflicts, and divisions within a community [16]. Consequently, social disaster mitigation positions the community as the primary agent capable of identifying potential conflicts and developing local mechanisms to maintain social stability and cohesion.

According to Bartos and Wehr, social conflict is a condition arising from opposition or contradiction among several parties in their efforts to achieve specific goals [17]. These goals are subjective interests that reflect the interests of each party involved in the conflict, whether material or non-material. In another interpretation, Pruitt and Kim (as cited in Susan) define conflict as a perceived divergence of interests [17]. According to them, interests can take the form of feelings or desires to achieve a sense of security in the face of adverse situations or threats. Additionally, they may also take the form of a desire to maintain and acquire power for a better quality of life [17]. Regardless of these two definitions, in principle, conflict necessitates two elements: contradiction and interests. Contradiction here can manifest as attitudes, thoughts, judgments, and especially social actions that lead to social friction or clashes. In the context of this study, this can take the form of fights involving sharp weapons, such as a *carok*. As for interests, these relate more to the manifestation of subjective personal desires and aspirations, which can take the form of power, material possessions, natural resources, or even ideology. In the context of this study, the concept of interest refers to the personal desire to become a ruler and hold a public office at the village level as village head.

Finally, there is the concept of local wisdom. The term 'local wisdom' encompasses several meanings. One of the most commonly cited definitions is that local wisdom refers to the natural and social resources that grow and develop within a community;

these are trusted and recognized as important elements that strengthen social cohesion among community members [18]. From this definition, several key terms emerge: natural and social resources, growth and development within the community, and, finally, social cohesion. Local wisdom can also be understood as a system of knowledge, ideas, values, skills, experiences, behaviors, and customary practices carried out by communities in a specific region [19]. Given the complexity of these values, local wisdom, within certain boundaries, serves a specific purpose in addressing various issues within the community. Regarding its functions, Sirtha (in Sartini 2004) notes that local wisdom—comprising culture, traditions, knowledge, creativity, and a set of other local values—has four (4) important functions: 1) Conservation and preservation of natural resources; 2) Development of human resources; 3) The development of culture and science; 4) Advice, beliefs, literature, and worldviews [20].

Considering these four functions, particularly the functions of cultural development, wisdom, and beliefs, they can indeed be utilized as instruments for development and the strengthening of the social system across all aspects, including education, the economy, and politics, and especially in the socio-political sphere. In the socio-political sphere, amid the widespread politically motivated social conflicts in several regions of Madura, locally rooted religious wisdom can be projected as a specialized tool to address and resolve the dynamics of political conflict in Madura. The religious values and local wisdom in question are none other than the Islamic framework that has long been widely accepted and popular in Madura. Among these is the value associated with the kiai figure [21]. In this context, whether acknowledged or not, the *kiai* as a traditional Islamic religious figure in Madura is a tangible manifestation of Maduran local wisdom that has long played a central role in maintaining the overall social stability of Maduran society.

3.3 Mitigating Political Conflicts in Village Head Elections Based on Local Wisdom through the Religious Authority of the *Kiai*

The big question is: How can we understand the position or role of the *kiai* as a strategic instrument for mitigating political conflicts in village head elections in Madura in practice, in a contextual sense? The answer is straightforward, because, as is well known, Maduran society is characterized by a high degree of personal religiosity. This can be observed in their daily social lives; one clear reflection of this is their social attitudes and behaviors, which show deep respect and reverence for the *kiai* [1], [22]. On many occasions, the *kiai* plays the role of a central figure whom the community trusts to mediate disputes or specific problems. That is why, in the context of Madurese society. However, the term '*kiai*' is strongly associated with the figure or personality of an Islamic leader; in reality, the *kiai* can indeed play a cross-social role. Given their position and capacity, it is quite logical to argue that, within certain limits, the *kiai*, viewed through the lens of their role and status as an embodiment of local wisdom in Madura, function as a third party in efforts to mitigate village head election conflicts in Madura.

When viewed through the lens of Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) concept of "enunciative modalities", within the context of the genealogy of power and knowledge [23], [24], there are at least three major factors explaining why the *kiai* and the religious

authority vested in him play a strategic role and function as an instrument for mitigating political conflict surrounding village head elections *(Pilkades)* in Madura [23]. These three forms of capital are authority, ideology, and knowledge. Authority or power, in the classical view, is understood as a person's ability to influence others so that they submit to and obey that person. Max Weber classified authority into three types: formal, traditional, and charismatic. Falling into the categories of traditional and charismatic authority is the authority derived from religious values, as embodied and inherent in the figure of the *kiai* [25], [26]. In the context of this study, the element of religious authority inherent in the *kiai* is clearly and tangibly reflected in his high social status within Madurese society. The religious standing and influence of the *kiai* in Madurese society are so great that he is identified by some as the *Raja Kecil* (little king). As a king, the *kiai* possesses sufficient power and a comprehensive set of tools of authority to control and manage the various social upheavals emerging within Madurese society. This includes the socio-political unrest that frequently arises during village head elections (*Pilkades*) in Madura.

In addition to authority or power, the *kiai*'s next form of social capital is knowledge. The concept of knowledge in this study is not viewed from a classical perspective, which holds that knowledge is everything depicted in thought, based on the processing of sensory observations. The meaning of knowledge here refers more to a series of social discourses whose existence is constantly shaped and constructed by power relations. In the context of this study, the element of knowledge inherent in the *kiai* refers to his name and social role, which carry the indexical significance of a religious figure. The term *kiai* is not merely a local term denoting the highest social class in Madura, the *Raja Kecil* (little king) or Cultural Broker in Clifford Geertz's terminology, but goes beyond that; it is also synonymous with a local figure embodying profound religious insight and knowledge [27]. That is why, on many occasions, the people of Madura often position the *kiai* as the sole authority and source of truth in resolving various issues that have arisen within the community. This includes social conflicts related to political issues surrounding the village head elections (*Pilkades*).

Finally, there is social capital in the form of ideology. The concept of ideology here refers to a system of personal thought that serves as a guide and framework for carrying out daily life activities. It is important to emphasize here that the concept of ideology does not refer to mainstream ideologies such as capitalism, socialism, communism, and so on. Rather, it pertains to specific groups, beliefs, or religious movements, such as Islamic organizations and the like. Falling into this category is the Islamic mass organization *Nahdlatul Ulama*, one of the most influential organizations in Madura [10], [28]. How can we understand the existence of *Nahdlatul Ulama* (NU) as part of the *kiai*'s social capital within the social system and structure of Maduran society? The answer lies in the symbiotic relationship that has long been established between the *kiai* and the NU religious social organization in Madura. In fact, the majority of *kiai* in Madura have strong emotional ties to NU, both structurally and culturally. Structurally, these emotional bonds are reinforced by institutional affiliations, such as serving as active officials within the NU structure; at the very least, they are registered as leaders of Islamic boarding schools *(pondok pesantren)*, where we know that NU is a large boarding school.

In contrast, a boarding school is a small NU. Culturally speaking, the social (ideological) ties between NU and the *kiai* in Madura can be traced to the strong influence of NU's religious traditions and paradigms on their daily religious and social practices, both in thought and ritual [29]. NU's influence on the identity and religious culture of the Madurese people is so strong that there is a humorous anecdote: when asked about their religion, Madurese people will answer that 99 percent of their religion is NU, and 1 percent is *Muhammadiyah*.

The same applies to efforts to mitigate socio-political conflicts surrounding the *Pilkades* in Madura. The presence or existence of *kiai* within the social system and structure of Maduran society, which the local community has long regarded as possessing strong and comprehensive social capital, such as their mastery of the instruments of power, religious knowledge, and NU's ideological framework, can serve as strategic instruments for [4], [10]. Armed with these three forms of social capital, it is quite logical that in this study the researcher positions the status and influence of the *kiai* as a tertiary party or group, that is, the most representative and ideal disinterested party to carry out activities aimed at mitigating political conflicts in the *Pilkades*. Given their status and influence, *kiai*s, with all their charisma and leadership, can serve as mediators, performing conflict-intervention functions while taking into account the interests of the conflicting parties. Through the *kiai*'s presence as a mediator, there is hope that all forms of political discord and conflict that have arisen among the Madurese community can be effectively managed and resolved. This will yield solutions and conflict resolutions that are fully oriented toward the realization of peace, justice, objectivity, and tranquility.

What needs to be emphasized and noted here is that, as a mediator in Galtung's terminology, the *kiai* must carry out his intervention activities to resolve and mediate political conflicts in Madura while upholding neutrality. In other words, the *kiai* must accommodate and embrace the interests of all conflicting parties, thereby fostering constructive and productive conflict resolution. Conversely, if the *kiai*'s intervention as a mediator fails to remain neutral and objective and instead tends to defend or take sides with one of the conflicting factions, then the conflict will not be resolved. Even if it is resolved, the resulting decision will likely be oriented toward satisfying only one group's interests.

4 Conclusion

Based on the analysis above, several key points constitute the conclusions of this study, namely: First, political conflicts surrounding village head elections in Pamekasan Regency have become a crucial social issue that continues to recur over time. This is clearly illustrated by numerous cases over the past decade, particularly since the outbreak of bloody conflict during the village head elections in Batu Bintang Village and Bujur Barat Village, Batu Marmar Subdistrict, Pamekasan Regency, in 2022. To address this unfavorable social situation, specific mitigation measures are needed to minimize conflict and to manage and resolve conflicts through strategies and approaches that are both strategic and effective. One approach or strategy that can be employed is

to leverage the values of Maduran local wisdom. The concept of local wisdom here refers to the presence of Maduran local elites who are believed to hold significant status and influence within the local community. In the context of Maduran society, these local elites specifically refer to the *kiai* and the religious authority associated with him. Second, the claim that the *kiai* embodies the local wisdom of Maduran society, which is viewed as strategic for managing and resolving political conflicts in Madura, rests on the *kiai*'s possession of a comprehensive set of social capital necessary to intervene in such conflicts. Given his long-standing social status and role, the *kiai*'s social capital encompasses three elements: authority or power, knowledge, and ideology. The element of authority or power in a *kiai* refers to his social status, whereby the *kiai* has long been identified as a *Raja Kecil* capable of influencing the community around him. The element of knowledge refers to the popular perception of the *kiai* as a local figure whom the Madurese people trust to possess deep and broad religious understanding and insight. The ideological element, meanwhile, refers to the *kiai*'s religious identity, as he has long been known to have close emotional ties, both structural and traditional, to Indonesia's largest Islamic organization, *Nahdlatul Ulama*.

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