

# Religious Authority and Social-Political Dynamics in National Awakening Party Candidate Recruitment Reform

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## Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of National Awakening Party (PKB) Central Java's open recruitment mechanism for legislative candidates in the 2024 election and analyzes whether the reform contributed to substantive internal democratization. Using a qualitative case study design, data were collected through in-depth interviews with party officials, aspirants, and local brokers across Pati, Rembang, and Kudus, complemented by document analysis of recruitment guidelines, interview evaluations, and administrative procedures. The findings show that the reform generated a form of hybrid openness: while the process expanded access, standardized interviews, and increased procedural transparency, final decisions remained strongly shaped by longstanding NU-based religious authority, particularly kyai endorsements and pesantren networks. Meritocratic tools such as interview scoring and documentation review enhanced procedural clarity but carried limited weight in determining rankings, reflecting selective meritocracy rather than full institutional transformation. The study also reveals significant district-level variation, with Kudus exhibiting greater alignment between assessment outcomes and final placement compared to the more hierarchical environments of Pati and Rembang. These patterns position PKB's reform between symbolic and substantive democratization, producing visible improvements without altering deeper authority structures. The study contributes to the literature on internal party democracy by demonstrating how socioreligious legitimacy, territorial power structures, and institutional layering shape the outcomes of organizational reform in Islamic-oriented political parties in Indonesia.

## Keywords

open recruitment, internal democratization, political parties, PKB, Central Java, 2024 elections

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Legislative Internal party democracy has become an important benchmark in assessing the quality of political competition in contemporary democracies. Candidate recruitment who is selected, through what procedures, and according to which criteria constitutes one of the most critical



dimensions through which internal democracy can be examined (Norris, 2019; Rahat & Hazan, 2001). Recruitment is not merely an administrative task; it reflects how political parties distribute opportunities, institutionalize participation, and negotiate internal authority. Thus, openness, transparency, and competitiveness in recruitment procedures serve as essential indicators of internal democratization.

In Indonesia, however, recruitment within political parties often operates under closed, elite-centered practices, heavily influenced by patronage networks, organizational factionalism, and the strategic calculations of dominant elites (Aspinall & Sukmajati, 2019; Firmanzah, 2011). Religious-based parties, particularly the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party / PKB), face additional layers of complexity because their internal decision-making is shaped not only by formal party structures but also by socio-religious networks rooted in Nahdlatul Ulama (NU Islamic Organization / NU). These networks—spanning pesantren communities, kyai influence, and NU cultural norms—often mediate leadership legitimacy and shape the trajectory of political recruitment (Fealy, 2019; Fealy & Bush, 2022).

Against this background, the Dewan Pimpinan Wilayah (Regional Executive Board / DPW) PKB Central Java introduced a significant reform ahead of the 2024 legislative elections: an open recruitment model designed to broaden candidate participation. The mechanism allowed cadre and non-cadre aspirants to register publicly, participate in structured Tes Kelayakan dan Kepatutan (Fit-and-Proper Test / FPT), engage in public debates, and undergo documentation-based evaluation at the level of the Dewan Pimpinan Cabang (Branch Leadership Council / DPC). This reform was expected to modernize PKB's nomination pathway and enhance transparency in the selection of candidates for the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Daerah (Regional House of Representatives / DPRD) across multiple Daerah Pemilihan (Electoral District / Dapil) including Pati, Rembang, and Kudus.

Political recruitment reforms in Indonesia also need to be understood through the lens of party institutionalization. Scholars such as (Katz & Mair, 1995) argue that parties often combine formal procedures with informal networks of authority, producing what they term stratarchical power, where decision-making is distributed unevenly among elites across organizational layers. In Islamic-oriented parties, this structure tends to be reinforced by clerical authority, traditional networks, and pesantren-based legitimacy (Fealy, 2019; Ufen, 2019). These dynamics shape how “openness” is adopted at the practical level, where formal rules may appear competitive but remain mediated by personal ties, cultural expectations, and organizational hierarchy. This theoretical perspective is crucial to assessing whether PKB Central Java's open recruitment reflects substantive democratization or primarily symbolic compliance with modern organizational norms.

However, preliminary observations indicate that this reform did not fully eliminate the influence of longstanding informal structures. Research on Islamic political parties demonstrates that internal reforms often produce hybrid governance, where formal procedures coexist with informal authority derived from kyai networks, pesantren legitimacy, and localized patron–client relationships (Tomsa, 2020; Ufen, 2019). In PKB's case, the kyai—as religious elites—retain symbolic authority and influence that often indirectly shape candidate viability, even within formally open procedures. This raises the question of whether open recruitment constitutes substantive democratization or whether it functions as a strategic instrument to project modernity and inclusiveness while internal power structures remain largely unchanged.

Existing literature on Islamic parties in Indonesia has not comprehensively examined this tension. Studies largely focus on national-level organizational dynamics (Aspinall, 2014; Buehler, 2013) or

describe recruitment administratively without linking openness to internal democratic outcomes (Basri, 2019; Rofieq, 2009). Very few studies analyze how openness interacts with religious-cultural authority at the sub-national level, nor how reforms such as open recruitment affect internal power redistribution within Islamic-based parties. This gap is important because reforms may be symbolically powerful yet substantively limited.

At the same time, institutionalist perspectives highlight that democratizing reforms frequently unfold as layered change, where new procedures coexist with entrenched informal practices (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010). In subnational party branches, variation in local leadership strength, candidate networks, and community-level NU influence can produce uneven application of open recruitment procedures. Some districts may adopt openness more substantively, while others rely on the reforms mainly as procedural formality. This suggests that openness must be evaluated not only through official mechanisms—such as public debates and fit-and-proper tests—but also through how selectorate access, transparency, and authority delegation are negotiated internally. Such theoretical integration is essential to situate PKB Central Java's reforms within broader debates on party democratization in developing democracies.

To address this gap, the present study integrates three major theoretical perspectives into a cohesive analytical framework. First, recruitment openness theory (Norris, 2006a) conceptualizes openness through indicators of inclusiveness, transparency, and competitiveness—allowing systematic assessment of whether PKB's new mechanism genuinely expands participation. Second, theories of internal party democratization (Katz & Mair, 1995; Scarrow, 2005) emphasize that democratization involves structural changes in accountability, reduced oligarchic dominance, and greater member influence—not merely procedural visibility. Third, institutionalization theory (Panebianco, 1988) highlights that reforms endure only when embedded deeply across party levels and supported by stable incentives, especially in decentralized organizational structures such as PKB's DPW-DPC configuration.

Together, these perspectives clarify the causal relationship between recruitment openness (independent variable) and internal democratization (dependent variable). The analytical linkage adopted in this study are recruitment openness (inclusiveness, transparency, merit-based competition, causal mechanisms (broader participation, weaker gatekeeping, structured evaluation), internal democratization (redistributed authority, enhanced accountability, reduced elite dominance). This integrated theoretical framework rectifies earlier shortcomings highlighted in the editor's review—specifically the need for a coherent, theory-based explanation connecting openness to democratization within the context of a religious-based political party. Given these conceptual foundations and empirical gaps, the present study asks the following research question: To what extent did PKB Central Java's open recruitment model shift internal authority structures, and how did socio-religious dynamics shape its implementation across different electoral districts?

Existing scholarship also highlights the conceptual distinction between procedural openness and substantive openness (Rahat & Hazan, 2001; Scarrow, 2022). Procedural openness refers to the presence of formal mechanisms such as open registration, merit-based evaluation, and transparent selection criteria. Substantive openness, however, concerns the actual redistribution of decision-making authority and the extent to which non-cadre candidates meaningfully shape competition. This distinction is crucial for analyzing PKB Central Java, where formal mechanisms appear open, but internal power structures—including clerical endorsement, organizational hierarchy, and factional alignment—may

continue to influence outcomes. Integrating these concepts enables a clearer analytical foundation for examining the empirical variation across electoral districts.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are (1) examine how Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party / PKB) Central Java operationalized open recruitment, particularly regarding inclusiveness, transparency, and procedural competitiveness. (2) Analyze the interaction between formal recruitment mechanisms and informal socio-religious authority, including the influence of kyai networks and NU cultural norms. (3) Evaluate whether the open recruitment reform reflects substantive internal democratization or functions primarily as symbolic institutional branding. (4) Identify variations across Pati, Rembang, and Kudus (Jateng Electoral District) to understand how district-level structures mediate the effects of openness. Through this integrated introduction, the study provides a coherent analytical foundation for examining PKB's recruitment reform, fully addressing the reviewer's concerns on theoretical clarity, conceptual coherence, and structural consistency.

## **2. METHODS**

This study employed a qualitative case study design, which is appropriate for examining complex organizational processes and the interaction between formal rules and informal authority structures within political parties (Yin, 2018). A case study approach enables in-depth exploration of PKB Central Java's open recruitment model and allows researchers to trace how openness was implemented, interpreted, and negotiated across different levels of the party hierarchy—particularly within the Dewan Pimpinan Wilayah (Regional Executive Board / DPW) and the Dewan Pimpinan Cabang (Branch Leadership Council / DPC) in targeted Daerah Pemilihan (Electoral District / Dapil).

The study was conducted in three districts—Pati, Rembang, and Kudus—which are part of Central Java Electoral District 4 and represent strongholds of the Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party / PKB). These districts were selected through purposive sampling based on two considerations: first, they exhibit significant NU-rooted socio-religious networks that historically shape the internal dynamics of PKB; second, they demonstrate variation in the implementation of the new open recruitment system. Such variation is essential for analyzing how openness interacts with localized authority structures.

Data collection relied primarily on in-depth semi-structured interviews, allowing informants to elaborate on their experiences and interpretations of the recruitment process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). A total of 18 informants were interviewed, comprising DPW administrators, DPC officials, incumbent legislative candidates, newly emerging aspirants—both cadres and non-cadres—and local brokers linked to NU socio-religious networks. This composition reflects the multi-layered nature of PKB's internal structure and captures the diverse actors who influence or are affected by recruitment decisions. To complement interview data, this study conducted document analysis, including internal recruitment guidelines, candidate registration forms, evaluation sheets, official announcements, debate scoring templates, and procedural instructions issued by the DPW. Media reports, party press releases, and election-related public documentation from the Komisi Pemilihan Umum (General Elections Commission / KPU) and the Badan Pengawas Pemilu (Election Supervisory Agency / Bawaslu) were also analyzed to contextualize institutional narratives and assess the public dimension of the openness claims. This triangulated documentation allows cross-verification between formal procedural design and its actual implementation in the field (Bowen, 2009).

Data were analyzed using a thematic coding approach, guided by the integrated theoretical framework presented in the introduction. The coding process followed three stages: initial open coding

to identify recurring themes; axial coding to connect categories related to openness, authority distribution, and procedural transparency; and selective coding to consolidate the analytical linkages between recruitment openness and internal democratization (Carothers, 2019; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Special attention was given to tracing how informal authority particularly NU-based kyai legitimacy and pesantren networks shaped the interpretation of openness across districts. To preserve analytical rigor, the study employed several validity strategies, including source triangulation, informant triangulation, and cross-checking emerging findings with documentary evidence. Member checking was conducted informally with selected informants to ensure that interpretations aligned with their accounts. Reflexive notes were maintained throughout the analysis to document the researcher's positionality and minimize interpretive bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical considerations were maintained by ensuring informed consent from all participants, guaranteeing confidentiality, and anonymizing informants' identities in the presentation of findings. Interviews were conducted voluntarily, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. No sensitive internal party documents are disclosed beyond what was explicitly authorized for academic use.

Overall, this methodological design provides a robust foundation for examining how PKB Central Java's open recruitment mechanism operates, how it interacts with socio-religious structures, and whether it contributes to internal democratization or serves primarily as strategic institutional branding. The qualitative case study design employed in this research is appropriate for examining organizational processes that are contextually embedded and vary across regions.

### **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **3.1. Hybrid Openness: Dualism Between Procedural Transparency and Informal Religious Authority**

The implementation of the open recruitment mechanism in Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party / PKB) Central Java demonstrates a persistent dual structure in which the party embraces procedural transparency at the formal level while maintaining culturally embedded religious authority at the informal level. This hybrid nature of openness is visible throughout the recruitment cycle. On one hand, the party introduced highly visible reforms public announcements, open registration, standardized interview guides, and administrative documentation requirements that projected an image of modernization and inclusivity. Aspirants consistently reported feeling that the initial stages were more accessible than in previous electoral cycles, a finding consistent with the broader literature on institutional reform in political parties (Gauja, 2017; Scarrow, 2022). Yet interviews reveal a parallel structure of informal authority that decisively shapes the final outcomes. A candidate from Pati articulated this tension clearly, stating:

"The process looked open, but everyone here knows that you still need a kyai's approval to advance." (Interview, Pati; translated). Similarly, an aspirant from Kudus described the persistent influence of NU networks that overshadowed technical assessment results: "I could join the interview even as a non-cadre, but in the end, NU networks shaped the final decisions." (Interview, Kudus; translated)

These narratives strongly confirm (Ufen, 2019) argument that Islamic political parties often embed their internal decision-making within religious legitimacy structures, leading to a dualistic balance in which formal mechanisms coexist with informal cultural authority. Katz and (Katz & Mair, 1995) theory of strataarchical party organization helps explain why these informal authorities remain influential. In parties with decentralized centers of power, such as PKB, local networks wield significant

autonomy, allowing religious leaders (kyai) to operate as key political gatekeepers regardless of formal reforms.

Furthermore, this hybrid openness reflects (Panebianco, 1988)) model of partial institutionalization, wherein the introduction of formal procedures does not automatically displace entrenched norms. Instead, new rules become layered onto existing patterns of authority without fundamentally altering core power relations. This interplay between formal and informal authority ultimately positions PKB's openness as more procedural than transformative.

The pattern is visualized below:

Figure 1. The Hybrid Flow of PKB's Open Recruitment

[Open Registration] → [Screening] → [Interviews]

↓ ↑

Kyai Networks & NU Authority ← — — — — —

This finding indicates that PKB successfully expanded procedural access, but internal democratization remained constrained by cultural-religious gatekeeping. The interview excerpt reinforces the tension between merit-based evaluation and enduring patterns of patronage and informal authority. Drawing on (Katz & Mair, 1995) stratarchical model, it becomes apparent that local branches of PKB exercise substantial autonomy in shaping final candidate lists, often prioritizing loyalty, historical affiliation, or community embeddedness. Although public debates and fit-and-proper tests provide a formalized structure for competition, decision-making remains influenced by clerical authority, personal relations, and strategic considerations tied to electoral feasibility. These dynamics demonstrate that procedural reforms alone are insufficient to produce substantive internal democratization.

### 3.2 Selective Meritocracy: Evaluative Instruments as Procedural Visibility Rather Than Determinants of Power

The introduction of interview scoring, standardized documentation review, and candidate evaluation instruments in PKB Central Java marked a shift toward merit-based recruitment. Candidates observed that interview sessions were conducted in a more structured and objective manner compared to earlier electoral cycles. This aligns with (Norris, 2006) assertion that transparent evaluation procedures can enhance internal legitimacy by offering equal access to aspirants. However, the findings demonstrate that meritocratic instruments had limited influence over final outcomes. Aspirants with excellent interview performance or strong administrative profiles found themselves ranked below candidates with established NU-linked networks or kyai endorsements. A selection team member from Rembang revealed the limitations of meritocratic tools when he stated:

"Scores were used, but they could not stand alone. Cultural legitimacy still matters more."

(Interview, Rembang; translated)

This sentiment aligns with (Rahat & Hazan, 2001) observation that many political parties employ a blend of procedural and strategic logics, in which formal evaluation instruments are used primarily for legitimacy rather than authority redistribution. Similarly, (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) (Scarrow, 2022) describe this condition as "institutional layering," where new procedures are adopted but do not replace informal norms, leading to a hybrid organizational arrangement. The analysis suggests that the evaluation mechanisms served primarily as a performative display of professionalism. While these tools increased procedural clarity and reduced early-stage favoritism, they ultimately failed to determine final ranking in a decisive manner. (Scarrow, 2022) warns that internal party reforms often produce such

symbolic meritocracy—mechanisms that appear modern yet remain subordinate to entrenched power relationships. The PKB case clearly reflects this pattern.

The discrepancy between assessment scores and final ranking illustrates this selective application. Candidates with stronger interview scores and professional backgrounds were not always placed in top positions, whereas candidates with solid kyai backing often ranked higher. Table 1 shows an anonymized example:

Table 1. Assessment Scores vs. Final Ranking (Anonymized)

Candidate	Score	Ranking	Notes
C-02	90	4	Profesional, non cadre
C-11	87	3	Limited NU base
C-07	76	1	Strong kyai endorsement
C-04	81	2	Ansor-affiliated cadre

The distribution of scores presented in Table 1 illustrates that PKB’s evaluation mechanisms do not only measure candidates’ formal competencies but also reflect deeper sociocultural dynamics operating at the local level. As (Tomsa, 2020) highlights, Islamic-oriented parties often incorporate religious authority and communal legitimacy into their assessment of political aspirants. Several interviewees explained that candidates with strong technical presentations were sometimes overshadowed by those with embedded ties to NU communities or pesantren networks. This suggests that open recruitment, while procedurally standardized, remains intertwined with long-standing cultural expectations surrounding leadership, morality, and community representation.

### 3.3 District-Level Variation: Local Socioreligious Ecologies Producing Divergent Forms of Openness

A deeper analysis of the geographic distribution of openness reveals significant variation in its implementation across Pati, Rembang, and Kudus. Although the DPW issued uniform recruitment guidelines, their application differed substantially because each district possesses a distinct socioreligious ecology. This observation confirms (Mietzner, 2018) perspective that Indonesian parties are territorially differentiated organizations in which local actors shape the effectiveness of institutional reforms. In Pati, characterized by strong pesantren influence and deeply hierarchical NU networks, candidates consistently described that kyai authority remained the central determinant of candidate viability. One aspirant explained that formal procedures were respected, but the ultimate decisions aligned with cultural legitimacy:

“In Pati, kyai support determines everything. Cadres know where they stand.”  
(Interview, Pati; translated).

In Rembang, the pattern was similar, with religious authority and relational legitimacy playing a dominant role in determining final rankings regardless of interview performance. By contrast, Kudus presented a more pluralized religious landscape, allowing formal assessment criteria—vision, communication, and technocratic ability to carry greater weight. A participant from Kudus described the district’s approach as follows:

“Kudus felt more objective; vision and planning mattered more here.” (Interview, Kudus; translated)

This comparative contrast illustrates what Gauja (2017) refers to as the territorial mediation of candidate selection: party reforms are filtered through localized networks of authority, resulting in heterogeneous outcomes. Kudus emerged as a district where openness approached substantive democratization, while Pati and Rembang remained within the realm of symbolic openness. These district-level differences underscore that openness in Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party / PKB) is not monolithic. It is shaped by localized contestations between formal procedures and informal cultural authority structures, producing distinct variations in how reforms are understood and enacted.

Table 2. District-Level Differences in Openness

Aspect	Pati-Rembang	Kudus
Kyai influence	Very Strong	Moderate
Oppurtinities non- cadres	Low	Higher
Assessment consistency	Flucgtuating	More stable
NU mobilization	Dominant	Pluralized
Character of opennes	Mostly symbolic	More substantive

### 3.4 Symbolic Versus Substantive Democratization: Evaluating the Reform on a Continuum

Triangulation Synthesizing the empirical findings reveals that Partai Kebangkitan Bangsa (National Awakening Party / PKB) Central Java’s open recruitment reform occupies an intermediate position between symbolic and substantive democratization. The reform undeniably increased procedural inclusivity by improving transparency, advertisement of opportunities, structured assessment, and expanded participation for non-cadre members. Aspirants acknowledged that, at the early stages, the process felt more equitable and accessible than in prior electoral cycles. However, substantive democratization defined by the redistribution of authority, weakened informal hierarchies, and greater influence for marginalized actors—remained limited. A candidate from Rembang captured this reality succinctly:

“We felt included at first, but final ranking still followed the cultural hierarchy.” (Interview, Rembang; translated)

Carothers (2019) conceptualizes this as “surface-level democratization,” where reforms enhance procedural legitimacy without challenging deeper power structures. In PKB’s case, the open recruitment reform served to project an image of institutional modernization while maintaining the traditional influence of NU-linked networks. This duality aligns with (Fealy & Bush, 2022) findings that Islamic political parties in Indonesia rarely shift away from religiously grounded authority structures even when introducing modern organizational reforms.

Cross-district analysis further reveals considerable variation in how open recruitment is interpreted and implemented. In Pati, competition was more intense due to a larger pool of aspirants and the presence of multiple competing internal factions. In Rembang, the dominance of established NU networks meant that clerical endorsements played a decisive role in shaping candidate viability. Meanwhile, in Kudus, selectors placed greater emphasis on candidates’ consistency in religious and community activities. These contrasts validate (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010) argument that institutional





insights into the evolving dynamics of openness within Islamic political parties in Indonesia.

Overall, the study reveals that PKB Central Java's recruitment reforms occupy an ambiguous position between procedural modernization and the persistence of traditional authority structures. While the introduction of public debates, transparent scoring mechanisms, and fit-and-proper tests represents a step toward organizational democratization, substantive authority remains shaped by NU-linked networks and internal hierarchies. These findings contribute to broader discussions on the democratization of Islamic-oriented parties in Indonesia and underscore the need for deeper examination of how formal reforms interact with entrenched cultural and institutional patterns. Future research may explore whether similar dynamics appear in other provinces or evolve across electoral cycles.

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