

Can a Da'i Remain Silent? Strategic Non-Communication and the Moral Economy of Islamic Publics during Digital Controversies

Nur Setiawati¹, Faridah², Saparuddin³, Retna Dwi Estuningtyas⁴, Fitriani⁵

¹ Universitas Muslim Indonesia, Indonesia

² Universitas Ahmad Dahlan Sinjai, Indonesia

³ Universitas Islam Makassar, Indonesia

⁴ Universitas Ibnu Chaldun Jakarta, Indonesia

⁵ STEBI Al-Muhsin Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Correspondence: nur.setiawati@umi.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how silence and restrained response were interpreted within Indonesian digital Islamic publics. Six public digital documents drawn from three controversy clusters between 2023 and 2026 formed the empirical material. Comparative archival digital ethnography and qualitative discourse analysis were used to trace how non-response, delayed response, and restrained speech were judged in relation to religious authority. The findings showed that silence remained legitimate when audiences could connect it to tabayyun, uncertainty, or the need to avoid premature judgment. Its legitimacy weakened when audiences perceived ongoing harm, selective concern, or a mismatch between public religious authority and public responsibility. The analysis developed Islamic communicative non-performance as a concept for situations in which an expected act of religious communication was perceived as missing and that absence affected evaluations of authority. The findings indicated that silence in digital da'wah was neither communicatively empty nor automatically blameworthy, since its meaning depended on the moral expectations surrounding the religious actor and the controversy.



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INTRODUCTION

Da'wah on social media has changed the conditions under which religious authority is encountered. A preacher may move between a mosque, a podcast, Instagram, YouTube, and short video platforms without treating these spaces as separate audiences. The same followers can encounter advice, moral commentary, political opinion, and religious teaching in one continuous feed. Indonesian research shows that this environment weakens older boundaries around religious expertise and makes authority more dependent on recurring digital presence. Solahudin and Fakhruroji (2020) connect this shift to new patterns of Islamic learning. Kurniasih and Raya (2022) show how a preacher's authority can be rebuilt through digital platforms after reputational decline. Fauzi (2024) also finds that micro-celebrity practices have become part of the struggle over who is recognised as a legitimate religious voice.

Most of this literature follows speech. Sermons, captions, videos, comments, religious applications, and influencer performances provide visible material that can be collected and interpreted. Silence is harder to treat as data because nothing appears to happen. Yet followers often notice when a familiar religious figure does not respond to an issue that has become morally urgent. The absence may then circulate through questions, tags, criticism, or comparisons with earlier statements.

Research on digital religion gives good reasons to take that absence seriously. Campbell (2007) argues that online religious authority is layered rather than simply transferred from offline institutions. Campbell (2010) later showed that digital settings alter how roles and structures of authority are recognised. Indonesian studies add a more local account of how that authority is lived. Husein and Slama (2018) describe tensions that arise when piety becomes publicly visible. Muthohirin (2021) and Naamy (2023) show how popular preachers build continuing relations with audiences through social media and make religious presence part of ordinary digital routines.

Silence has a different history in communication research. Le et al. (2019) show that organisations may delay, avoid, or withhold communication for strategic reasons during a crisis. Pang et al. (2022) likewise find that silence can be used deliberately and later broken when circumstances change. Parke et al. (2022) reach a related conclusion in organisational settings, where withholding untimely speech can improve how later speech is received. These studies reject the idea that silence is always passive. Religious controversy adds another difficulty. A da'i is not judged only by reputation or timing. Audiences can also connect religious authority with expectations of knowledge, moral guidance, and public care. Strategic silence therefore describes one possible intention, but intention cannot be inferred from a public absence alone.

Three Indonesian episodes make the problem visible. In 2023 a senior Majelis Ulama Indonesia figure argued that da'i should not remain silent while poorly grounded religious claims circulated on social media (MUI, 2023a). In April 2026, discussion around allegations of sexual misconduct involving a religious figure produced disagreement over whether calls for *ghibah* avoidance and *tabayyun* provided a sufficient response when possible harm was still being discussed (ANTARA, 2026) (Suara.com, 2026). In July 2026, KH Mustain Syafi'i criticised the silence of kiai and ulama toward corruption, and his statement received extensive public support online (DetikJatim, 2026a) (DetikJatim, 2026b).

The episodes are not identical cases of deliberate silence. One concerns an institutional demand that religious authorities speak. Another concerns restrained speech that some audiences regarded as inadequate. The third is an accusation of collective non-response. Their common feature is narrower. In each episode, the legitimacy of a missing, delayed, or limited religious response became an object of public judgment.

Moral economy helps explain those judgments without assuming that Muslim publics share one moral code. Thompson (1971) used the term to show how collective action can rest on practical expectations about legitimate conduct. Sayer (2007) later widened its use by emphasising moral evaluation in ordinary social relations. Digital *da'wah* also produces expectations about presence, clarification, and restraint. Brady et al. (2021) show how online environments reinforce moral outrage, while Sharma (2023) demonstrates how moral emotions can become part of collective public positioning.

Islamic communicative non-performance refers to a narrower condition in which an act of religious communication is publicly expected, is perceived not to occur or to occur inadequately, and that absence becomes relevant to the evaluation of authority. The concept does not turn silence into wrongdoing. A da'i may have sound reasons not to comment when facts are unclear. The question is how digital Muslim publics draw the boundary between legitimate restraint and an absence they regard as morally consequential. The analysis examines that boundary across the three clusters and explains when non-response alters the public meaning of religious authority.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research uses comparative archival digital ethnography with qualitative discourse analysis. The corpus consists of six anchor documents published between 2023 and August 2026, with two materials representing each controversy cluster. The first cluster uses an MUI statement on the obligation of da'i to engage religious problems on social media and a later MUI report on public attention to its responses on national issues. The second uses an ANTARA report that establishes the public allegation and a Suara.com report that reproduces a preacher's response together with visible audience criticism. The third uses two DetikJatim reports on KH Mustain Syafi'i's criticism of ulama silence toward corruption and the public reaction that followed. Selection required the obligation to speak, the legitimacy of restraint, or the meaning of silence to be explicit in the material rather than inferred from an unrelated controversy.

Archival digital ethnography is appropriate because the interaction is distributed across institutional statements, news reports, social media posts, and reproduced audience responses. Abidin (2020) notes that digital ethnography requires attention to the conditions under which online material becomes observable. De Seta (2020) similarly warns against treating digital fieldwork as simple collection of available content. The six documents are therefore read as linked traces of public controversy rather than as a representative sample of Indonesian Muslims. Cottica et al. (2020) inform the relational reading of actors and recurring concepts, but no quantitative discourse network is claimed.

Coding focused on descriptions of the obligation to speak, reasons offered for restraint, harms associated with silence, and the effect of non-response on religious authority. *Tabayyun*, *ghibah*, competence, public protection, corruption, moral courage, and selective concern were coded when they shaped the meaning of speech or absence. Each cluster was first read on its own terms before comparisons were made across cases. Ordinary social media users are not identified. Comments are discussed only when already reproduced by public news reports, and usernames are omitted. Engagement counts are treated only as context for visibility, not as evidence of public consensus. News reports are also read as mediated accounts rather than neutral transcripts of platform activity. These limits reduce unnecessary recontextualisation and prevent the analysis from turning visible reactions into claims about Indonesian Muslims as a whole.

The clusters do not represent the same type of silence. One contains an explicit demand for speech, another contains restrained speech criticised as inadequate, and the third contains an accusation of collective silence. They are compared because each makes the boundary between expected religious communication and perceived non-response visible. The analysis does not infer intention from silence. Reasons for a da'i or ulama not speaking are considered only when they appear in the public material.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three controversy clusters place religious non-response under different kinds of pressure. The first turns silence into a problem of competence, the second tests how far caution can remain legitimate when harm is alleged, and the third treats collective silence as a question of public moral responsibility. Their value lies in this variation. The cases do not reproduce one model of silence, but they expose a shared dispute over when religious authority is expected to become communicatively present.

Table 1 Comparative Characteristics of the Digital Controversy Clusters

Controversy cluster	Form of non-response	Public expectation	Main tension	Dominant public interpretation
Religious misinformation on social media, 2023	Perceived absence of qualified intervention	Da'i should correct of misleading claims	Competence and responsible guidance versus leaving space to less-qualified voices	Silence leaves space for less-qualified voices
Religious misconduct controversy, 2026	Restrained or delayed response	Religious actors should acknowledge possible harm without guilt	Tabayyun and legal uncertainty versus concern for vulnerable parties	Restraint may prevent premature judgment but appear inattentive to harm
Ulama and corruption discourse, 2026	Perceived collective silence	Ulama should address public wrongdoing	Caution or institutional distance versus accusations of selective concern	Collective silence may suggest moral concern

Source: Authors' analysis based on selected digital materials (2023–2026).

The differences summarized in Table 1 prevent a simple equation between silence and failure. Public criticism becomes sharper when non-response is linked to a perceived risk of harm or to selective concern, while restraint remains more defensible when it can be connected to verification and limited knowledge. The common issue is not the amount of speech produced. It is whether audiences regard the response as proportionate to the authority claimed, the seriousness of the controversy, and the

information reasonably available at the time. That relation became the main point of comparison across the clusters.

Religious Authority and the Expectation to Speak

The 2023 MUI statement treats digital silence as a problem of religious competence. KH Marsudi Syuhud argued that qualified da'i should not leave social media debates to people who speak about religion without sufficient knowledge (MUI, 2023a). The concern was not that every preacher must comment on every event. An open digital field can be filled by weak or misleading claims when recognised religious actors withdraw. Research on Indonesian digital religion supports this concern. Kholili et al. (2024) describe how digital proselytising operates in a media environment whose institutional boundaries remain unsettled. Hermansah et al. (2026) also show that established Islamic organisations now compete for authority inside social media fields rather than outside them.

Public visibility changes the practical meaning of authority. A preacher who appears regularly in a follower's feed becomes familiar as a source of interpretation, even when the relationship remains one sided. Repeated presence can create expectations without any formal promise to respond. Slama (2017) observed an earlier version of this change when social media altered relations between Indonesian preachers and their constituencies. Digital access made religious contact more frequent, more personal in appearance, and less dependent on scheduled encounters. That ordinary familiarity matters when a controversy suddenly creates demand for guidance.

The later MUI report on public attention to its statements shows how this expectation works institutionally. MUI recorded substantial online engagement when it addressed nationally salient issues, suggesting that public communication has become part of how institutional authority is encountered (MUI, 2023b). Religious authority is therefore experienced through patterns of appearance and response as well as knowledge. Rachman et al. (2025) describe a related transformation in social media *da'wah*. AlMazaedh et al. (2026) place the same issue in platform societies where authority is continually mediated by digital infrastructures.

Visibility does not create an unlimited duty to speak. Followers rarely expect the same response from every scholar, preacher, or organisation. Expectations rise when an issue is close to a figure's established field of preaching or when that figure has entered comparable debates before. They also rise when the controversy is understood as collective harm. Grgurić Čopa et al. (2024) show that influencers face moral dilemmas because followers extend role expectations beyond the activity that first made them visible. A religious influencer faces a stronger version of that problem because moral guidance is already part of the public role.

Popularity and authority should still be kept separate. A large audience can make a preacher more visible without making that preacher more competent to judge every religious or social issue. Digital publics do not always preserve this distinction, which can create unreasonable pressure for immediate opinion. The relevant expectation is therefore tied to recognised role and demonstrated competence, not follower count alone. This matters because the moral force of silence depends partly on whether the absent speaker could reasonably have been expected to contribute knowledge, guidance, or a principled public position. Silence becomes harder to read as neutral when audiences can compare it with a long archive of earlier speech. Social media preserves old statements and makes selective intervention visible. A preacher who comments quickly on personal morality but avoids an issue involving institutional misconduct may be judged through that contrast. The judgment can be unfair, especially when audiences know little about the preacher's information or constraints. Still, the comparison exists because the platform stores a public history of communicative choices.

Religious authority in digital settings therefore carries a contingent expectation of communicative presence. The expectation is not a legal duty and it is not fixed by theology alone. It develops through repeated public practice. Recognition, access, and habitual commentary make later absence more noticeable. Once an audience begins asking why a religious figure has not spoken, silence is already part of the controversy.

The Limits of Religious Silence

The second controversy cluster shows why silence cannot simply be treated as a failure. The allegation involving Syekh Ahmad Al Misry was publicly reported as a legal complaint involving five male students (ANTARA, 2026). A later statement by Ustaz Derry Sulaiman stressed the dangers of *ghibah*, misinformation, and premature judgment. He also urged audiences to wait for legal

adjudication. The response drew criticism from users who argued that public warning could be necessary when further harm was feared (Suara.com, 2026). The disagreement concerned the proper form and timing of religious communication rather than a simple choice between speaking and staying silent.

Tabayyun gives restraint a clear ethical basis. Unverified allegations can damage people irreversibly, and viral platforms reward speed before facts are settled. Husein and Slama (2018) show that Indonesian online piety already carries anxieties about how religious norms are performed under public visibility. Rohmawati et al. (2025) describe a related process in which social media creates hybrid religious practices and reworks offline norms through digital circulation. Caution in this setting is not an obstacle to communication. It can be a form of epistemic discipline, especially when a *da'i* lacks enough evidence to make a responsible judgment.

Caution becomes controversial when audiences interpret it as withdrawal from public responsibility. People may accept that guilt cannot be declared while still expecting acknowledgment of possible harm, support for reporting procedures, or a reminder that protection and verification can occur together. This is where religious non-response differs from organisational silence. Le et al. (2019) and Pang et al. (2022) mainly ask whether silence protects or damages an organisation during crisis. Digital *da'wah* adds a moral question about what a recognised religious voice owes to people who may be vulnerable.

Public criticism in the second cluster also shows that audiences fill gaps left by limited explanation. When a religious figure says little about why a definitive judgment is being withheld, users can supply their own reasons. They may see prudence, loyalty, fear, institutional protection, or indifference. Brady et al. (2021) help explain why these judgments can spread quickly because moral expression is reinforced through social feedback. Sharma (2023) shows that online moral outrage can also become a form of collective positioning. Neither process proves that public judgment is correct. It does show that silence does not remain under the speaker's control.

Legal process and religious communication also operate on different timelines. A court may need months or years to establish criminal responsibility, while a community may need immediate guidance about reporting, safety, or responsible discussion. Waiting for adjudication can be appropriate for a claim about guilt, but it does not answer every communicative need created by the controversy. The distinction is easy to lose online because a short post is often read as a complete moral position. A restrained response therefore becomes clearer when it states what remains unknown and what ethical duties can still be affirmed before the legal process ends.

Withholding judgment is not the same as withholding every form of presence. The first can be justified by uncertainty. The second becomes harder to defend when audiences believe that acknowledgment is possible without deciding disputed facts. A preacher can say that evidence is incomplete, discourage harassment, support lawful investigation, and recognise the need to prevent further harm. None of those acts requires a premature verdict.

The limit of silence is contextual rather than absolute. Restraint retains legitimacy when audiences can connect it to a recognisable ethical reason and when delay does not appear to ignore preventable harm. It loses legitimacy when absence is read as selective protection or moral indifference. The same silence can move from prudence to blame as the perceived stakes of a controversy change.

Islamic Communicative Non-Performance in Digital Publics

The corruption cluster makes the expectation of speech especially explicit. KH Mustain Syafi'i criticised kiai and ulama whom he regarded as silent while corruption continued to damage public life. A video of the sermon circulated widely and attracted strong support online (DetikJatim, 2026a). Follow-up coverage again highlighted his claim that wrongdoing becomes stronger when good people and religious figures do not act (DetikJatim, 2026b). The public response did more than endorse a severe proposal for punishing corruption. It also endorsed the idea that religious authority should become audible when an issue is understood as serious moral injury.

Islamic communicative non-performance captures this narrower relation. It applies when a religious response is publicly expected, the response is perceived as absent, delayed, or insufficient, and that perception affects how authority is judged. Proof that the silence was intentional is not required, nor does the concept assume that audiences are always fair in what they demand. Strategic silence remains useful when intention can be established through statements or other evidence. Communicative

non-performance begins elsewhere, with the observable relation between public expectation, perceived absence, and the judgment that follows.

The moral economy of expected speech explains why the same absence can be judged differently across controversies. Thompson (1971) used moral economy to describe practical norms through which people judged acceptable conduct. Sayer (2007) emphasises that ordinary social relations are saturated with moral evaluation. Digital Muslim publics also make practical judgments about what a religious authority should do. These judgments are not uniform. Some users value caution while others demand intervention. Some give institutional ulama greater responsibility than celebrity preachers. What holds the field together is not agreement but recurring evaluation of whether authority has responded in a fitting way.

Platform visibility intensifies those evaluations. Fauzi (2024) shows how religious authority can be challenged by micro-celebrity dynamics. Naamy (2023) describes new media as an arena in which religious authority is continuously negotiated. Aida et al. (2024) add that religious practice itself now moves through influencer and content-creator logics. Under these conditions, silence can be noticed at scale. Users can tag absent figures, revive old statements, and compare responses across issues. What once remained a private absence can become a public claim about inconsistency.

Platform memory also changes the time available for such judgments. Older sermons, captions, and videos remain searchable long after the circumstances in which they were produced have passed. An audience can place a current silence beside a statement made years earlier and treat the contrast as evidence of selective concern. That comparison may ignore changes in knowledge or context, yet it still shapes public interpretation. Digital authority is therefore exposed to a form of retrospective consistency testing that was far more difficult when *da'wah* circulated mainly through local and temporary encounters.

The concept should not become a demand for constant commentary. Digital *da'wah* already rewards quick opinion and participation in every trending dispute. Constant speech would weaken the epistemic restraint that religious authority also requires. Campbell (2007) and Campbell (2010) remain useful here because online authority is attached to different roles and forms of competence. A scholar's refusal to speak outside an area of knowledge can strengthen rather than weaken credibility.

A more defensible standard is proportionate presence. The response should match what is known, the likely harm, and the actor's actual competence. Sometimes that response will be a clear moral position. Sometimes it will be a statement that facts remain uncertain. At other times, silence may still be the least harmful option. Islamic communicative non-performance arises only when audiences believe that the absence conflicts with the authority that has been publicly claimed or recognised.

This account also changes how digital *da'wah* can be studied. Research often treats religious authority as something built through content, interaction, and visibility. Kholili et al. (2024) show the institutional difficulties created by digital proselytising. AlMazaedh et al. (2026) describe authority as increasingly mediated by platform structures. The three cases add a quieter dimension. Authority can also be revised through what does not appear. A missing response becomes meaningful because earlier speech and public recognition have already established the expectation against which the absence is judged. Picture 1 represents this relation as a sequence in which recognized authority generates expectations of presence, perceived non-response invites public interpretation, and those interpretations feed back into evaluations of religious authority.

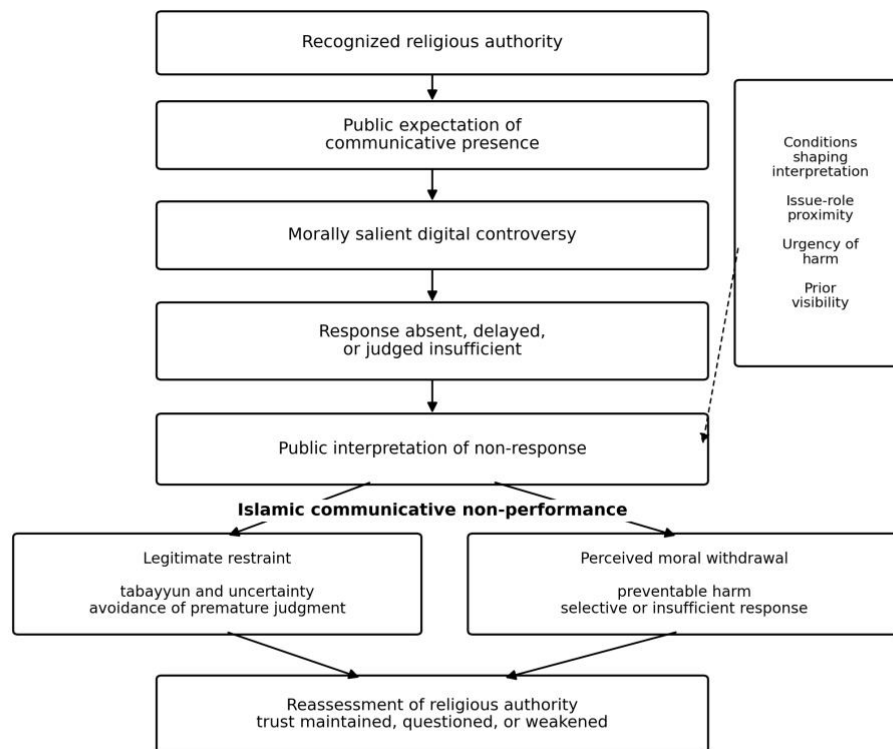


Figure 1 Islamic Communicative Non-Performance in Digital Islamic Publics

CONCLUSION

Religious silence becomes publicly consequential when recognised authority meets a strong expectation of communicative presence. The three Indonesian controversy clusters show different forms of that expectation. One demanded that qualified da'i occupy a digital space crowded with weak religious claims. Another exposed tension between *tabayyun* and public concern about possible harm. The third treated ulama silence toward corruption as a moral failure. None of these episodes proves that religious figures must speak on every public issue. They show that digital publics increasingly evaluate the conditions under which silence is considered acceptable. Islamic communicative non-performance names the point at which a perceived absence begins to affect the meaning of religious authority. The concept is relational rather than intention based. A da'i may remain silent for reasons that are careful and ethically defensible, yet audiences can still interpret the absence differently. Withholding judgment therefore does not have to mean withdrawing every form of communicative presence.

The study is limited by its small archival corpus and by reliance on public documents rather than interviews with preachers or direct collection of platform comments. The framework needs testing across larger controversies and different Muslim settings. Interviews could examine why religious actors decide not to speak, while audience research could test how people distinguish caution from avoidance, how long a delay remains acceptable, and whether expectations change with the perceived seriousness of harm. Comparative work could also examine whether institutional ulama, independent da'i, and religious influencers are judged by different standards. Even with those limits, silence deserves a stable place in Islamic communication research. Digital authority is shaped not only by eloquence and visibility. It is also shaped by moments when a public that has learned to expect a religious voice finds that voice absent.

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