Journal of Religious Movements
Vol. 1. No. 1 (2026), pp. 59-73
DOI: 10.66277/jrm.1.1.384

e-ISSN: xxxx-xxxx
Elkuator Research & Publication

Tolerated Religious Deviance in Indonesian Digital Islam: The Mama Ghufron Phenomenon

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Received: 20 February 2026 | Revised: 14 May 2026 | Accepted: 12 June 2026

Abstract
The Mama Ghufron controversy in Indonesian digital Islam raises a broader question about how disputed religious authority is classified when strong doctrinal criticism does not develop into equivalent legal or security escalation. Using a qualitative, source-based case-study design, we examine mainstream media reports, official statements from the Indonesian Ulama Council (MUI), legal records from contrastive blasphemy cases, and scholarship on digital religion, mediated authority, platformization, and religious regulation. We employ tolerated religious deviance as the principal analytical category, referring to a condition in which religious claims remain publicly circulable under criticism without being doctrinally accepted or fully incorporated into criminal or security frameworks. The analysis shows that perceived eccentricity, limited political threat, institutional correction, fragmented media circulation, ridicule, and platform-conditioned visibility together shape this intermediate position. The MUI response demonstrates that toleration does not imply institutional silence, while comparison with the Lina Lutfiawati and Aulia Rakhman cases highlights how intentionality, sacred referents, public mobilization, and legal classification influence different trajectories of escalation. The Mama Ghufron case therefore reveals how movement-like religious formations may remain socially durable through controversy, correction, oppositional attention, and repeated circulation even when their authority is publicly disputed and their claims remain outside recognized standards of religious legitimacy. Conceptually, this framework clarifies how religious boundary-making operates between recognized authority, criminalized blasphemy, securitized threat, and publicly tolerated deviance.

Keywords: religious deviance; Mama Ghufron; religious authority; Indonesian Islam; blasphemy.

Introduction

By mid-2024, short clips associated with Mama Ghufron had moved well beyond the local setting of Pondok Pesantren UNIQ Nusantara and entered a wider Indonesian digital controversy. Reports published on 28 and 29 June foregrounded claims attributed to him about speaking the language of ants, using Suryani language (as he claimed), and possessing forms of extraordinary spiritual access, while the same reports also presented explanations from people connected to the *pesantren* who regarded some of the viral fragments as decontextualized.[1] What appeared in public

[1] Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'MUI Dorong Ada Penyelesaian Sikapi Polemik Mama Ghufron,' July 9, 2024; Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'Respons Polemik Mama Ghufron, MUI Lakukan Kajian Termasuk Video Call dengan Malaikat Maut,' July 9, 2024.

was therefore not a stable portrait of a new religious movement with an agreed doctrine, formal membership, or organizational manifesto, but a controversy assembled from fragments that could be detached from the original sermon, reframed by journalists, disputed by religious commentators, and recirculated as objects of curiosity or ridicule. The subsequent intervention of the Indonesian Ulama Council (Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI) further complicates any attempt to describe the case as merely comic or marginal, because the council publicly acknowledged the controversy, undertook further examination, and coordinated with its regional bodies in East Java and Malang. The sociological puzzle lies in the coexistence of these processes: strong religious criticism and institutional scrutiny did occur, yet the available public record did not develop into a nationally visible criminal or security pathway comparable to several other Indonesian disputes over religious speech.[2]

The contrast between visibility and punitive escalation matters because controversies over religion in Indonesia do not move automatically from theological disagreement to legal sanction. A statement can be treated as misleading without being prosecuted, corrected by religious authorities without being securitized, or ridiculed in public without being recognized as legitimate. The Mama Ghufron controversy sits precisely within this unstable middle ground. MUI officials described several circulating claims as potentially misleading and discussed correction, guidance, and the possibility of a legal route, but those responses remained distinguishable from a completed criminal process or from the language commonly associated with militant politics and violent extremism. This intermediate position should not be romanticized as pluralism, because public circulation under ridicule can reproduce strong hierarchies of credibility and religious knowledge; neither should it be reduced to institutional silence, since the documentary record clearly shows intervention. The problem is better framed around differential classification: how do religious institutions, media organizations, legal actors, and wider publics decide whether contested religious speech belongs primarily to the field of doctrinal correction, ridicule, public disorder, religious insult, or political threat? That question moves beyond the truth or falsity of Mama Ghufron's claims and directs attention to the social processes through which disputed authority is made tolerable, punishable, laughable, or dangerous.[3]

Research on Indonesian digital Islam offers an important foundation for approaching this problem, although it has largely concentrated on forms of religious authority that seek followers, cultivate piety, or organize collective practice. Husein and Slama show how social media produces new anxieties around online piety and religious self-presentation, while Nisa demonstrates that digital communication can support the formation of an Islamic social movement through disciplined practices that extend between online and offline settings. Hew's analysis of Felix Siauw similarly illustrates how visual persuasion and social-media performance interact with face-to-face preaching, and Slama situates these cases within a broader reorganization of Islamic practice through digital media. Taken together, these studies make it difficult to treat social media as a neutral channel that simply carries pre-existing religious authority unchanged. They also reveal, however, a gap that becomes visible in the Mama Ghufron case. Much of the established literature asks how actors use media to build authority, mobilize publics, or sustain recognizable religious programs; less attention has been given to situations in which a religious figure remains highly

[2] Avirista Midaada, 'Geger Ponpes UNIQ Nusantara Malang Usai Ceramah Bahasa Semut Abuya Ghufron,' SINDOnews, June 28, 2024; Avirista Midaada, 'Filosofi Ceramah Bahasa 'Semut' Abuya Mama Ghufron Ulama Ponpes di Malang,' Okezone News, June 28, 2024; Avirista Midaada, 'Viral Ceramah Abuya Ghufron, Ulama Ponpes di Malang yang Mengaku Bisa Bahasa Semut,' iNews, June 28, 2024; Mutmainah J., 'Ngaku Bisa Bahasa Semut, Abuya Ghufron Ulama Ponpes dari Malang Viral,' Jatim Times, June 29, 2024.

[3] Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'MUI Dorong Ada Penyelesaian'; Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'Respons Polemik Mama Ghufron.'

visible while his credibility is simultaneously contested by large sections of the public. The relevant phenomenon is therefore not successful digital preaching in the usual sense, but the social durability of disputed authority when criticism, correction, disbelief, and amusement all contribute to continued circulation.[4]

The literature on mediated religious authority sharpens this distinction by showing that authority in digital environments is performed through forms of visibility that are not reducible to institutional credentials. Turner argued that new media weaken older monopolies over religious knowledge by expanding access and accelerating circulation, while Campbell's work on digital creatives emphasizes the changing processes through which religious authority is negotiated in technologically mediated settings. Febrian's recent study of Indonesian religious influencers likewise demonstrates how visual strategies can construct and negotiate authority on Instagram. Mama Ghufron should not be equated with the polished influencers examined in this scholarship, because the available sources do not establish that he deliberately cultivated an influencer persona or designed a systematic digital strategy. His relevance lies in a different relation between visibility and legitimacy. A religious figure may become recognizable before questions of doctrinal credibility are settled, and recognition can be sustained by hostile as well as supportive attention. Once public prominence is analytically separated from accepted authority, ridicule and correction no longer appear as external reactions that simply follow a religious phenomenon; they become part of the social environment through which the phenomenon is reproduced. This distinction allows us to ask how contested charisma travels across publics that evaluate the same figure according to different standards of knowledge, trust, and religious plausibility.[5]

Platform studies adds another dimension because digital circulation depends on infrastructures that reward portability, repetition, and visible engagement even when users disagree about the material being circulated. Van Dijck and Poell identify programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication as central elements of social-media logic, while Nieborg and Poell describe platformization as a process through which cultural materials become increasingly contingent on the infrastructures that distribute and repackage them. Campbell and Tsuria make a parallel intervention in digital religion by emphasizing that online and offline religious practice are now deeply entangled rather than separable domains. These approaches do not permit a claim that a specific TikTok recommendation system caused Mama Ghufron's visibility, because no recommendation logs, platform analytics, or systematic engagement archive are available. They do, however, help explain why an unusual sermon fragment can move through multiple contexts without retaining a single meaning. A journalist can frame it as controversy, a religious scholar can reproduce it in order to correct it, an institutional statement can cite it as a problem requiring review, and a user can circulate the same fragment as humor. In each case the content remains publicly active, even though the communicative intention and evaluation change. Platform-conditioned circulation therefore offers a stronger conceptual language than any simple assumption that virality proves popularity or persuasion.[6]

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[4] Fatimah Husein and Martin Slama, 'Online Piety and Its Discontent: Revisiting Islamic Anxieties on Indonesian Social Media,' Indonesia and the Malay World 46, no. 134 (2018): 80–93; Eva F. Nisa, 'Social Media and the Birth of an Islamic Social Movement: ODOJ (One Day One Juz) in Contemporary Indonesia,' Indonesia and the Malay World 46, no. 134 (2018): 24–43; Wai Weng Hew, 'The Art of Dakwah: Social Media, Visual Persuasion and the Islamist Propagation of Felix Siauw,' Indonesia and the Malay World 46, no. 134 (2018): 61–79; Martin Slama, 'Practising Islam through Social Media in Indonesia,' Indonesia and the Malay World 46, no. 134 (2018): 1–4.

[5] Bryan S. Turner, 'Religious Authority and the New Media,' Theory, Culture & Society 24, no. 2 (2007): 117–34; Heidi A. Campbell, Digital Creatives and the Rethinking of Religious Authority (London: Routledge, 2021); Harry Febrian, 'Visualizing Authority: Rise of the Religious Influencers on the Instagram,' Social Media + Society 10, no. 4 (2024): 1–19.

[6] José van Dijck and Thomas Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic,' Media and Communication 1, no. 1 (2013): 2–14; David B. Nieborg and Thomas Poell, 'The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent

Humor and ridicule belong within this process of classification because laughter can mark a boundary without requiring the formal mechanisms of law or security. Billig's social critique of humor is useful precisely because it refuses to treat ridicule as an innocent emotional release; ridicule can discipline behavior, signal social inferiority, and define what a community regards as foolish or unacceptable. In the Mama Ghufron controversy, the significance of humor does not depend on assuming that every viewer reacted in the same way, since the available material is not an audience survey and cannot support that generalization. What can be observed is a public register in which extraordinary claims were repeatedly made available as objects of incredulity, correction, and amusement. That register creates an ambivalent form of tolerance. A disputed figure may remain visible without being treated as a political enemy, while ridicule simultaneously denies him epistemic parity with recognized religious authorities. Such tolerance is therefore neither respect nor indifference; it is continued circulation under conditions of hierarchy and contestation. This distinction also matters for understanding why amusement can coexist with institutional concern, because MUI's public interventions did not eliminate the humorous framing already attached to the controversy, and corrective responses themselves entered the same media circuits through which the disputed material continued to travel.[7]

The legal literature on blasphemy in Indonesia further demonstrates that doctrinal controversy becomes legally consequential through processes of interpretation, complaint, institutional mobilization, and political framing rather than through theological disagreement alone. Crouch shows how Indonesia's blasphemy regime is negotiated through state institutions, Telle highlights the role of civilian and religious actors in activating the law through religious lawfare, and Tyson emphasizes the instability of meaning and intention in cases where religious offense enters judicial institutions. These studies suggest that comparison should be organized around the pathways through which disputed speech becomes institutionally legible. A statement may be framed as deliberate insult to a sacred object, as heresy requiring correction, as speech that threatens public order, or as eccentricity that remains primarily within religious and media controversy. The Mama Ghufron case becomes analytically valuable because it can be placed beside cases that moved more clearly into criminal adjudication, especially Lina Lutfiawati and Aulia Rakhman, without assuming that these controversies are identical in content or legal structure. The contrast directs attention to intentionality, the sacred referent involved, organizational pressure, the availability of a prosecutorial pathway, and the degree to which public narratives connect disputed speech with broader threats to social and political order.[8]

Religious-movement studies provides the final piece of the analytical framework, but it also requires restraint in naming the object under examination. Barker and Dawson emphasize durable organization, patterns of commitment, leadership relations, recurrent practices, and shared narratives when analyzing new or alternative religious movements. The available record on Mama Ghufron is much richer in public controversy than in the internal social life of his followers, which means that a fully institutionalized movement cannot be reconstructed from these materials. A local religious audience, a *pesantren* setting, recurrent teaching, claims of extraordinary knowledge, and visible followers or attendees nevertheless create a movement-like formation that acquires additional social reality through the actions of journalists, critics, institutional officials, and digital

Cultural Commodity,' New Media & Society 20, no. 11 (2018): 4275–92; Heidi A. Campbell and Ruth Tsuria, eds., Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2022).

7 Michael Billig, Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour (London: SAGE, 2005).

8 Melissa A. Crouch, 'Law and Religion in Indonesia: The Constitutional Court and the Blasphemy Law,' Asian Journal of Comparative Law 7, no. 1 (2012); Kari Telle, 'Faith on Trial: Blasphemy and 'Lawfare' in Indonesia,' Ethnos 83, no. 2 (2018): 371–91; Adam Tyson, 'Blasphemy and Judicial Legitimacy in Indonesia,' Politics and Religion 14, no. 1 (2021): 182–205.

publics. We therefore ask how the Mama Ghufron controversy became publicly tolerable despite explicit religious criticism, and what this trajectory reveals about the classification of disputed religious authority in Indonesian digital Islam. We use tolerated religious deviance to describe a condition in which religious claims are publicly marked as misleading, excessive, eccentric, or outside accepted standards while remaining predominantly within correction, ridicule, review, and mediated circulation rather than moving into a completed pathway of securitization or criminal prosecution. The concept does not designate theological truth, social equality, or deliberate state protection; it identifies a historically contingent institutional and media location that must be demonstrated through the particular trajectory of the case.[9]

Method

We employ a qualitative, source-based case-study design focused on the public formation surrounding Mama Ghufron rather than on the private beliefs of his followers. The immediate case corpus is chronologically concentrated around four Indonesian media reports published on 28 and 29 June 2024 and two official MUI statements published on 9 July 2024. Three of the four June reports were written by the same journalist for different outlets, so repeated publication is treated as evidence of media circulation and framing rather than as independent corroboration of every factual claim. Sources were included when they directly identified Mama Ghufron, documented a specific public statement, reported an institutional response, or offered an attributable explanation from actors connected to the *pesantren*. The 2022 MUI East Java fatwa on ethics of digital da'wah and subsequent academic discussions are used to reconstruct the institutional vocabulary available for evaluating digital preaching, while their temporal relation to the 2024 controversy is kept explicit so that a general fatwa is not misrepresented as a case-specific ruling. We distinguish the evidentiary roles of these materials throughout the analysis: journalism records public framing and reported reactions, official MUI publications document institutional positions, and peer-reviewed scholarship supplies theoretical and comparative interpretation. This design privileges traceable public evidence and avoids treating rumors, unattributed social-media commentary, or unverified claims about internal community life as empirical findings.[10]

Two legal controversies are used as contrastive cases: the 2023 conviction of Lina Lutfiawati, documented in the official Supreme Court decision directory, and the 2024 conviction of comedian Aulia Rakhman, documented through reputable court reporting. The comparison is organized around the nature of the disputed act, attributed intentionality, relation to recognized sacred symbols, the presence of complaints or institutional mobilization, the emergence of a formal legal pathway, and the degree to which the controversy was associated with public-order or security concerns. These cases do not constitute a controlled comparative sample and are not used to establish a single causal explanation for the different outcomes; their function is to make visible the classificatory and institutional differences surrounding Mama Ghufron.[11] Thematic reading connects these materials with scholarship on mediated religious authority, social-media logic, platformization, humor, and blasphemy regulation. We first reconstruct how the controversy was framed, then examine the documented intervention of religious institutions, and finally compare

[9] Eileen Barker, New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, 1989); Lorne L. Dawson, Comprehending Cults: The Sociology of New Religious Movements, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[10] Midaada, 'Geger Ponpes UNIQ Nusantara'; Midaada, 'Filosofi Ceramah Bahasa 'Semut''; Midaada, 'Viral Ceramah Abuya Ghufron'; Mutmainah J., 'Ngaku Bisa Bahasa Semut'; Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'MUI Dorong Ada Penyelesaian'; Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'Respons Polemik Mama Ghufron'; Majelis Ulama Indonesia Provinsi Jawa Timur, Fatwa Nomor 06 Tahun 2022 tentang Etika Dakwah di Era Digital (2022).

[11] Campbell and Tsuria, Digital Religion; van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic'; Nieborg and Poell, 'Platformization of Cultural Production'; Crouch, 'Law and Religion in Indonesia'; Telle, 'Faith on Trial.'

that trajectory with the legal escalation visible in the two contrast cases. The absence of systematic archives of original posts, comments, view counts, recommendation data, interviews, participant observation, membership records, and direct financial information narrows the kinds of inference that can responsibly be made. Audience motives, follower belief, algorithmic causation, and economic gain are therefore approached through the limits and possibilities of the documented public record rather than treated as directly measured variables.[12]

Results and Discussion

Tolerated Religious Deviance and Institutional Boundary-Making

The most important feature of the institutional response is that criticism and toleration were not opposites. MUI officials publicly expressed concern about teachings attributed to Mama Ghufron, stated that further examination was underway, coordinated with organizational bodies in East Java and Malang, and referred to correction, guidance, and the possibility of a legal route if circumstances required it. These interventions place the controversy firmly within the field of institutional boundary-making, because mainstream religious authority did not remain neutral about the claims circulating in public. At the same time, the documented response differed from a completed criminal prosecution or a security classification associated with violent extremism. The distinction is crucial for understanding what tolerance means in this case. It does not describe approval, doctrinal recognition, or deliberate protection by the state; rather, it identifies a trajectory in which religious disapproval, investigation, and public correction coexist with continued circulation and with the absence, in the sources examined here, of the strongest legal and security mechanisms available. We therefore use tolerated religious deviance for an uneven institutional location in which a figure is marked as religiously problematic while remaining outside a completed punitive pathway. This formulation also avoids reducing the case to a simple opposition between orthodoxy and deviance, because the response reveals several gradations of governance operating simultaneously through religious organizations, media framing, public ridicule, and the possibility, but not the realization, of further legal escalation.[13]

The 2022 MUI East Java fatwa on digital da'wah helps clarify the normative vocabulary that later shaped criticism of Mama Ghufron, although its chronology must remain explicit. Issued two years before the controversy, the fatwa addresses ethical responsibilities in online preaching, including concerns about provocative content, attacks on other groups, threats to national cohesion, and the social consequences of religious communication. Subsequent scholarship has interpreted the fatwa through Pancasila, religious moderation, and professional accountability, while a 2024 conference paper applied the earlier ethical framework directly to the Mama Ghufron controversy. This sequence is more analytically useful than treating the fatwa as if it had been issued specifically against him, because it shows how an existing normative repertoire can be activated when a new religious controversy emerges. Religious institutions do not need to create a new doctrinal ruling for every disputed figure; they can draw on established standards of responsible preaching to evaluate whether a public performance meets expectations of accountability, professionalism, and social responsibility. The Mama Ghufron case therefore reveals an intermediate form of governance located below criminal law but above informal disagreement. Correction within an ethics-of-da'wah framework can be consequential even when no court case follows, since it publicly marks the boundaries of responsible religious speech,

[12] Indonesian Supreme Court Decision Directory, Putusan PN Palembang Nomor 726/Pid.Sus/2023/PN Plg, September 19, 2023; Reuters, 'Indonesian Court Jails Comedian for Joking about the Name Muhammad,' June 11, 2024.

[13] Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'MUI Dorong Ada Penyelesaian'; Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'Respons Polemik Mama Ghufron.'

authorizes particular forms of criticism, and provides institutions with a language for distinguishing problematic preaching from militant or intentionally insulting conduct.[14]

Seen across different institutional fields, religious deviance does not pass through a single switch that automatically converts theological criticism into punishment. Religious organizations are concerned with doctrine, ethical preaching, and public pedagogy; courts require a legally cognizable offense and a pathway of complaint, investigation, prosecution, and adjudication; security institutions respond to different indicators, such as organized violence, militant recruitment, or threats to public order. Mama Ghufron's controversy crossed the first field clearly, because MUI publicly intervened and the 2022 East Java fatwa offered a relevant ethical vocabulary, whereas the available sources do not show equivalent movement through a nationally visible criminal or security process. This unevenness matters because the same religious statement can acquire different institutional meanings depending on who interprets it and what consequences are attributed to it. A religious scholar may emphasize error or irresponsible da'wah, a journalist may foreground novelty and controversy, a legal complainant may seek to frame an utterance as insult, while security institutions may find little reason to intervene in the absence of militant organization or public disorder. Tolerated religious deviance describes the resulting overlap of boundaries, where one form of authority is strongly challenged without every other institution adopting the same classificatory frame. Its analytical value lies precisely in refusing to infer consensus from the absence of prosecution or indifference from the presence of continued public circulation.[15]

The category also clarifies why radicalism should remain peripheral rather than central to the interpretation. Nothing in the documented corpus presents Mama Ghufron as organizing followers around deradicalization, anti-extremism, violent politics, or a state program of religious moderation, and the same materials do not portray his community as engaged in militant mobilization. The public dispute instead revolves around extraordinary linguistic and spiritual claims, the credibility of religious authority, and the ethical responsibilities of preaching. Describing this pattern as non-securitized deviance is more precise than treating it as a form of counter-radicalism, because the relevant distinction concerns the absence of a security frame rather than the presence of an anti-radical project. Low political threat is nonetheless part of the observed trajectory: media reports and MUI statements foreground misleading teachings and public religious understanding rather than organized violence or anti-state mobilization. That feature helps explain why correction remained more visible than securitization, although it should not be turned into a universal causal rule. A similar religious controversy could move into a different institutional register if followers were mobilized into conflict, if another religious community became a direct target, or if public disorder became attached to the dispute. Toleration is therefore contingent on how a case develops across institutional arenas, and the Mama Ghufron controversy captures one moment within that shifting process rather than a permanent identity attached to the person or community.[16]

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[14] Majelis Ulama Indonesia Provinsi Jawa Timur, Fatwa Nomor 06 Tahun 2022; Athoillah Islamy, 'Sinergitas Pancasila dan Fatwa tentang Etika Dakwah di Era Digital,' POROS ONIM: Jurnal Sosial Keagamaan 4, no. 1 (2023): 12–23; Fikri Hailal and Lailiyatun Nafisah, 'Peran Fatwa Ulama dan Fenomena Dakwah Mama Ghufron,' in Proceedings of the 8th International Annual Conference on Fatwa MUI (2024): 99–110; Agus Fatuh Widoyo et al., 'Moderation of Religion in the Fatwa of Majelis Ulama Indonesia about the Ethics of Da'wah in the Digital Age,' Jurnal Ilmu Dakwah 43, no. 1 (2023): 107–19.

[15] Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'MUI Dorong Ada Penyelesaian'; Crouch, 'Law and Religion in Indonesia'; Telle, 'Faith on Trial.'

[16] Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'MUI Dorong Ada Penyelesaian'; Majelis Ulama Indonesia, 'Respons Polemik Mama Ghufron.'

Platformed Circulation, Ridicule, and the Attention Economy

The movement of Mama Ghufron's controversial statements across digital media is better understood through changing conditions of circulation than through a direct attribution of causality to recommendation algorithms. One Okezone report recorded a defense from the *pesantren* side that the much-discussed 'language of ants' should be understood philosophically and that viral fragments had been detached from a wider context. Whether that explanation resolves the theological dispute falls outside our sociological purpose, but the defense exposes a conflict over contextual authority. A local religious setting provides narrative, pedagogical, and relational cues that may shape how participants interpret a statement, whereas a circulated fragment is encountered by publics who often lack access to those cues and instead receive the material through headlines, captions, corrective videos, or commentary. Once the fragment becomes the primary object of encounter, control over meaning shifts from the speaker and local community toward journalists, religious critics, platform users, and institutions that reframe it for other audiences. The controversy therefore changes as it moves. A claim that may have been embedded in a longer sermon becomes a portable sign of eccentricity; a defense intended to restore context becomes another item in the public record; and institutional correction keeps the disputed material recognizable even while challenging its legitimacy. Digital mediation is not simply a technical stage between speaker and audience but an arena in which the religious meaning, credibility, and social relevance of the statement are repeatedly renegotiated.[17]

Social-media logic and platformization help explain why this renegotiation can continue even when audiences remain unconvinced. Van Dijck and Poell describe programmability, popularity, connectivity, and datafication as organizing principles of platformed communication, while Nieborg and Poell show how cultural materials become modular and contingent as they are reformatted within platform infrastructures. In that environment, religious content does not need to persuade in order to remain circulable. Journalists can foreground the unusual aspects of a sermon because novelty is newsworthy, religious scholars can reproduce a contested phrase in order to explain why it is problematic, and ordinary users can share the same material to signal disbelief, concern, amusement, or distance.[18] These practices do not reveal the operation of a specific recommendation algorithm, but they do show a recursive pattern in which multiple actors repeatedly return the controversy to public attention. Indonesian research on digital preaching strengthens this interpretation because mediated authority has been shown to depend on forms of presentation as well as institutional credentials. Hew's work on Felix Siauw and Febrian's analysis of Indonesian religious influencers demonstrate how visual and platformed strategies shape the public encounter with religious expertise. Mama Ghufron differs substantially from those actors, yet the common condition is that visibility is mediated. In his case, negative mediation often increases recognizability while undermining authoritative recognition, making visibility and legitimacy move along different trajectories.[19]

Ridicule intensifies this separation because it offers audiences a recognizable stance toward a disputed claim without requiring sustained doctrinal engagement. Billig's account of laughter and ridicule treats humor as a practice of social boundary-making, capable of marking what a community regards as improper, foolish, or inferior. The Mama Ghufron controversy illustrates how such boundary work can operate alongside formal religious criticism. A viewer who encounters a fragment already framed as implausible may participate by laughing, reposting, or

[17] Midaada, 'Filosofi Ceramah Bahasa 'Semut' Abuya Mama Ghufron.'
[18] Hew, 'Art of Dakwah'; Febrian, 'Visualizing Authority.'
[19] van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic'; Nieborg and Poell, 'Platformization of Cultural Production.'

repeating the statement, thereby rejecting the religious authority attached to it while simultaneously extending its public life. This dynamic does not imply that all users share the same reaction, and the available corpus cannot measure the distribution of amusement, support, anger, or indifference across audiences. The significance lies instead in the public register created by repeated framing: unusual claims become objects that can be handled through humor as readily as through theological correction. Such a register may lower the apparent political temperature of a controversy because the speaker is coded more readily as eccentric than as threatening, yet ridicule is not a neutral or egalitarian form of tolerance. It can reinforce hierarchies between recognized experts and supposedly gullible followers, turning religious difference into a spectacle of intellectual superiority. Continued circulation under ridicule therefore combines toleration with symbolic exclusion, and that combination helps explain why the case remained socially visible without becoming institutionally normalized.[20]

The same recursive circulation places the controversy within an attention economy, although the form of value involved should not be confused with direct financial gain received by Mama Ghufron or Pondok Pesantren UNIQ Nusantara. Fealy's analysis of commodified Islam remains useful for showing how religious symbols and practices can enter circuits of consumption, while platformization clarifies how cultural content can generate value for intermediaries whose interests differ sharply from those of the original speaker.[21] A news outlet may benefit from the curiosity produced by an unusual claim, a religious teacher may attract an audience by explaining why the claim should be rejected, and platform users may increase the recognizability of a disputed figure precisely while expressing contempt or disbelief. These actors do not share one motive or theological position, yet their activities converge in keeping the controversy searchable, quotable, and reusable. Correction and amplification are therefore not simple opposites, because a corrective act must identify at least part of what it seeks to refute, and media contextualization necessarily reproduces some of the material that generated attention. Digital religion research has repeatedly shown that online and offline authority are entangled rather than separated into distinct worlds. Mama Ghufron adds a negative variant of that insight: opponents can contribute to social durability even while contesting legitimacy, and mediated visibility can persist because controversy itself supplies a recurring resource for explanation, criticism, and amusement.[22]

Blasphemy, Legal Escalation, and Differential Classification

The contrast with Lina Lutfiawati demonstrates why legal escalation cannot be inferred directly from the mere presence of religious controversy. In September 2023, the Palembang District Court convicted Lina Lutfiawati, widely known as Lina Mukherjee, under Indonesia's electronic-information framework after a video in which she recited an Islamic prayer before eating pork became the subject of public complaint and legal action; the official decision directory records a two-year prison sentence and a fine. Her case reached criminal adjudication because the disputed act became institutionally legible as a deliberate juxtaposition of sacred language with conduct regarded as religiously prohibited, and the controversy was translated into a prosecutable legal claim. Whatever one's normative assessment of the judgment, the procedural trajectory is clear: public offense generated complaint, legal investigation, prosecution, and a court decision. Mama Ghufron's case followed a different route. His statements were criticized as implausible, misleading, or religiously irresponsible, but the available record examined here does not show a

[20] Billig, Laughter and Ridicule.
[21] Husein and Slama, 'Online Piety and Its Discontent'; Campbell and Tsuria, Digital Religion.
[22] Greg Fealy, 'Consuming Islam: Commodified Religion and Aspirational Pietism in Contemporary Indonesia,' in Expressing Islam: Religious Life and Politics in Indonesia, ed. Greg Fealy and Sally White (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2008), 15–39; Nieborg and Poell, 'Platformization of Cultural Production.'

comparable national criminal process. The difference cannot be reduced to a simple hierarchy in which one form of religious wrongness is inherently more serious than another, because legal escalation depends on how an act is framed, who mobilizes around it, what sacred referent is involved, how intentionality is attributed, and whether the controversy can be translated into the categories required by criminal law.[23]

Aulia Rakhman's case reinforces this point from a different angle. Reuters reported that a court in Lampung sentenced the comedian to seven months in prison in June 2024 after a joke about the name Muhammad was treated as violating blasphemy law. Here again, the disputed act could be narrated through a clear sacred referent and interpreted as intentional insult rather than as eccentric religious authority. The contrast with Mama Ghufron does not establish that one utterance was objectively more offensive, nor does it require a theological ranking of injury. It shows instead that different acts become legible to institutions through different narratives. A joke directed toward the name of the Prophet can be framed as disrespect toward a recognized sacred symbol; a public performance involving extraordinary linguistic and spiritual claims can be framed as misleading preaching, implausibility, or abuse of religious authority. These narratives influence which actors become central to the response. Legal complainants, police, prosecutors, and courts were visible in the Lina and Aulia trajectories, whereas MUI review, ethical correction, media controversy, and ridicule were more visible in the Mama Ghufron case. Differential classification therefore precedes differential institutionalization: before the state acts through criminal law, a controversy has already been interpreted through categories such as insult, heresy, irresponsibility, eccentricity, or threat, and those categories shape the pathway that becomes possible.[24]

Indonesian scholarship on blasphemy law provides a stronger explanation for these divergent pathways than any assumption that doctrinal error automatically triggers punishment. Crouch emphasizes the institutional negotiation surrounding law and religion, Telle demonstrates how civilian and religious actors can activate blasphemy law through organizational pressure, and Tyson shows that questions of meaning, intention, and political context remain central to judicial legitimacy. Several dimensions therefore need to be considered together. The nature of the disputed act matters because explicit reference to a sacred symbol can facilitate a claim of insult; attributed intention matters because institutions often ask what a speaker was understood to be doing; mobilization matters because complaints and organizational pressure can carry controversy into legal institutions; and public-order narratives matter because religious offense is frequently connected to claims about social stability. The Mama Ghufron record is notable for a different combination. Institutional actors clearly objected to his teachings, but the dominant public framing concerned credibility and misleading da'wah rather than a deliberate attack on a sacred object, while militant or anti-state mobilization was largely absent from the materials examined. These features do not prove a single causal mechanism, yet together they help explain why religious correction remained more prominent than prosecution or securitization. The relevant outcome is therefore best understood as a pathway produced through interacting classifications rather than as the automatic consequence of a particular type of speech.[25]

Placing the three cases side by side also prevents the analysis from becoming an argument for harsher punishment. Scholarship on Indonesian blasphemy law has repeatedly raised concerns about majoritarian pressure, ambiguity of intention, religious lawfare, and the legitimacy of criminalizing religious offense. The value of comparison lies elsewhere: it reveals a broad zone between recognized orthodoxy and criminalized blasphemy in which disputed religious speech

[23] Indonesian Supreme Court Decision Directory, Putusan PN Palembang Nomor 726/Pid.Sus/2023/PN Plg.
[24] Reuters, 'Indonesian Court Jails Comedian for Joking about the Name Muhammad.'
[25] Crouch, 'Law and Religion in Indonesia'; Telle, 'Faith on Trial'; Tyson, 'Blasphemy and Judicial Legitimacy.'

may be corrected, investigated, mocked, or socially marginalized without reaching court. Much everyday boundary-making takes place within this zone, yet it can disappear from scholarship when attention is concentrated primarily on prosecutions. Mama Ghufron's controversy demonstrates how perceived eccentricity, weak security framing, and institutional correction can combine to keep a case within this intermediate register, at least for the period documented by the available sources. The trajectory remains contingent. A later complaint, a new institutional ruling, political mobilization, interreligious conflict, or public disorder could alter the classification and move the case toward another pathway. Tolerated religious deviance therefore describes a historically situated relation among speech, institutions, and publics rather than a protected legal status. Its comparative usefulness lies in showing that non-prosecution is not a residual category of cases the state simply ignores, but a field structured by alternative forms of regulation, evaluation, ridicule, and religious governance.[26]

Charisma, Competing Publics, and Tolerated Religious Formation

Media reporting indicates the existence of a recurring local audience around Mama Ghufron, including accounts from representatives of the *pesantren* that night religious gatherings could attract several hundred participants, although attendance figures alone reveal very little about the social meanings attached to participation. People may attend a religious gathering because of trust in a teacher, local relationships, ritual routine, expectations of spiritual benefit, kinship obligations, curiosity, or combinations of motives that cannot be reconstructed from journalistic reporting. Our source base is concentrated on public controversy rather than ethnographic access to the community, which makes the internal religious world surrounding Mama Ghufron considerably less visible than the digital debate about him. This asymmetry is theoretically significant rather than merely methodological. Online audiences encounter a figure largely through controversial fragments that have already been selected, captioned, corrected, or ridiculed, whereas local participants encounter him within a denser environment of repeated interaction, pedagogical relationships, ritual practice, and social familiarity. The same statement can therefore acquire sharply different meanings across publics, functioning for some participants as evidence of extraordinary religious distinction while appearing to distant observers as implausible or comic. Rather than assuming that either public provides transparent access to Mama Ghufron's authority, we treat charisma as a relational problem whose meaning changes according to the social setting in which a claim is heard, repeated, defended, or rejected.[27]

This distinction between a local religious audience and a wider digital public also prevents premature classification of the phenomenon as a fully institutionalized religious movement. Barker and Dawson emphasize durable organization, patterns of commitment, leadership structures, shared narratives, and recurrent practices when analyzing new religious movements, and the available media corpus cannot reconstruct those dimensions in sufficient depth. Mama Ghufron's setting nevertheless displays several movement-like features: a named religious figure, a *pesantren* environment, recurrent teaching, a local audience, and claims to forms of knowledge or spiritual access that distinguish the leader from ordinary participants. The evidentiary basis is asymmetrical, however, because the public controversy is far better documented than the internal social life of the group. That asymmetry should shape the language of analysis. A movement-like religious formation is a more defensible description than a consolidated movement, because it acknowledges the presence of recurring social relations without inventing organizational depth that has not been observed. At the same time, public formation extends beyond adherents.

[26] Telle, 'Faith on Trial'; Tyson, 'Blasphemy and Judicial Legitimacy.'
[27] Midaada, 'Filosofi Ceramah Bahasa 'Semut' Abuya Mama Ghufron.'

Journalists, religious critics, MUI officials, platform users, and other observers continually interpret the figure and thereby stabilize him as a recognizable object of public religion. Their attention does not create an organization, but it does contribute to a social reality in which Mama Ghufron remains publicly consequential even when many of those involved reject his authority.[28]

Charisma is especially useful for understanding why the same performance can sustain attachment in one setting and ridicule in another. Claims to extraordinary spiritual access often function within religious traditions as assertions of distinction, but their persuasive force depends on relationships of trust, recognized knowledge, ritual context, and the expectations through which followers interpret a teacher. Digital mediation unsettles those conditions by carrying the claim into publics that do not share the same interpretive background. Turner, Campbell, and Febrian each show, from different angles, that religious authority in mediated environments is negotiated across institutional credentials, performance, technological competence, and public visibility. Mama Ghufron's controversy adds a more conflictual configuration. Local participants may encounter authority through repeated presence and relational familiarity, while digital observers often encounter only the fragment that has already been marked as strange. This divergence produces competing regimes of credibility rather than a simple opposition between believers and informed outsiders. Ridicule can police the boundary of legitimate knowledge among distant publics, yet it may reveal little about why local participants continue to attend or how they interpret criticism. The gap itself should become an object of research, because contested religious authority cannot be fully explained by studying either the charismatic claim or the digital reaction in isolation; it emerges through the tension between the social worlds in which those evaluations are produced.[29]

For religious-movement studies, the broader implication is that public formation may be sustained through antagonistic attention as well as through adherence. Platformed controversy creates a second layer of social reality composed of critics, interpreters, journalists, institutions, and users whose attention repeatedly returns a disputed figure to visibility. This layer should not be mistaken for organizational membership, yet it can prolong the public life of a movement-like formation and shape how the local community is perceived from outside. Billig's analysis of ridicule helps explain how antagonistic attention can mark a figure as epistemically inferior, while platform theory clarifies why the same negative judgment remains circulable through reusable fragments and repeated commentary. Within this configuration, tolerated absurdity is best treated as one modality of tolerated religious deviance rather than as a separate theory. The phrase refers to situations in which publicly perceived eccentricity or implausibility contributes to a controversy remaining within ridicule, correction, and mediated circulation rather than being immediately translated into a militant or criminal frame. The category remains provisional because one case cannot establish its general range, and its value will depend on comparison with other religious formations that move differently across institutional boundaries. Even so, the Mama Ghufron phenomenon demonstrates that social durability and doctrinal legitimacy need not develop together: a figure can remain recognizable because opponents, institutions, and media continue to interpret him, while the question of accepted religious authority remains unresolved.[30]

Conclusion

The Mama Ghufron controversy is best understood as a case of tolerated religious deviance in which strong criticism, institutional intervention, ridicule, and continued public circulation coexist without producing the same legal or security trajectory visible in several other Indonesian disputes over religion. MUI did not treat the controversy with indifference; officials publicly examined the

[28] Barker, New Religious Movements; Dawson, Comprehending Cults.
[29] Turner, 'Religious Authority and the New Media'; Campbell, Digital Creatives; Febrian, 'Visualizing Authority.'
[30] Billig, Laughter and Ridicule; van Dijck and Poell, 'Understanding Social Media Logic'; Nieborg and Poell, 'Platformization of Cultural Production.'

teachings attributed to Mama Ghufron, coordinated with regional bodies, and discussed correction, guidance, and the possibility of legal action. Yet the documented pathway remained centered on disputed religious authority and responsible da'wah rather than on a completed prosecution or a security classification linked to militant politics. That combination explains why tolerance cannot be equated with approval. It describes a condition in which religious claims are marked as problematic and socially unequal while remaining publicly circulable through media, institutional statements, corrective discourse, and humor. The contrast with Lina Lutfiawati and Aulia Rakhman further shows that religious controversy becomes legally consequential through more than doctrinal disagreement alone. Intentionality, sacred referents, complaint, organizational mobilization, public-order narratives, and the availability of legal categories shape whether a dispute moves toward criminal adjudication. Mama Ghufron's trajectory therefore reveals an intermediate field of religious governance located between recognized orthodoxy and formal punishment, where correction and ridicule can regulate disputed authority without eliminating its public presence.

Digital circulation adds another layer to this intermediate field because visibility can be sustained by actors who reject the religious authority of the person they help to make recognizable. Journalists, religious commentators, institutional officials, and platform users can all return a disputed statement to public attention for different reasons, ranging from correction and explanation to curiosity and amusement. Platformization makes such material portable across contexts, while ridicule provides a socially intelligible way of marking distance from claims regarded as implausible. The resulting visibility should not be confused with legitimacy or with direct evidence of algorithmic causation. What matters is the recursive structure of circulation: correction reproduces the statement it seeks to challenge, news contextualization foregrounds the controversy it attempts to explain, and hostile attention can keep a religious figure socially present even when persuasion remains weak. This dynamic contributes to religious-movement studies by showing that movement-like formations may acquire public durability through antagonistic attention as well as through adherence. The local social world around Mama Ghufron remains distinct from the wider digital public that discusses him, and the gap between those publics is central to the problem of charisma. Religious authority is therefore negotiated not only through doctrine, organization, or leadership, but also through the media forms, institutional classifications, and public emotions that determine how a controversial figure is encountered beyond his immediate community.

Several limitations define the boundaries of this interpretation and point toward the next stage of research. The public corpus is relatively small, several early reports share the same journalist, and the available materials do not provide systematic archives of original videos, comment threads, view counts, recommendation data, interviews, participant observation, membership records, or direct evidence of financial gain. The internal religious world of followers is consequently less accessible than the media controversy, while the measurable distribution of supportive, hostile, amused, or indifferent audience reactions remains unknown. These limits do not erase the patterns documented here, but they restrict the scale at which tolerated religious deviance can be generalized. Comparative research should therefore examine other Indonesian cases that moved toward formal fatwa, criminal prosecution, security intervention, or continued informal correction, while ethnographic work at the *pesantren* could clarify how followers understand extraordinary claims, institutional criticism, and online ridicule. A systematic digital archive would also make it possible to distinguish more carefully among platform visibility, journalistic repetition, corrective circulation, and audience engagement. Such work could test whether tolerated absurdity operates as a recurring modality of religious deviance or whether the Mama

Ghufron case represents a more specific historical configuration. For now, the case demonstrates that religious authority may remain socially consequential even when legitimacy is disputed, because criticism, institutional correction, public amusement, and repeated mediation can sustain the visibility of a contested religious formation.

Generative AI Usage Statement

OpenAI ChatGPT was used to support language editing, paragraph restructuring, citation-format conversion, and editorial preparation. All sources, substantive claims, interpretations, and revisions were reviewed under human editorial supervision, and the authors retain full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, argumentation, citations, and ethical integrity of the manuscript. No synthetic or AI-generated research data were used.

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