



The Politicization of Religion in Indonesia's 2024 Electoral Cycle: Religious Identity, Elite Mobilization, and Democratic Polarization

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Article History

Received: 21-04-2026

Revised: 08-05-2026

Accepted: 11-05-2026

Keywords:

Politicization of religion; Religious identity; Political elites; Electoral democracy; Indonesia

Abstract

Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle demonstrated that religion remains an influential resource in democratic contestation. This study examines the politicization of religion through three interconnected dimensions: the deployment of religious identity, the mobilization of religious elites, and the production of democratic polarization. The study employed qualitative library research by analyzing academic literature, election-related documents, media reports, and public discourse concerning the pre-election, campaign, voting, and post-election phases of Indonesia's 2024 national election. The findings show that religious identity was used to construct moral legitimacy and distinguish political in-groups from out-groups. Religious leaders, communities, and symbols were also mobilized to strengthen electoral credibility and voter loyalty, while digital media accelerated the circulation of religiously framed political narratives. In several cases, Islamic symbols were commodified as electoral assets, shifting public attention from substantive issues such as welfare, inequality, and policy accountability toward symbolic identity competition. However, the presence of religion in politics should not automatically be understood as politicization. The distinction lies between ethical religious participation that contributes moral criticism to public life and the instrumental use of religion for short-term electoral advantage. This study argues that the politicization of religion weakens substantive democracy when it reduces political competition to identity-based loyalty, limits rational deliberation, and deepens social division. The article contributes to religious studies by explaining religion as a contested social and political resource within contemporary Indonesian democracy.

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INTRODUCTION

Religion occupies a significant position in Indonesia's democratic public sphere. It functions not only as a system of personal belief and moral orientation, but also as a source of collective identity, institutional authority, and political legitimacy. Religious organizations, leaders, symbols, and moral vocabularies frequently participate in public debates, electoral campaigns, and policy contestation. This condition confirms that religion remains relevant to the study of political identity, institutions, legitimacy, and political mobilization in modern democratic societies.¹

The relationship between Islam and democracy in Indonesia cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between religious authority and popular sovereignty. Since the establishment of the Indonesian state, Islamic groups, nationalist actors, and representatives of other communities have negotiated the place of religion within a plural political order. Pancasila emerged as a shared foundation through which religious commitments and national citizenship could coexist. Indonesia consequently developed a form of democracy in which religion remained publicly influential without formally transforming the state into an Islamic state.

Menchik describes this configuration as a form of "godly nationalism," in which religious belief is embedded within national identity and public legitimacy.² This arrangement has enabled Islamic organizations to participate actively in democratic life, but it has also produced tensions concerning religious freedom, minority protection, moral authority, and the boundaries of acceptable political participation. Religion may support democracy by encouraging social responsibility, ethical leadership, and civic participation. At the same time, it can be instrumentalized to exclude opponents, establish moral hierarchies, and mobilize voters through identity-based loyalty.

The public presence of religion should therefore be distinguished from the politicization of religion. The participation of religious actors in public affairs is not inherently undemocratic. Public religion may contribute ethical criticism, defend disadvantaged groups, promote peaceful participation, and hold political power accountable.³ Politicization occurs when religious identities, symbols, authorities, or doctrines are deliberately used as strategic instruments to gain political advantage, delegitimize opponents, or transform electoral preferences into tests of religious loyalty.

In this article, the politicization of religion refers to the strategic use of religion by political actors to construct legitimacy, mobilize constituencies, and organize political boundaries between insiders and outsiders. It involves more than the ordinary expression of religious values in public life. Religion becomes politicized when political support is associated with religious authenticity, when opponents are depicted as threats to the faith or the religious community, and when religious symbols are packaged as electoral assets rather than substantive ethical commitments.

¹ Jonathan Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2018).

² Jeremy Menchik, *Islam and Democracy in Indonesia: Tolerance without Liberalism*, *Cambridge Studies in Social Theory, Religion and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/DOI: 10.1017/CBO9781316344446>.

³ José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994).

This distinction is important in the Indonesian context because political identity and religious identity are deeply interconnected. Religious affiliations may legitimately shape citizens' ethical positions and policy preferences. However, the instrumental use of those affiliations can transform democratic competition into identity conflict. The boundary between religious participation and political manipulation depends on how religion is used, by whom, for what purpose, and with what consequences for equality, deliberation, and social cohesion.

Indonesia's previous electoral contests demonstrate the importance of this problem. The 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential election intensified divisions between groups associated with Islamic populism and those claiming to defend religious pluralism. Research by Aspinall and Mietzner shows that the 2019 election deepened a socioreligious cleavage between pluralist and Islamist constituencies. This division did not only shape electoral preferences but also contributed to illiberal responses from political actors on both sides.⁴ The experience illustrates how religion-based polarization may coexist with formally competitive elections while weakening broader democratic norms.

The 2024 national election took place within a political environment already marked by concerns about democratic regression, the concentration of political power, weakening institutional checks, and declining confidence in representative institutions. Studies of Indonesia's recent democratic development have identified tendencies toward autocratization and reduced substantive democratic quality, even though electoral procedures and public support for democracy remain present.⁵ Political Islam has also continued to adapt to changing relations between parties, religious organizations, state institutions, and electoral coalitions.⁶

Within this context, religious identity remained an important political resource. Before the 2024 election, the Indonesian Election Supervisory Body (Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, Bawaslu) identified identity politics and the politicization of identity as strategic issues requiring preventive supervision. Bawaslu distinguished identity politics, which refers to political positions based on particular identities and beliefs, from the politicization of identity, which involves exploiting those identities for political interests in ways that may incite hostility or social division.⁷ This distinction provides a useful institutional foundation for examining the strategic use of religion during electoral competition.

The term electoral cycle in this study refers to the interconnected phases of pre-election positioning, candidate and coalition formation, official campaigning, voting, and immediate post-election contestation. The concept allows the politicization of religion to be examined as a process rather than as an isolated campaign incident. Religious narratives may emerge before the official

⁴ Edward Aspinall and Marcus Mietzner, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia," *Journal of Democracy Johns Hopkins University Press* 30, no. 4 (2019): 104–18.

⁵ Taufik, Muhamad M.N. Nadzri, and Jamaie Hj. Hamil, "Declining Democracy: Autocratization in Indonesia during the Jokowi Years," *Otoritas: Jurnal Ilmu Pemerintahan* 13, no. 2 (2023): 333–51.

⁶ Testriono, "Mencari Peran Islam Politik Dalam Demokrasi Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 31, no. 2 (2024): 627–39.

⁷ Rama Agusta, "Dalam Rapat Wantannas, Totok Terangkan Definisi Politik Dan Politisasi Identitas," Badan Pengawas Pemilihan Umum, 2023, <https://bawaslu.go.id/id/berita/dalam-rapat-wantannas-totok-terangkan-definisi-politik-dan-politisasi-identitas>.

campaign period through elite endorsements and coalition building, intensify during electoral mobilization, and continue after voting through disputes concerning legitimacy and representation.

Bawaslu's publications on the 2024 election also emphasized that political uses of social, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities may threaten electoral fairness, democratic integrity, and social unity when they are managed irresponsibly.⁸ The political relevance of religion therefore cannot be assessed solely by counting religious messages or identifying religious figures in campaigns. Analysis must examine how religious identity is framed, how authority is mobilized, how digital narratives are circulated, and whether these practices produce exclusionary political boundaries.

One important dimension is the construction of religious identity as political legitimacy. Political candidates may seek to demonstrate personal piety, proximity to Islamic institutions, or commitment to the interests of the ummah. Such performances can be legitimate forms of political communication. They become problematic when religious imagery substitutes for policy accountability or when political opponents are represented as less Islamic, morally suspect, or hostile to Muslim interests.

A second dimension concerns elite mobilization. Religious leaders, preachers, Islamic organizations, educational networks, and religious communities possess moral and social authority that can influence political preferences. Their participation may encourage informed civic engagement, but their authority may also be strategically appropriated to strengthen candidate credibility. Islamic populism frequently works by constructing a morally unified religious people whose interests are supposedly threatened by political, economic, or cultural elites.⁹ This framing transforms political competition into a struggle over who legitimately represents Islam.

A third dimension is digital polarization. Social media allows religiously framed political messages to circulate rapidly through sermons, short videos, campaign clips, hashtags, and informal networks. Digital communication can expand democratic participation, but it also facilitates emotional narratives, disinformation, and political hoaxes. Research on political communication in the post-truth era indicates that religious language can be combined with misinformation to strengthen group loyalty and reduce critical evaluation of political claims.¹⁰

A fourth dimension is the commodification of religious symbols. Commodification occurs when religious clothing, terminology, ceremonies, endorsements, or moral claims are packaged and exchanged for electoral value. Under such conditions, religion may be reduced from a source of ethical criticism to a symbolic instrument for building political brands. The problem is not the visibility of Islamic symbols themselves, but their strategic detachment from substantive commitments to justice, welfare, accountability, and minority protection.

⁸ Muhammad Subhan et al., "Politik Identitas Dalam Dinamika Demokrasi Indonesia: Tantangan Dan Peluang," *Perpustakaan BAWASLU* (Jakarta, September 2024).

⁹ Daffa Adnanabin and Immanuel Zefa, "Islamic Populism as Identity Politics: Dynamics and Challenges in Indonesian Democracy," in *The 6th International Conference on Technology, Education, and Social Science* (KnE Publishing, 2025), 309.

¹⁰ Isna Fitria Agustina et al., "Political Hoaxes in the Post-Truth Era: An Islamic Political Analysis," *Al-Istinbath: Jurnal Hukum Islam* 8, no. 2 (2023): 645–66.

Previous studies have provided important analyses of identity politics, Islamic populism, religious polarization, and democratic decline in Indonesia. Research on the Jakarta election demonstrated how religious identity could turn ordinary political differences into broader social conflict.¹¹ Studies of Islamic populism have also shown how religious identity can unite diverse constituencies through narratives of moral community, exclusion, and resistance to perceived elites.¹² Other works have examined political hoaxes, democratic regression, and the relationship between religion and the state.

Nevertheless, three limitations remain in the existing literature. First, many studies focus on earlier contests, particularly the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential election. These studies provide valuable historical foundations, but they do not fully explain how religious politicization adapted during the 2024 electoral cycle.

Second, previous research often examines identity politics, elite endorsements, digital campaigns, or religious commodification separately. There remains a need for an integrated framework that explains how religious identity, elite mobilization, digital communication, and symbolic commodification interact within a single electoral process.

Third, the literature frequently treats the political presence of religion as either beneficial or harmful without clearly distinguishing ethical religious participation from instrumental politicization. This distinction is necessary to avoid assuming that every intervention by religious actors constitutes manipulation or that religion must be excluded from democratic public life.

This study addresses these limitations by examining the politicization of religion during Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle through three principal dimensions: religious identity, elite mobilization, and democratic polarization. Commodification and digital circulation are analyzed as mechanisms through which these dimensions were produced and reinforced.

The article addresses four questions: How was religious identity used to construct political legitimacy? How were religious leaders, communities, and symbols mobilized by political actors? How did digital religious narratives contribute to democratic polarization? What are the implications of these practices for substantive democracy in Indonesia?

This study argues that religion becomes politically problematic not because it enters the democratic public sphere, but because it is instrumentalized to transform political competition into religious loyalty, symbolic antagonism, and exclusionary group boundaries. Conversely, religious participation may strengthen democracy when it promotes ethical accountability, social justice, peaceful deliberation, and protection of equal citizenship.

By adopting this distinction, the article contributes to religious studies and the study of Indonesian democracy in two ways. Theoretically, it conceptualizes religion as a contested social and political resource rather than merely a normative belief system. Empirically, it examines how religious identity and authority operated within the specific dynamics of Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle. The

¹¹ Arsenius Wisnu and Aji Patria, "Konflik Sosial Dan Politik Identitas Sebagai Kecacatan Demokrasi Indonesia: Studi Kasus Pilkada DKI Jakarta 2017," *Deviance Jurnal Kriminologi* 7 (2023): 81–100.

¹² Vedi R Hadiz, "On Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East" (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 2017).

analysis is expected to clarify the boundary between religion as a source of democratic ethics and religion as an instrument of short-term electoral power.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using library research and document analysis. The method was selected to examine how religious identities, religious authorities, Islamic symbols, and political narratives were constructed and strategically used during Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle. Library research can be used as an independent research method when sources are selected, evaluated, and interpreted systematically rather than merely summarized. Document analysis also enables researchers to examine written materials as representations of particular social contexts, institutional interests, and relations of power.¹³

The research data were obtained from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, official election documents, institutional reports, and selected digital media publications related to religion and electoral politics in Indonesia. Official documents and institutional reports were used to identify electoral regulations, public concerns, and documented political developments, while academic publications provided theoretical and analytical perspectives. Media reports were used selectively to trace publicly documented events, political statements, religious endorsements, and campaign narratives.¹⁴

The sources focused primarily on Indonesia's 2024 national election, including the periods of pre-election positioning, candidate and coalition formation, official campaigning, voting, and immediate post-election contestation. Earlier studies concerning the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential election were included to provide historical context for the development of religious identity politics and socioreligious polarization in Indonesia. The review prioritized sources that directly addressed the relationship between religion, political mobilization, electoral competition, and democratic polarization.¹⁵

The literature was identified using keywords such as "politicization of religion," "religious identity," "identity politics," "Islamic populism," "religious elites," "religious mobilization," and "Indonesia's 2024 election." Sources were selected based on their relevance, academic credibility, and contribution to the research questions. Publications that discussed religion and politics only in general terms without a clear connection to Indonesian electoral dynamics were excluded. A total of [insert the actual number] academic publications, official documents, institutional reports, and media materials were included in the final analysis.¹⁶

The collected data were analyzed descriptively and critically through thematic analysis. The researchers first read the selected sources repeatedly to identify recurring ideas, political actors, religious narratives, and forms of mobilization. The data were subsequently classified into five themes:

¹³ Hannah Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines," *Journal of Business Research* 104 (2019): 333–39, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039>.

¹⁴ Glenn A Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method," *Qualitative Research Journal* 9, no. 2 (August 3, 2009): 27–40, <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>.

¹⁵ Snyder, "Literature Review as a Research Methodology: An Overview and Guidelines."

¹⁶ Snyder.

religious identity as political legitimacy, religious elite mobilization, digital religious narratives, the commodification of Islamic symbols, and the implications of religious politicization for substantive democracy. Thematic analysis was selected because it provides a flexible procedure for identifying, organizing, and interpreting recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative materials.¹⁷

The concept of the politicization of religion was used as the principal analytical framework. In this study, politicization refers to the strategic use of religious identities, symbols, leaders, institutions, or narratives to obtain electoral support, strengthen political legitimacy, delegitimize opponents, or construct identity-based political loyalty. This analytical position draws on the understanding that religion may influence politics through identity, institutional authority, legitimacy, and collective mobilization. However, the study distinguishes instrumental politicization from ethical religious participation that contributes moral criticism, social justice, peaceful civic engagement, and democratic accountability.¹⁸

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, information from academic publications was compared with official documents, institutional reports, and credible media sources. Media reports were not treated as equivalent to academic studies, but were used to identify events and political narratives that were publicly documented. Significant claims were cross-checked with other sources whenever possible, while differing interpretations were considered to prevent the analysis from assuming that every involvement of religious actors constituted political manipulation.¹⁹

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis identified five interconnected dimensions of religious politicization during Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle: religious identity as a source of political legitimacy, the mobilization of religious elites and networks, the amplification of religious narratives through digital media, the commodification of Islamic symbols, and their implications for substantive democracy. These dimensions demonstrate that religion continued to function as an important political resource, although its use was not always expressed through direct sectarian confrontation.²⁰

Compared with the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election and the 2019 presidential election, overt religious polarization was less dominant in the 2024 presidential contest. Post-election assessments suggest that explicit campaigns dividing voters into rigid religious and ideological blocs appeared less frequently. Nevertheless, the reduced visibility of open identity conflict did not mean that religion had become politically irrelevant. This study interprets the 2024 election as indicating a shift from confrontational identity politics toward more subtle forms of religious positioning, symbolic association, elite endorsement, and digital framing.²¹

¹⁷ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (January 1, 2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

¹⁸ Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*.

¹⁹ Bowen, "Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method."

²⁰ Subhan et al., "Politik Identitas Dalam Dinamika Demokrasi Indonesia: Tantangan Dan Peluang."

²¹ Jaa Pradana, "Data Pemilih Dan Politisasi SARA Menurun, Herwyn Tegaskan Politik Uang Masih Masalah Serius," [bawaslu.go.id](https://www.bawaslu.go.id/id/berita/data-pemilih-dan-politisasi-sara-menurun-herwyn-tegaskan-politik-uang-masih-masalah-serius), 2025, <https://www.bawaslu.go.id/id/berita/data-pemilih-dan-politisasi-sara-menurun-herwyn-tegaskan-politik-uang-masih-masalah-serius>.

Religious Identity as Political Legitimacy

Religious identity remained an important source of political legitimacy during the 2024 electoral cycle. Political candidates and parties sought to present themselves as morally credible, religiously acceptable, and responsive to Muslim aspirations. This occurred through religious terminology, public demonstrations of piety, visits to Islamic educational institutions, meetings with religious leaders, and claims of commitment to the interests of the *ummah*. Religion therefore operated not merely as private belief but as a symbolic resource through which political credibility was constructed.²²

The political significance of this strategy must be understood in relation to Indonesia's Muslim-majority electorate. Qodir and Hefner observe that both Islamic and nationalist parties attempted to attract Muslim voters by addressing issues such as education, poverty, women, and the position of Islam in national and international affairs. Their study also indicates that the boundary between Islamic and religious-nationalist parties is not always ideologically clear. Religious language can consequently function as a flexible electoral instrument rather than as evidence of a coherent Islamic political program.²³

Religious identity becomes politicized when the religious image of a candidate substitutes for substantive political evaluation. Under such conditions, voters are encouraged to assess political actors primarily through perceived piety, association with Islamic institutions, or symbolic proximity to Muslim communities. Questions concerning policy competence, corruption, social inequality, employment, education, and institutional accountability may receive less attention than the candidate's ability to perform a recognizable religious identity.²⁴

However, the use of religious identity in 2024 did not reproduce the exact political configuration of previous elections. The coalitional changes among national elites weakened the earlier binary division between Islamist and pluralist camps. Actors who had previously occupied opposing political blocs entered new alliances, making rigid religious categorization more difficult. The decreased intensity of open polarization therefore reflected not the disappearance of identity politics, but the changing structure of political alliances and electoral interests.²⁵

This finding supports the argument that religious identity is neither fixed nor politically autonomous. Its meaning is continuously reconstructed through coalition building, electoral communication, and competition over Muslim representation. Terms such as "Islamic leadership," "politics of the *ummah*," and "religious morality" do not possess a single political meaning; they are

²² Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*.

²³ Refaldy bernalis fasya et al., "Ideological Contestation and Identity Politics in the Sustainability of Indonesian Elections," *Journal of Islamic Law and Humanitarian Studies* 2, no. 1 SE-Articles (May 18, 2026): 27–39, <https://doi.org/10.64268/jilhs.v1i3.123>.

²⁴ Abdul Majid and Said Amirulkamar, "Identity Politics Approaching the 2024 Election through Social Media Through Sociology of Religion Perspective," *Journal of Governance and Public Policy* 10, no. 3 SE-Articles (October 6, 2023): 274–87, <https://doi.org/10.18196/jgpp.v10i3.18088>.

²⁵ Ananda Mazliana et al., "Politik Identitas Dan Polarisasi Sosial : Dinamika Dalam Demokrasi Dengan Tinjauan Sistematis Literatur Review," *JISOH: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Humaniora* 2, no. 2 (2026): 1156–69.

interpreted and mobilized differently by parties, candidates, religious organizations, and digital communities.²⁶

Religious Elites and Electoral Mobilization

Religious leaders occupy a strategic position in Indonesian political life because their authority is rooted in religious knowledge, moral reputation, educational institutions, community networks, and the trust of their followers. These resources provide religious elites with forms of social influence that political parties may not possess independently. A study by Mohammad Ali emphasizes that religious figures possess personal charisma, congregational networks, and moral authority that can shape political information and community attitudes.²⁷

During electoral competition, political actors frequently seek proximity to scholars, preachers, pesantren leaders, Islamic organizations, and religious communities. Such relationships may provide symbolic legitimacy, access to established social networks, and opportunities to communicate with Muslim constituencies. Endorsements or appearances with respected religious figures can be interpreted by voters as confirmation of a candidate's morality, acceptability, or commitment to Islamic interests.²⁸

Nevertheless, the political participation of religious leaders should not automatically be classified as religious politicization. Religious figures are citizens who have the right to express political preferences and contribute to public debate. They may also play a constructive role by encouraging peaceful participation, rejecting political violence, countering disinformation, and educating voters. Bawaslu itself involved religious leaders in efforts to prevent identity politics because of their capacity to reduce political tension and communicate ethical messages to religious communities.²⁹

The distinction lies in whether religious authority is used to educate citizens or to demand political conformity. Instrumentalization occurs when the political preference of a religious leader is transformed into an implied religious obligation for followers, when support for a candidate is equated with loyalty to Islam, or when political disagreement is presented as disobedience to religious authority. Under these circumstances, the autonomy of voters is reduced because political choice is placed within a relationship of sacred obedience rather than rational democratic consideration.³⁰

The regulation of political activities in places of worship illustrates the boundary between religious civic participation and partisan mobilization. Election authorities prohibited campaign activities and the placement of campaign materials in places of worship, while still recognizing that religious institutions could provide nonpartisan voter education and warnings concerning money politics, hoaxes, and social division. This distinction confirms that the democratic problem is not the

²⁶ Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*.

²⁷ Mohammad Ali, "Peran Tokoh Agama Dalam Upaya Mencegah Praktik Politik Identitas Pada Pemilu 2024," *Jurnal Bawaslu Provinsi Kepulauan Riau* 5, no. 02 SE-Artikel (2023): 82–91, <https://journal.bawaslu.go.id/index.php/JBK/article/view/330>.

²⁸ Hadiz, "On Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East."

²⁹ Achmad Fachrudin, *Konflik Politik Identitas: Pergumulan Politik, Agama Dan Media Dari Pilkada DKI 2017 Hingga Pilpres 2019* (Jakarta Selatan: Literasi Demokrasi Indonesia, 2021).

³⁰ Hadiz, "On Islamic Populism in Indonesia and the Middle East."

presence of political education within religious communities, but the conversion of sacred institutions into instruments of partisan competition.³¹

The involvement of religious elites can therefore produce two opposing democratic effects. Their moral and social capital may strengthen electoral integrity when used to promote peace, verification of information, and respect for political differences. Conversely, it may reinforce clientelism and identity loyalty when used to sanctify candidates, stigmatize competitors, or direct congregations toward particular electoral choices without substantive political evaluation.³²

Digital Religious Narratives and Democratic Polarization

Digital media became a central arena for political identity construction before and during the 2024 election. Social media enabled candidates, supporters, influencers, religious preachers, and anonymous accounts to circulate political messages beyond formal party structures. Religious narratives could be reproduced through short videos, campaign images, sermons, hashtags, edited quotations, and emotionally charged commentary.³³

Research conducted before the election showed that identity politics was already being constructed through social media by combining legitimacy identity, resistance identity, and project identity. Religious, ethnic, and cultural groups that considered themselves neglected could articulate dissatisfaction through digital platforms, while political actors attempted to transform these identities into support for particular candidates and political projects.³⁴

One example can be found in the circulation of the *#kadrun* label in discussions surrounding Anies Baswedan's candidacy. Dharma, Hariyanto, and Muharram found that Instagram content associated Anies and his supporters with radical Islam, intolerance, and the establishment of a caliphate. Regardless of whether these representations accurately reflected the candidate or his supporters, such labeling demonstrates how digital discourse can construct political identity by attaching religiously charged categories to individuals and groups.³⁵

This mechanism did not only mobilize supporters through positive religious identification; it also delegitimized opponents through negative religious labeling. Political identities were constructed through terms that associated certain groups with radicalism, anti-Islamic attitudes, intolerance, secularism, or threats to national unity. The political effect of such labeling was to simplify diverse constituencies into morally opposed categories.³⁶

³¹ Ahmad Ainun Najib, "Politisasi Dakwah Di Indonesia (Studi Analisis Politisasi Dakwah Dalam Kontesasi Pemilihan Umum Di Indonesia)," *ASWALALITA: Journal of Da'wah Management* 3, no. 1 SE-Articles (2024): 10–22, <http://ejournal.iainutuban.ac.id/index.php/aswalalita/article/view/860>.

³² Ali, "Peran Tokoh Agama Dalam Upaya Mencegah Praktik Politik Identitas Pada Pemilu 2024."

³³ Majid and Amirulkamar, "Identity Politics Approaching the 2024 Election through Social Media Through Sociology of Religion Perspective."

³⁴ Majid and Amirulkamar.

³⁵ Ferry Adhi Dharma, Didik Hariyanto, and Fajar Muharram, "Construction of Political Identity on Instagram: Unveiling the Kadrun Hashtag Movement in Indonesia's 2024 Presidential Election: Konstruksi Identitas Politik Di Instagram: Menyingkap Gerakan Tagar Kadrun Dalam Pemilihan Presiden 2024 Di Indonesia," *Academia Open* 8, no. 2 SE-Political science (July 20, 2023): 10.21070/acopen.8.2023.6922, <https://doi.org/10.21070/acopen.8.2023.6922>.

³⁶ Dharma, Hariyanto, and Muharram.

The pattern continued a longer trajectory in Indonesian digital politics. Research on the 2019 presidential election demonstrated that social media contributed to Islamic political polarization by enabling competing groups to produce and circulate narratives concerning religious authenticity, political leadership, and the representation of Muslims. Although the intensity of polarization declined in the 2024 presidential election, the digital infrastructure and symbolic vocabulary created during previous contests remained available for renewed political use.³⁷

Political hoaxes intensified this problem because false or misleading information could be combined with religious language and moral claims. In a post-truth environment, political information may be accepted not because it has been verified, but because it confirms the fears, prejudices, or collective identity of a political community. Religious sentiment increases the emotional power of such messages because political disagreement is represented as a struggle involving faith, morality, and the survival of the religious community.³⁸

Digital media should not, however, be regarded as an autonomous cause of polarization. Platforms amplify content created and circulated by political actors, campaign networks, influencers, and users. Polarization emerges from the interaction between technological algorithms, existing social divisions, elite strategies, and user participation. Digital media accelerate and widen political messages, but political actors remain responsible for producing the narratives that those platforms circulate.³⁹

Commodification of Islamic Symbols

The commodification of religion constitutes another important dimension of the 2024 electoral cycle. Religious commodification occurs when religious symbols, practices, language, and authority are packaged as resources that possess political, economic, or symbolic exchange value. In the Indonesian context, Syahputra, Aisyah, and Mailin argue that religion has often been commodified for personal and group interests, particularly in the fields of politics and media. Their study shows that religious values and symbols may be used to attract public attention, construct public image, and produce political or material benefit.⁴⁰

This process can be observed when Islamic clothing, religious terminology, visits to pesantren, participation in religious ceremonies, Qur'anic references, and endorsements from religious figures become elements of political branding. These practices are not necessarily evidence of personal insincerity. Candidates may possess genuine religious commitments. The analytical issue concerns whether religious symbolism is accompanied by substantive ethical commitments or is primarily displayed to produce electoral attractiveness. In this sense, religious symbols become commodified when they are strategically used to create a marketable political identity rather than to strengthen public accountability, social justice, and policy responsibility.⁴¹

³⁷ Salahudin et al., "ISLAMIC POLITICAL POLARISATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN INDONESIA," *Asian Affairs* 51, no. 3 (May 26, 2020): 656–71, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03068374.2020.1812929>.

³⁸ Agustina et al., "Political Hoaxes in the Post-Truth Era: An Islamic Political Analysis."

³⁹ Salahudin et al., "ISLAMIC POLITICAL POLARISATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE 2019 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN INDONESIA."

⁴⁰ Mhd. Andi Syahputra, Aisyah, and Mailin, "COMMODIFICATION OF POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES IN THE MEDIA CONTEST IN INDONESIA," *Al-Mufida: Jurnal Ilmu-Ilmu Keislaman* 6, no. 2 (2021): 97–106.

⁴¹ Syahputra, Aisyah, and Mailin.

The commodification of religion is especially effective when political institutions experience a crisis of public trust. Candidates and parties that cannot rely entirely on ideological consistency or institutional performance may seek alternative legitimacy through religious imagery. Qodir and Hefner's finding that Islamic and nationalist parties lack clearly differentiated political ideologies helps explain why religious symbols can be used flexibly across party boundaries. Religion becomes a recognizable political brand even when the concrete policies offered by parties remain similar or unclear.⁴²

Religious commodification can redirect political attention from structural problems toward symbolic competition. Public discussions concerning poverty, education, employment, environmental degradation, social inequality, and corruption may be displaced by debates over which candidate appears more pious, more Islamic, or more closely connected to religious communities. Symbolic identity becomes politically profitable because it produces emotional attachment more quickly than complex policy discussion.⁴³

The problem is therefore not the use of Islamic symbols themselves, but their detachment from the ethical values they claim to represent. Islamic political symbolism becomes commodified when justice, public welfare, honesty, and accountability are reduced to campaign imagery without consistent institutional practice. Religion then risks losing its prophetic and critical function because it is absorbed into the branding strategies of competing elites.⁴⁴

Implications for Substantive Democracy

The politicization of religion affects substantive democracy by changing the basis on which citizens evaluate political actors. Procedural democracy may continue through elections, campaigns, and voting, while the quality of democratic deliberation declines. When religious symbolism and group loyalty dominate political evaluation, voters have fewer opportunities to compare candidates through policies, competence, institutional integrity, and commitment to constitutional rights.⁴⁵

Religious politicization also affects the recognition of legitimate opposition. Democracy requires political competitors to accept one another as legitimate participants even when they disagree fundamentally. Socioreligious polarization weakens this principle when opponents are represented as enemies of Islam, threats to religious communities, radical groups, or morally inferior citizens. Aspinall and Mietzner describe how the division between Islamist and pluralist constituencies can produce nondemocratic pluralism, in which both camps remain politically competitive while tolerating illiberal practices against perceived opponents.⁴⁶

A further implication concerns equal citizenship. When political legitimacy is defined through a narrow religious identity, religious minorities and Muslims with different political or theological orientations may be treated as less authentic members of the political community. Bawaslu has identified rejection of candidates on the basis of religion, ethnicity, or other social identities as one of

⁴² fasya et al., "Ideological Contestation and Identity Politics in the Sustainability of Indonesian Elections."

⁴³ fasya et al.

⁴⁴ Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*.

⁴⁵ Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino, "The Quality of Democracy: An Overview," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 4 (2004): 20–31, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2004.0060>.

⁴⁶ Aspinall and Mietzner, "Southeast Asia's Troubling Elections: Nondemocratic Pluralism in Indonesia."

the dangers of identity politicization. The politicization of majority religion may therefore undermine constitutional equality even without formally changing electoral institutions.⁴⁷

At the same time, the relative decline of overt identity polarization in 2024 demonstrates that political actors can limit sectarian strategies when they perceive them as electorally risky. The large proportion of younger voters, changes in elite coalitions, public fatigue with polarization, and preventive measures by election institutions may have discouraged direct religious confrontation. This indicates that identity politics is not inevitable; it is shaped by political incentives and can be reduced through institutional supervision, public criticism, and voter education.⁴⁸

Religion should therefore not be excluded from democratic public life. Religious organizations and leaders have historically contributed to education, social welfare, humanitarian work, peacebuilding, and political ethics. Their participation can strengthen democracy when it promotes justice, accountability, anti-corruption, peaceful elections, and protection of vulnerable communities. The relevant distinction is between religion as a source of public ethics and religion as an instrument of electoral domination.⁴⁹

The findings of this study indicate that Indonesia's 2024 electoral cycle was characterized not by the complete disappearance of religious politicization, but by its adaptation. Open sectarian confrontation became less dominant, while symbolic legitimacy, elite networking, digital labeling, and religious branding remained politically relevant. Religion continued to operate as a contested resource whose democratic consequences depended on how it was mobilized, the interests it served, and whether it encouraged ethical citizenship or exclusionary political loyalty.

CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of politicization of religion in the 2024–2026 political year shows that religion no longer only functions as a moral and spiritual guideline, but is also used as a political instrument to gain support, strengthen legitimacy, and build community loyalty. In the practice of electoral democracy, religious symbols and identities are often used by political elites as a strategy for mass mobilization and political imagery.

This phenomenon is related to the commodification of religion, which is when religious values and symbols are used as political commodities in democratic contestation. In the perspective of Karl Marx's conflict theory, religion can be used as a tool of legitimization of power related to political interests and social structures. As a result, people's attention is often diverted from substantive issues such as welfare, social inequality, and economic justice to issues of religious identity.

In addition, excessive politicization of religion has the potential to cause social polarization, identity conflicts, and weakening the quality of democracy. Therefore, religion should be restored to its primary function as a source of moral, ethical, and social criticism, while democracy needs to be directed towards a more rational and inclusive competition of ideas and programs.

⁴⁷ Ferdian Nugraha et al., "Politik Identitas Dan Politisasi Agama Dalam Konteks Pemilu," *Jurnal Sosial Politik Dan Hukum* 1 (2024): 51–58.

⁴⁸ Mazliana et al., "Politik Identitas Dan Polarisasi Sosial : Dinamika Dalam Demokrasi Dengan Tinjauan Sistematis Literatur Review."

⁴⁹ Ali, "Peran Tokoh Agama Dalam Upaya Mencegah Praktik Politik Identitas Pada Pemilu 2024"; Fox, *An Introduction to Religion and Politics: Theory and Practice*.

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