

# Religious Legitimacy in Politics: An Analysis of Islamic Political Communication and Ethical Contradictions amid Corruption Practices in Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Religious symbols increasingly shape political communication in Indonesia, where religious legitimacy is frequently employed to construct moral authority in electoral politics. This trend becomes contradictory when ethical religious narratives coexist with persistent corruption involving political elites.

**Method:** This study employs a qualitative approach using library research combined with critical discourse analysis to examine Islamic political communication, media framing, and symbolic religious narratives in Indonesian political discourse.

**Results:** The findings reveal that religious legitimacy is constructed through moral framing, symbolic authority, and mediated religious messaging that shapes public perceptions of political morality. However, such legitimacy largely operates at the performative and symbolic level, functioning as political image construction rather than ethical governance practice. The coexistence of religious rhetoric and corruption cases indicates a structural gap between moral claims and institutional political behavior.

**Conclusions:** Religious political communication has shifted toward performative legitimacy, positioning religion as a strategic instrument of political persuasion rather than ethical accountability, thereby generating tensions within democratic governance.

## ABSTRAK

**Pendahuluan:** Simbol keagamaan semakin membentuk komunikasi politik di Indonesia, di mana legitimasi religius digunakan untuk membangun otoritas moral dalam kontestasi elektoral. Fenomena ini menjadi kontradiktif ketika narasi etika keagamaan berdampingan dengan praktik korupsi elite politik.

**Metode:** Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi kepustakaan yang dipadukan dengan analisis wacana kritis untuk mengkaji komunikasi politik Islam, framing media, dan konstruksi simbolik narasi keagamaan.

**Hasil:** Temuan menunjukkan bahwa legitimasi religius dikonstruksi melalui framing moral, otoritas simbolik, dan komunikasi yang termediasi media dalam membentuk persepsi publik. Namun, legitimasi tersebut cenderung bersifat performatif dan simbolik, lebih sebagai konstruksi citra politik daripada praktik etika.

**Simpulan:** Komunikasi politik berbasis agama bergeser menjadi legitimasi performatif yang menempatkan agama sebagai instrumen persuasi politik, sehingga menimbulkan ketegangan dalam tata kelola demokrasi.



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and politics in Indonesia has never been entirely separable, yet it has undergone significant transformation alongside the expansion of electoral democracy and digital media environments. Over the past two decades, religious symbols and narratives have increasingly been employed as strategic instruments of political communication to construct moral legitimacy in the public sphere (Widiatmaka et al., 2024). In this context, religion no longer operates solely as a source of ethical guidance but also functions as symbolic capital shaping perceptions of integrity and credibility among political actors.

The growing incorporation of religious symbolism into political communication is closely related to the rise of identity-based political mobilization and digital political campaigning. Political actors frequently deploy religious narratives, moral framing, and pious imagery to establish emotional proximity with voters, particularly within Indonesia's Muslim-majority society (Sipa, 2021). This shift reflects a transformation from programmatic political communication toward symbolic persuasion grounded in religious legitimacy.

However, this development raises a critical problem. The strong use of religious rhetoric emphasizing morality and integrity often coexists with persistent corruption cases involving political elites and public officials. This paradox reveals a tension between communicated religious legitimacy and the empirical reality of political behavior. Studies on the politicization of religion indicate that religious discourse is often instrumentalized as a tool of political mobilization rather than as a substantive ethical framework (Kurniawan, 2018).

From a political communication perspective, this contradiction can be explained through framing processes, in which political reality is constructed through selective emphasis to influence public interpretation (Entman, 1993). Religious narratives enable political actors to present themselves as morally credible figures, even when their political practices may contradict such representations.

The expansion of digital media further intensifies this dynamic. The mediatization of religion transforms religious expression into publicly circulating content shaped by media logic (Hjarvard, 2008). In Indonesia, digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of religious-political messages, reinforcing identity-based political alignment and emotional engagement among audiences (Lim, 2017).

Within Islamic perspectives, political legitimacy is normatively grounded in ethical responsibility, including justice (*adl*) and trustworthiness (*amanah*), as emphasized in Islamic teachings (Srikiki & Siagian, 2024). However, contemporary political communication often shifts this ethical foundation toward symbolic performance, creating a gap between normative religious values and empirical political practices.

Previous studies have examined identity politics and religious mobilization in Indonesia, showing how religious narratives influence voter behavior and political alignment (Yunus et al., 2023). Other studies highlight the rise of Islamist populism, which may challenge democratic consolidation when religion becomes a dominant source of political legitimacy (Mietzner, 2018). Nevertheless, these studies tend to emphasize electoral dynamics and political polarization rather than ethical contradictions in political communication.

This limitation indicates a research gap in understanding how religious legitimacy is constructed within political communication while simultaneously being undermined by corruption

practices. In particular, there is still limited research that integrates Islamic political communication, media processes, and ethical evaluation within an empirically grounded framework (Idris, 2025).

Therefore, this study aims to analyze how Islamic political communication constructs religious legitimacy in Indonesia and how such legitimacy produces ethical contradictions in the context of corruption. The analysis focuses on political speeches, media narratives, and digital political communication during the 2019–2024 period.

This article contributes to Islamic communication studies by positioning religious legitimacy as a communicative process that operates not only as moral discourse but also as a strategic instrument that may become detached from ethical accountability in contemporary democratic politics.

## 2. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using library research combined with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine the construction of religious legitimacy in Islamic political communication and its ethical contradictions in the context of corruption in Indonesia. This approach allows the study to analyze how religious discourse is represented, constructed, and interpreted within academic discussions related to political communication and Islam.

The data for this study are derived from scholarly literature, including journal articles, academic books, and other scientific publications relevant to the research topic. In total, this study analyzes more than 20 academic sources that specifically address the politicization of religion, Islamic political communication, media and democracy, as well as ethical issues in politics. These sources were selected purposively based on several criteria: (1) direct relevance to the themes of political communication and religious legitimacy; (2) focus on the Indonesian context or strong theoretical relevance to the phenomenon under study; (3) publication in reputable academic journals or scholarly outlets; and (4) discussion of issues related to morality, power, or corruption in political contexts.

The publication timeframe of the selected sources ranges from 2014 to 2026, reflecting the development of contemporary scholarship on Islamic political communication and democratic dynamics in Indonesia. This timeframe was chosen to capture shifts in political discourse, particularly in relation to the digitalization of political communication and the increasing role of religion in electoral politics.

The analysis is conducted using the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), which consists of three stages. First, textual analysis is performed to identify key concepts, terms, and narratives related to religious legitimacy in political communication. Second, discursive practice analysis examines how these discourses are produced, structured, and represented within academic literature. Third, social practice analysis interprets the relationship between religious discourse, political practices, and broader social realities, particularly in relation to corruption and ethical governance.

In this study, Qur'anic verses are positioned as a normative-critical analytical framework to evaluate the ethical dimensions of political communication. Verses related to justice (*adl*), trust (*amanah*), and anti-corruption principles are interpreted contextually and used as benchmarks to assess the consistency between the construction of religious legitimacy in political discourse and

Islamic ethical principles. This approach enables the analysis to move beyond description toward a critical evaluation of the gap between religious narratives and political practices.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 Religious Legitimacy and the Construction of Islamic Political Communication in Indonesia

Religious legitimacy has become a significant component in the formation of political authority within Indonesia's democratic landscape. In a society where religion constitutes an essential element of public identity, Islamic discourse functions not only as a moral reference but also as a communicative instrument through which political actors construct credibility and public trust. The literature indicates that political legitimacy increasingly emerges from communicative practices that translate religious symbolism into political meaning.

The incorporation of Islamic narratives into political communication reflects broader transformations in democratic competition. Previous studies suggest that political actors strategically mobilize religious language, visual symbolism, and moral framing to establish proximity with Muslim voters. [Widiatmaka et al. \(2024\)](#) argue that the politicization of Islam in electoral contests represents an adaptive strategy aimed at converting religious identity into political capital. Similarly, [Yunus et al. \(2023\)](#) demonstrate that identity-based political communication reshapes voter perception by linking political preference with perceived moral obligation.

From a communication theory perspective, legitimacy is constructed through framing processes that highlight selected moral interpretations while marginalizing alternative evaluations. [Entman \(1993\)](#) explains that framing operates by defining problems, diagnosing causes, and proposing moral judgments. Within this framework, the literature shows that religious references are framed as ethical validation of leadership, enabling political actors to present themselves as morally authoritative figures. Consequently, legitimacy becomes a communicative outcome rather than solely an institutional achievement.

The growing influence of digital media intensifies this dynamic. The mediatization of religion transforms religious expression into publicly circulating communication content shaped by media logic ([Hjarvard, 2008](#)). Scholarly works highlight that digital platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of religiously framed political messages, strengthening emotional identification and collective solidarity among audiences ([Lim, 2017](#)). These processes contribute to the amplification of religious narratives as instruments of political persuasion within contemporary communication environments.

Islamic political communication in this context operates through symbolic performance. Religious imagery, references to Islamic morality, and associations with religious authorities become communicative resources designed to produce moral credibility. [Nasoha et al. \(2023\)](#) show that Islamic-oriented political actors strategically employ digital communication to construct religious identity through narratives emphasizing piety and ethical commitment. However, the literature also indicates that such communicative strategies often function at the level of symbolic representation rather than reflecting substantive adherence to Islamic ethical principles.

Normatively, Islamic teachings place ethical responsibility at the center of political leadership. The Qur'an establishes justice and trustworthiness as foundational requirements of authority (QS. An-Nisā' [4]: 58):

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُكُمْ أَنْ تُؤَدُّوا الْأَمَانَاتِ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهَا وَإِذَا حَكَمْتُمْ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ أَنْ تَحْكُمُوا بِالْعَدْلِ

This verse emphasizes that political authority derives from the fulfillment of trust (*amanah*) and the practice of justice (*adl*) rather than symbolic representation. In this study, the verse is positioned as an analytical benchmark to evaluate the ethical dimension of political communication. When interpreted alongside existing literature, a discrepancy becomes evident between normative Islamic ethical principles and the communicative construction of legitimacy, suggesting that religious narratives are often utilized symbolically.

Historical perspectives on Islamic political communication further reinforce this distinction. Classical Islamic governance traditions conceptualized leadership legitimacy as emerging from ethical integrity and social responsibility rather than identity mobilization (Srikiki & Siagian, 2024). Contemporary political communication, however, often shifts legitimacy toward symbolic visibility, creating tension between normative Islamic ethics and pragmatic electoral strategies.

Angretnowati and Karolus (2022) interpret this phenomenon as an exercise of symbolic power within democratic consolidation processes. Religious discourse becomes a political resource capable of shaping public perception while simultaneously risking the instrumentalization of faith. As a result, religious legitimacy in Indonesian politics operates within a dual structure: it functions both as a source of ethical guidance and as a strategic communicative mechanism within electoral competition.

This duality reveals that Islamic political communication in Indonesia cannot be understood merely as religious participation in politics. Instead, it represents a contested arena where normative Islamic values interact with modern political communication practices shaped by media logic, identity mobilization, and democratic competition. The literature-based analysis in this section suggests that the construction of religious legitimacy is predominantly symbolic, which lays the foundation for ethical contradictions that become more visible when examined in relation to corruption practices, as discussed in the following section.

### 3.2 Ethical Contradictions: Religious Legitimacy and Corruption in Indonesian Political Communication

The literature indicates that the increasing use of religious narratives in political communication does not necessarily correspond with ethical political practices. While religious legitimacy is often constructed through symbolic and communicative strategies, numerous studies reveal a persistent contradiction between these narratives and the reality of corruption involving political actors in Indonesia.

Previous research highlights that corruption remains a systemic issue within Indonesian politics, often involving elites who publicly project moral and religious credibility. Syahputra (2014) explains that media representations of corruption cases frequently expose inconsistencies between the moral image constructed by political actors and their actual behavior. Similarly, Mukhijab (2016) argues that media discourse on corruption reflects a broader structural problem in which political communication is used to manage public perception rather than to ensure ethical accountability.

From the perspective of political communication, this contradiction can be understood as a gap between symbolic legitimacy and substantive ethics. The literature suggests that religious narratives function as a form of symbolic capital that enhances political acceptability, even when ethical violations occur. In this sense, legitimacy is constructed at the level of discourse, while ethical responsibility is often neglected in practice.

The expansion of digital media further complicates this dynamic. Studies indicate that social media platforms facilitate the rapid dissemination of religiously framed political messages, which can strengthen emotional identification while simultaneously obscuring critical evaluation of political performance (Lim, 2017). As a result, religious legitimacy becomes increasingly performative, relying on visibility and repetition rather than ethical consistency.

Within Islamic ethical perspectives, such contradictions represent a fundamental deviation from normative principles. The Qur'an explicitly condemns corruption and emphasizes moral responsibility in leadership (QS. Al-Baqarah [2]: 188):

وَلَا تَأْكُلُوا أَمْوَالَكُمْ بَيْنَكُمْ بِالْبُطْلِ

This verse prohibits unjust acquisition of wealth and highlights the ethical obligation to uphold justice in social and political interactions. In the context of this study, this verse functions as an analytical framework to evaluate the ethical dimension of political communication. When compared with the patterns identified in the literature, a clear discrepancy emerges between Islamic ethical principles and the communicative construction of religious legitimacy in politics.

Islamy (2020) emphasizes that Islamic political communication should be grounded in ethical responsibility and moral accountability. Srikiki and Siagian (2024) further explain that classical Islamic political traditions place ethical integrity at the core of leadership legitimacy. However, contemporary political practices often diverge from these principles, particularly in contexts where corruption persists despite strong religious narratives.

The literature-based analysis in this section demonstrates that the contradiction between religious legitimacy and corruption is not merely incidental but structurally embedded within contemporary political communication. Religious narratives are mobilized to construct moral authority, yet they may simultaneously function to mask or neutralize ethical scrutiny. This condition highlights the transformation of religious legitimacy into a strategic communicative resource that is increasingly detached from its normative ethical foundations.

### 3.3 Islamic Ethical Communication and the Reorientation of Political Legitimacy

The literature suggests that addressing the contradiction between religious legitimacy and corruption requires a reorientation of political communication toward ethical foundations. Islamic political communication, in its normative framework, emphasizes that legitimacy should be grounded in moral responsibility, integrity, and accountability rather than symbolic representation.

Islamy (2020) explains that Islamic political communication is fundamentally rooted in ethical values that guide both individual behavior and institutional practices. These values include honesty, justice, and responsibility, which are essential in establishing trust between political leaders and the public. Srikiki and Siagian (2024) further argue that classical Islamic political traditions conceptualize leadership legitimacy as inseparable from ethical conduct, where authority is justified through moral integrity rather than rhetorical performance.

In contemporary contexts, the literature indicates that the dominance of symbolic communication has shifted political legitimacy away from its ethical foundations. Religious narratives are often employed as strategic tools to construct public image, while ethical accountability remains weak. This condition highlights the need to reposition Islamic political communication as an ethical framework rather than merely a communicative strategy.

From an Islamic perspective, ethical communication is not limited to the use of religious symbols but requires consistency between discourse and action. The Qur'an emphasizes the importance of integrity and truthfulness in communication (QS. Aş-Şaff [61]: 2):

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لِمَ تَقُولُونَ مَا لَا تَفْعَلُونَ

This verse criticizes the inconsistency between words and actions, highlighting the ethical obligation to align communication with actual behavior. In the context of political communication, this principle serves as a critical framework to evaluate whether religious legitimacy reflects genuine ethical commitment or merely symbolic expression.

Furthermore, [Setiawan and Muhid \(2021\)](#) emphasize that media and communication processes play a crucial role in shaping political awareness and ethical maturity within society. This suggests that strengthening ethical political communication requires not only changes at the level of political actors but also the development of critical public engagement toward religious narratives in politics.

The literature-based analysis in this section indicates that the reorientation of political legitimacy must involve the integration of ethical principles into communicative practices. Islamic political communication should move beyond symbolic performance toward substantive ethical engagement, where legitimacy is derived from integrity, accountability, and consistency between discourse and action.

Thus, this study argues that resolving the contradiction between religious legitimacy and corruption is not solely a matter of reducing the use of religion in politics, but rather ensuring that religious communication is grounded in ethical responsibility. By repositioning Islamic political communication within its normative ethical framework, political legitimacy can shift from symbolic construction toward substantive moral authority.

### 3.4 Digital Mediatization and the Reconfiguration of Religious Political Authority in Indonesia

The transformation of political legitimacy in contemporary Indonesia is inseparable from the rapid expansion of digital communication technologies that reshape how political authority is produced and recognized. The emergence of social media platforms has fundamentally altered the structure of Islamic political communication by shifting legitimacy from institutional validation toward communicative visibility. Political actors increasingly operate within media environments where authority is constructed through narrative circulation, audience interaction, and symbolic consistency rather than sustained institutional credibility.

Historically, religious authority in Indonesia was mediated through structured institutions such as Islamic organizations, pesantren networks, and recognized scholarly figures whose legitimacy derived from intellectual tradition and communal trust. These institutions functioned as interpretative gatekeepers that maintained ethical and theological continuity. The digital communication environment disrupts this structure by enabling decentralized participation in

religious discourse. Individuals and political actors can now disseminate religiously framed political messages without reliance on established religious authority. Idris (2025) explains that social media transforms political communication into an interactive sphere in which legitimacy emerges from engagement metrics such as visibility, sharing patterns, and audience responsiveness.

This transformation reflects the broader process of mediatization, whereby media logic reorganizes social and cultural practices, including religion itself. Hjarvard (2008) argues that media institutions increasingly shape religious expression according to communicative formats optimized for accessibility and emotional appeal. Within political contexts, religious discourse becomes simplified and adapted to digital consumption patterns. Complex theological or ethical discussions are replaced by concise symbolic messages capable of rapid dissemination. As a result, religious communication becomes aligned with algorithmic incentives rather than deliberative ethical reasoning.

The Indonesian democratic environment provides fertile conditions for this transformation. Electoral competition encourages political actors to adopt communication strategies that maximize public attention. Religious symbolism, moral slogans, and visual representations of piety function as communicative shortcuts that signal moral credibility to audiences. Widiatmaka et al. (2024) observe that the politicization of religion increasingly operates through strategic messaging designed to translate religious identity into electoral advantage. Digital platforms amplify this strategy by allowing continuous reproduction of religious imagery across multiple communication channels.

Algorithmic structures further intensify the formation of ideological communication spaces. Lim (2017) demonstrates that social media algorithms tend to organize users into homogeneous networks that reinforce existing beliefs. Within these environments, religiously framed political messages circulate repeatedly among like-minded audiences, strengthening perceived legitimacy through repetition rather than critical evaluation. The communicative process thus prioritizes affirmation over scrutiny, allowing symbolic religiosity to maintain credibility even when governance performance becomes contested.

Digital political communication also transforms the emotional dynamics of legitimacy formation. Religious narratives frequently employ moral language that frames political competition as a struggle between ethical virtue and moral deviation. Insani et al. (2024) show that religious populism in online campaigns mobilizes affective identification by constructing simplified moral binaries. Such framing encourages emotional loyalty toward political actors while discouraging analytical assessment of policy effectiveness or institutional accountability. Legitimacy becomes experienced as moral alignment rather than evaluated through administrative outcomes.

Another important shift concerns the acceleration of political communication cycles. In pre-digital political environments, legitimacy developed gradually through institutional performance, policy delivery, and long-term public interaction. Digital communication ecosystems reward immediacy, requiring political actors to maintain continuous online presence. The need for constant visibility encourages prioritization of symbolic communication over substantive political explanation. Deha and Syas (2020) argue that relations among media, government, and society increasingly operate through perception management, where narrative dominance becomes central to political credibility.

The personalization of political communication further reshapes religious authority. Digital platforms enable leaders to cultivate direct relationships with audiences through personalized messaging, livestream interactions, and curated representations of religious identity. Authority becomes attached to individual personas rather than collective institutions or ideological programs. While this personalization expands participatory engagement, it simultaneously weakens institutional accountability mechanisms because legitimacy becomes dependent on mediated charisma rather than organizational responsibility.

Marketing logic increasingly intersects with religious communication strategies in digital politics. Sipa (2021) identifies the emergence of religious political marketing in which moral narratives are integrated with branding techniques designed to enhance memorability and emotional resonance. Political communication adopts persuasive strategies resembling commercial promotion, where religious symbolism functions as identity branding. This development does not eliminate religious meaning but transforms it into communicative capital capable of generating political loyalty.

The expansion of digital religious communication also reshapes public expectations toward political leadership. Visibility, perceived authenticity, and symbolic moral alignment often become primary indicators of credibility. Setiawan and Muhid (2021) suggest that media exposure significantly influences political maturity within Muslim communities, yet excessive reliance on symbolic messaging may reduce critical engagement when audiences evaluate leaders primarily through mediated representation. Consequently, ethical evaluation risks being replaced by communicative impression.

These developments demonstrate that religious political authority in Indonesia is undergoing structural reconfiguration. Legitimacy is increasingly negotiated within digital ecosystems governed by algorithmic visibility, emotional engagement, and narrative repetition. Religious discourse functions simultaneously as moral language and strategic communication resource, creating ambiguity between ethical commitment and symbolic performance.

The digital transformation of religious political communication therefore produces ambivalent democratic consequences. On one hand, digital media democratize participation by expanding access to political expression and religious discourse. On the other hand, the same mechanisms enable the instrumentalization of religious symbolism detached from institutional accountability. Political legitimacy becomes vulnerable to communicative manipulation when audiences evaluate authority primarily through mediated representation rather than ethical governance outcomes.

Understanding this transformation is essential for analyzing contemporary Indonesian politics because it reveals that legitimacy is no longer solely an institutional or ideological phenomenon. Instead, legitimacy emerges from interaction between democratic competition, media technology, and symbolic religious communication. The reconfiguration of religious authority within digital environments illustrates how political legitimacy increasingly depends on communicative structures that shape perception, emotion, and collective identity in the public sphere.

The literature-based analysis in this section reinforces the argument that the reconfiguration of religious political authority in digital environments contributes to the dominance of symbolic legitimacy over ethical substance, as discussed in the previous sections.

### 3.5 Democratic Implications of Religious Political Communication and the Crisis of Ethical Legitimacy

The increasing integration of religious discourse into political communication has generated profound implications for democratic development in Indonesia. While religion historically functioned as a moral foundation supporting collective solidarity and social ethics, its contemporary deployment within electoral competition reveals complex tensions between democratic participation, identity mobilization, and ethical governance. Political legitimacy is no longer shaped solely by institutional performance but by communicative practices that redefine how citizens interpret morality, authority, and political responsibility.

One of the most significant democratic consequences of religious political communication is the transformation of political competition into moralized contestation. Political actors frequently frame electoral rivalry through ethical narratives that distinguish between morally righteous and morally deficient political positions. Such framing shifts political debate away from policy evaluation toward identity affirmation. Yunus et al. (2023) argue that identity politics rooted in religious affiliation restructures voter alignment by linking political choice with moral belonging rather than programmatic assessment. As political preference becomes intertwined with religious identity, democratic competition risks evolving into symbolic moral conflict rather than deliberative engagement.

This moralization of politics influences how legitimacy is constructed and defended in the public sphere. Religious narratives provide political actors with moral insulation that can reduce public scrutiny. When leaders successfully associate themselves with religious symbolism, criticism may be interpreted not as political disagreement but as moral opposition. Kurniawan (2018) describes this condition within Indonesia's post-truth political environment, where emotional resonance and identity affirmation increasingly outweigh empirical evaluation. Democratic accountability becomes weakened when legitimacy derives from symbolic alignment rather than institutional transparency.

The communicative structure of contemporary democracy further intensifies this dynamic. Political communication increasingly operates within mediated environments characterized by speed, fragmentation, and competition for attention. Entman's (1993) framing theory explains that communication influences political understanding by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while minimizing others. Within religious political communication, frames emphasizing moral virtue often overshadow discussions concerning governance effectiveness, economic policy, or institutional reform. Consequently, democratic discourse becomes selectively constructed, privileging symbolic narratives over substantive debate.

Another important implication concerns the changing relationship between citizens and political institutions. Democratic systems rely on rational evaluation and accountability mechanisms through which voters assess performance and policy outcomes. However, when political legitimacy is grounded in religious symbolism, evaluative criteria shift toward perceived moral authenticity. Angretnowati and Karolus (2022) argue that symbolic power within post-fundamentalist Islamic movements demonstrates how religious narratives can consolidate political support while simultaneously complicating democratic consolidation processes. Citizens may maintain loyalty despite governance failures because legitimacy is interpreted through moral identity rather than institutional effectiveness.

The rise of religious populism also reshapes democratic representation. Populist communication strategies frequently construct a moral dichotomy between a virtuous religious community and a corrupt political elite. Mietzner (2018) identifies Islamist populism as a phenomenon capable of coexisting with democratic procedures while gradually eroding liberal democratic norms. Religious populism simplifies political complexity into emotionally accessible narratives, enabling leaders to claim exclusive representation of moral authenticity. This dynamic reduces pluralistic dialogue because political disagreement becomes framed as moral deviation rather than legitimate democratic diversity.

Digital communication ecosystems amplify these democratic tensions. Social media platforms encourage communicative polarization by rewarding emotionally charged content that generates engagement. Lim (2017) demonstrates that algorithmic environments produce “tribal nationalism,” where identity-based communication strengthens group cohesion while limiting cross-group deliberation. In religious political communication, this process intensifies polarization by reinforcing homogeneous interpretative communities. Democratic discourse becomes fragmented into parallel moral publics that rarely interact through deliberative reasoning.

The implications extend beyond electoral behavior to broader democratic culture. Political communication grounded primarily in symbolic religiosity risks encouraging passive citizenship characterized by emotional identification rather than critical participation. Setiawan and Muhid (2021) suggest that media influence can shape political maturity among Muslim communities, yet excessive reliance on symbolic messaging may inhibit reflective political judgment. When citizens evaluate leadership through mediated moral imagery, democratic participation may become expressive rather than evaluative.

Furthermore, the normalization of religious symbolism within political competition creates structural incentives for political actors to continuously escalate moral rhetoric. As religious discourse becomes an effective mobilization tool, competing actors may intensify symbolic claims to maintain visibility and legitimacy. This escalation risks transforming religion into a competitive communicative resource subject to political commodification. Nasoha et al. (2023) show that Islamic political parties increasingly adapt communication strategies to digital environments, emphasizing symbolic identity construction to remain electorally competitive.

Despite these challenges, religious political communication does not inherently undermine democracy. Religion can contribute positively by promoting ethical awareness, social solidarity, and moral accountability within public life. The democratic problem emerges when religious narratives become detached from ethical substance and institutional responsibility. Islamy (2020) emphasizes that Islamic political communication historically functioned as moral guidance rather than propaganda, suggesting that contemporary distortions arise from strategic instrumentalization rather than theological principles themselves.

The Indonesian case therefore illustrates a broader theoretical tension between communicative legitimacy and ethical legitimacy. Communicative legitimacy emerges through persuasive discourse capable of mobilizing public recognition, while ethical legitimacy depends on justice, accountability, and governance integrity. Democratic stability requires alignment between these two forms of legitimacy. When symbolic communication dominates ethical performance, democratic trust becomes fragile and susceptible to cycles of disillusionment.

Ultimately, the democratic implications of religious political communication reveal an ongoing transformation in how legitimacy operates within modern political systems. Political authority is

increasingly negotiated through mediated narratives that blend moral symbolism, identity construction, and communicative performance. Indonesia's experience demonstrates that democracy in religious societies is shaped not by the presence of religion itself but by how religious discourse interacts with media structures, electoral incentives, and ethical governance practices.

Understanding this transformation provides an analytical foundation for reconsidering democratic resilience in plural societies. The challenge facing Indonesian democracy is not to eliminate religious expression from politics but to ensure that communicative legitimacy remains anchored in ethical accountability. Democratic consolidation depends on restoring a balance in which religious discourse strengthens public morality without replacing institutional responsibility as the primary basis of political legitimacy.

The findings of this study indicate that the growing reliance on religious symbolism in political communication has significant implications for democratic quality, particularly when communicative legitimacy is not supported by ethical governance practices.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that religious legitimacy in Indonesian political communication is increasingly constructed through symbolic practices rather than grounded in substantive ethical principles. Islamic narratives are widely used to build moral credibility, yet they often function at the level of representation rather than reflecting consistent ethical behavior.

The findings reveal a clear contradiction between communicative legitimacy and ethical legitimacy, particularly in the context of corruption. While religious symbolism strengthens political acceptability, it does not guarantee accountability or integrity in governance.

The expansion of digital media further amplifies this dynamic by prioritizing visibility, emotional engagement, and narrative repetition. As a result, political legitimacy becomes more dependent on mediated representation than on ethical performance, with implications for the quality of democracy.

This study argues that Islamic political communication needs to be reoriented toward its ethical foundations, emphasizing integrity, justice, and consistency between discourse and practice.

However, this study is limited by its reliance on secondary data and the absence of direct empirical observation. Future research is encouraged to explore empirical cases to better understand the relationship between religious political communication and ethical practice.

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**Frans Tory Damara Pradipta:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft Preparation. **Enda Maharani:** Writing – Review & Editing, Validation, Supervision.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this manuscript. The authors affirm that there are no financial, personal, professional, political, religious, ideological, or academic relationships that could influence the objectivity of the research, analysis, or publication process.

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