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IDENTITY POLITICS AND RELIGIOUS POPULISM: CONTEXTUAL ISLAMIC REPRESENTATION IN INDONESIA'S 2024 REGIONAL ELECTION

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Abstract

This study analyzes patterns of electoral victories by regional head candidates in the 2024 regional elections across three regions with distinct institutional settings and socio-religious contexts: Aceh, where Islamic law is institutionally embedded; Jakarta, a pluralistic metropolitan region; and East Java, where *pesantren* (Islamic boarding schools) and Islamic organizations have longstanding social influence. The study employs a qualitative comparative design. The findings indicate that Islamic representation functions as a strategic political instrument, yet its implementation varies. In Aceh, a candidate's success is associated with the symbols and legitimacy of Islamic law. In Jakarta, Islamic elements appear primarily through inclusive moral and symbolic narratives addressed to a diverse electorate. By contrast, in East Java, the Islamic boarding school network and Islamic mass organizations play an important role in electoral dynamics. Conceptually, this study situates these results within the frameworks of religious populism and identity politics, showing that the mobilization of Islamic symbols in local elections is not determined by doctrine alone but is also shaped by relational and contextual factors and each region's socio-political arrangements. This study contributes to the development of scholarship on local political Islam and deepens understanding of Pilkada dynamics as a space for expressing identity and power strategies.

Keywords: Political Islam; religious populism; identity politics; electoral victory; local politics.

Abstrak

Studi ini mengkaji pola kemenangan calon kepala daerah dalam Pilkada 2024 di tiga wilayah dengan konteks kelembagaan dan sosial-keagamaan yang berbeda: Aceh, dengan kelembagaan syariat Islam; Jakarta, wilayah metropolitan yang majemuk; dan Jawa Timur, dengan jaringan pesantren dan organisasi Islam yang kuat. Pendekatan yang digunakan adalah studi komparatif kualitatif. Hasil studi menunjukkan bahwa representasi Islam merupakan instrumen politik yang strategis, namun penerapannya bervariasi. Di Aceh, kemenangan calon berkaitan dengan simbol dan legitimasi hukum

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Islam. Di Jakarta, aspek Islam terutama muncul melalui narasi moral dan simbolis yang inklusif dan ditujukan kepada pemilih yang beragam. Sementara itu, di Jawa Timur, jaringan pesantren dan organisasi massa Islam berperan penting dalam dinamika pemilihan. Secara teoretis, studi ini menempatkan temuan-temuan tersebut dalam kerangka populisme agama dan politik identitas, yang menunjukkan bahwa mobilisasi simbol-simbol Islam dalam pemilihan daerah tidak semata-mata ditentukan oleh faktor doktrinal, tetapi juga dipengaruhi oleh faktor relasional, kontekstual, dan konfigurasi sosial-politik di masing-masing wilayah. Studi ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan kajian Islam politik lokal serta memperkaya pemahaman mengenai dinamika Pilkada sebagai arena artikulasi identitas dan strategi kekuasaan.

Kata Kunci: *Islam politik; populisme agama; politik identitas; kemenangan elektoral; politik lokal.*

مستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة أنماط فوز المرشحين لرئاسة السلطات المحلية في انتخابات عام 2024 عبر ثلاث مناطق تختلف في سياقاتها المؤسسية والاجتماعية الدينية: آتشيه، حيث تترسخ الشريعة الإسلامية مؤسسيًا؛ وجاكرتا، بوصفها منطقة حضرية تعددية؛ وجاوة الشرقية، حيث تتمتع المعاهد الإسلامية والمنظمات الإسلامية بنفوذ اجتماعي راسخ. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة منهجًا مقارنًا نوعيًا، وأظهرت النتائج أن التمثيل الإسلامي يُعد أداة سياسية استراتيجية، وإن كانت آليات توظيفه تتفاوت؛ ففي آتشيه، يرتبط فوز المرشح بالرموز ومشروعية الشريعة الإسلامية، بينما تظهر العناصر الإسلامية في جاكرتا أساسًا من خلال خطابات أخلاقية ورمزية شاملة موجَّهة إلى قاعدة انتخابية متنوعة. وفي المقابل، تلعب شبكات مدارس "البيسانترين" (المدارس الداخلية الإسلامية) والمنظمات الإسلامية الجماهيرية دورًا مهمًا في ديناميكيات الانتخابات في جاوة الشرقية. ومن الناحية النظرية، تضع الدراسة هذه النتائج في إطار مفاهيم الشعبوية الدينية وسياسات الهوية، موضحةً أن توظيف الرموز الإسلامية في الانتخابات المحلية لا تحدده العوامل العقائدية وحدها، بل يتأثر أيضًا بالعوامل العلاقية والسياقية والترتيبات الاجتماعية والسياسية في كل منطقة. وتُسهم هذه الدراسة في تطوير الأبحاث المتعلقة بالإسلام السياسي المحلي، كما تعزز فهم ديناميكيات الانتخابات المحلية بوصفها ساحات للتعبير عن الهوية وممارسة استراتيجيات القوة.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الإسلام السياسي؛ الشعبوية الدينية؛ سياسات الهوية؛ الفوز الانتخابي؛ السياسة المحلية

A. Introduction

The 2024 simultaneous Regional Head Elections (Pilkada) are an important moment in the dynamics of local democracy in post-reform Indonesia, including in Aceh, East Java, and Jakarta. The simultaneous holding of Pilkada across more than 500 regions marks a significant transformation in the institutional design of local elections, aimed at strengthening the

efficiency and legitimacy of local government management and consolidating democracy.[1] Nevertheless, local political contestation continues to involve patronage practices, money politics, and identity-based mobilization, including the strategic use of religious symbols.

Regional elections become both symbolic and structural battles among local actors competing for power, legitimacy, and resources. Research on the 2024 Surabaya mayoral election similarly demonstrates how agrarian grievances can be politicized as electoral capital within local political competition.[2] With the rise of the phenomenon of religious populism and increasing Islamic conservatism, the involvement of religion in electoral politics is becoming increasingly prominent.[3] A comparative study of the victories of regional head candidates, particularly those with different Islamic characteristics and autonomy statuses, in Aceh, Jakarta, and East Java is important for understanding and deepening the ways Islam is represented,[4] mobilized, and negotiated in the local democratic arena.[5]

Theoretically, this article is grounded in the frameworks of Islamic populism and identity politics as developed in recent scholarship on religion and democracy in Southeast Asia. Vedi Hadiz argues that political Islam in Indonesia represents a form of 'Islamic populism,' wherein Islamic idioms and symbols are instrumentalized to articulate broader socio-economic grievances and competitive elite interests rather than to express a coherent theological program.[6] This theoretical framework enables the current analysis to go beyond a restricted interpretation of Islamic politics as being driven by doctrine, and to view it instead as a relational and context-dependent arena shaped by coalition dynamics, elite rivalry, and the localized structures of religious authority. Similarly, Widian, Satya, and Yazid demonstrate empirically that religion in Indonesian elections functions as a populist strategy—a mechanism for constructing 'the virtuous Muslim people' against a perceived corrupt or un-Islamic establishment.[7] Bayat's concept of post-Islamism provides a complementary perspective on the

[1] Marcus Mietzner, "The Limits of Autocratisation in Indonesia: Power Dispersal and Elite Competition in a Compromised Democracy," *Third World Quarterly* 46, no. 2 (January 2025): 153–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2024.2317970.
[2] Agus Machfud Fauzi et al., "Politicisation of Agrarian Legal Conflict as Political Capital: A Fiqh Siyasah Perspective," *De Jure: Jurnal Hukum dan Syar'iah* 18, no. 1 (May 2026): 126–49, https://doi.org/10.18860/j-fsh.v18i1.41410.
[3] Nova Nicky Nur Mukhibba and Kris Renzel A. Bana, "Transactional Politics and Abstention in Indonesia: An Islamic Political Ethics Perspective," *Wasathiyah: Journal of Political Islam and Society* 1, no. 2 (August 2026): 89–106, https://doi.org/10.64595/wasathiyah.v1n2.p89-106.
[4] Saiful Mujani, "Explaining Religio-Political Tolerance Among Muslims: Evidence from Indonesia," *Studia Islamika* 26, no. 2 (August 2019): 319–51, https://doi.org/10.15408/sdi.v26i2.11237.
[5] Shine Kurdiati Miare et al., "Incumbent Performance Dissatisfaction Influences Blank-Box Voting in the 2024 Gresik Election," *Journal of Religion, Local Politics, and Law* 2, no. 3 (July 2026): 291–310, https://doi.org/10.64595/jrlpl.v2n3.p291-310.
[6] Vedi R. Hadiz, "Imagine All the People? Mobilising Islamic Populism for Right-Wing Politics in Indonesia," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 4 (August 2018): 566–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2018.1433225.
[7] Rizky Widian, Putu Agung Nara Indra Prima Satya, and Sylvia Yazid, "Religion in Indonesia's Elections: An Implementation of a Populist strategy?," *Politics and Religion* 16, no. 2 (June 2023): 351–73, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755048321000195.

relationship between Islamic political aspirations, religious values, and democratic participation.[8] This perspective helps explain how Islamic representation can be articulated through institutional, symbolic, and socio-cultural arrangements rather than exclusively through demands for the formal implementation of Islamic law. Collectively, these frameworks enable an analysis of Islamic representation that goes beyond electoral reportage and connects local case-level findings to broader theoretical debates about religion, populism, and democratic contestation.

This representation may take symbolic forms, be presented through moral narratives, or be reflected in the candidate's closeness to local religious authorities.[9] Aceh, the only province that officially incorporates Islamic law into its legal and governmental systems, has a political structure that is distinctly different from that of other regions. In Aceh, candidates for regional leadership operate within an institutional setting in which administrative and electoral requirements coexist with strong public expectations concerning Islamic law, religious values, and regional identity.[10]

Jakarta was chosen for research because it is Indonesia's largest metropolitan political and economic center and represents a pluralistic and complex urban social setting. Electoral contests in Jakarta often involve identity sentiments, as experienced in previous Pilkada events.[11] Jakarta also represents the tension between civil nationalism and religious symbolism in urban politics.[12] More broadly, digital media has become an important arena for political information, public participation, and the formation of public opinion in Indonesia.[13]

East Java has a network of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) and Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) as mass organizations that play a central role in shaping voters' political preferences.[14] In this province, religious legitimacy is often obtained through cultural connections between

[8] Asef Bayat, ed., *Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199766062.001.0001.

[9] Dio Fajar Andrian and Khalid Syaifullah, "Dynamics of Power and Public Participation Regional Elections in Jombang," *Journal of Religion, Local Politics, and Law* 2, no. 2 (April 2026): 184–96, https://doi.org/10.64595/jrlpl.v2n2.p184-196.

[10] Zulkarnaini Zulkarnaini, Muhammad Ansor, and Laila Sari Masyhur, "Sharia in Power: Non-Muslims and the Performance of Islamic Politics in Aceh Public Sphere, Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Islam and Muslim Societies* 12, no. 2 (December 2022): 257–83, https://doi.org/10.18326/ijims.v12i2.257-283.

[11] Abdul Hamid, "Populism in the 2017 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election," *Journal of Governance* 4, no. 1 (June 2019), https://doi.org/10.31506/jog.v4i1.4874.

[12] Bulya Bulya and Suci Izzati, "Indonesia's Digital Literacy as a Challenge for Democracy in the Digital Age," *The Journal of Society and Media* 8, no. 2 (October 2024): 640–61, https://doi.org/10.26740/jsm.v8n2.p640-661.

[13] Yujitia Ahdarrijal and Dian Eka Rahmawati, "The Role of Digital Media in Determining the Direction of Indonesia's Democracy in 2023," *The Journal of Society and Media* 8, no. 1 (April 2024): 144–64, https://doi.org/10.26740/jsm.v8n1.p144-164

[14] Greg Fealy and Virginia Hooker, eds., *Voices of Islam in Southeast Asia: A Contemporary Sourcebook (*Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006).

candidates and Islamic boarding school communities.[15] Candidates who succeed in building patronage networks with kiai (Islamic religious scholars/leaders) or *dzurriyah* (descendants of prominent kiai or pesantren founders) of large Islamic boarding schools generally have higher electoral opportunities.[16]

Islam, as a religion, is frequently portrayed not only as a marker of religious identity but also as a strategic political instrument for establishing legitimacy across various Pilkada events.[17] This representation may take symbolic forms, appear within moral narratives, or reflect the candidate's proximity to local religious authorities.[18] The candidate's capacity to employ Islamic symbols and networks effectively frequently affects their chances of being elected, particularly in regions where Muslims constitute the majority of the population.[19] Research on the 2024 presidential election also identified an association between participation in Islamic student organizations and voting decisions, illustrating the wider electoral relevance of religious organizational networks.[20]

This study applies a qualitative methodology within a comparative case study design. This approach was selected to examine how Islamic representation is articulated within the electoral dynamics of three regions with distinct institutional and socio-cultural characteristics: Aceh, Jakarta, and East Java. Comparative case studies enable researchers to examine these phenomena in real-world settings and to contrast the dynamics unfolding in each region.[21] The theoretical framework adopted in this study is constructivism, which understands social reality as emerging from social and cultural interactions between political actors and voters.

This study adopts a social constructivist perspective, arguing that political and religious significance is not a stable characteristic but is continually generated through interactions

[15] Arifinsyah Arifinsyah, Ryandi Ryandi, and Manshuruddin Manshuruddin, "Pesantren Religious Paradigm: Aqeedah, Plurality, and Jihad," *The Journal of Society and Media* 3, no. 2 (October 2019): 278, https://doi.org/10.26740/jsm.v3n2.p278-298.

[16] Martin Van Bruinessen, "Traditionalist and Islamist Pesantrens in Contemporary Indonesia," in *The Madrasa in Asia*, 1st ed., ed. Farish A. Noor, Yoginder Sikand, and Martin Van Bruinessen (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 217–46, https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048501380.009.

[17] Am Fauzi et al., "Maintaining Identity Political Culture In Indonesia," *Journal of Physics: Conference Series* 953 (January 2018): 012185, https://doi.org/10.1088/1742-6596/953/1/012185.

[18] Jeremy Menchik, "The Politics of the Fatwa: Islamic Legal Authority in Modern Indonesia," *Indonesia* 114, no. 1 (October 2022): 75–97, https://doi.org/10.1353/ind.2022.0012.

[19] Poppy Gheandi Shafa and Khalid Syaifullah, "Religious Identity Politics in the Political Choices of Nadhlatul Ulama Members in the East Java Regional Elections," *Wasathiyah: Journal of Political Islam and Society* 1, no. 1 (April 2026): 30–42, https://doi.org/10.64595/wasathiyah.v1n1.p30-42.

[20] M. Salman Alfarisi and Mochamad Arif Affandi, "The Relationship between Student Activism in Islamic-Based Student Organizations and Voting Decisions in the 2024 Presidential Election," *Wasathiyah: Journal of Political Islam and Society* 1, no. 1 (April 2026): 14–29, https://doi.org/10.64595/wasathiyah.v1n1.p14-29

[21] Emanuele Ferragina and Christopher Deeming, "Comparative Mainstreaming? Mapping the Uses of the Comparative Method in Social Policy, Sociology and Political Science since the 1970s," *Journal of European Social Policy* 33, no. 1 (February 2023): 132–47, https://doi.org/10.1177/09589287221128438.

between political actors and voters within particular socio-cultural settings. From this standpoint, Islamic representation is not simply voiced by candidates and voters; it is actively formed and reformulated through ongoing interactions, which are influenced by local institutional conditions, historical developments in Islamic authority, and the symbolic resources available in each region.

To illustrate how this constructive process varies across regions, this study draws on two theoretical currents in contemporary political Islam studies. Post-Islamism provides a perspective on how Islamic political aspirations are negotiated within democratic institutions and changing socio-political contexts.[22] Religious populism, in turn, explains how religious identity may be mobilized through narratives that distinguish a morally defined religious community from political elites or perceived opponents.[23] Accordingly, Islamic representation and identity-based mobilization are examined as related but analytically distinct from religious populism, which specifically involves the construction of a morally defined political community in relation to perceived opponents or elites.

Research on the 2024 Pilkada further illustrates the relevance of the constructivist perspective. Fauzi et al. demonstrate that religious charisma inherited from prominent kiai figures did not yield uniform electoral outcomes across santri (students or members of the pesantren community)-based regions: while a candidate's kiai lineage secured victory in Mojokerto, an equally strong religious pedigree resulted in defeat in Jombang. This divergence indicates that religious legitimacy is not a static form of capital automatically conferred by lineage, but is continuously reconstructed through its interaction with gender dynamics, patronage networks, campaign branding, and fragmented pesantren support.[24] Rather than treating these theoretical currents as competing explanations, this study interprets post-Islamism, religious populism, and the empirical pattern of contested religious legitimacy[25] as converging illustrations of a single underlying constructivist process: the situated construction of religious meaning through actor–voter interaction, which assumes divergent institutional and symbolic forms across Indonesia's decentralized democracy.

[22] Bayat, Post-Islamism.
[23] Hadiz, "Imagine All the People?"
[24] Agus Machfud Fauzi et al., "Santri Community, Charisma, and the Contrast Political Agency: Electoral Victory and Defeat in Jombang and Mojokerto, Indonesia," *Ascarya: Journal of Islamic Science, Culture, and Social Studies* 5, no. 2 (December 2025): 224–35, https://doi.org/10.53754/xzzh8v16.
[25] Agus Machfud Fauzi et al., "Instrumentalizing Religious Symbolism in Electoral Politics: A Socio-Legal Analysis of Electoral Legitimacy and Post-Election Corruption in Indonesia," *Justicia Islamica* 23, no. 2 (July 2026): 629–62, https://doi.org/10.21154/justicia.v23i2.13181.

Data were collected through three main techniques: (1) analysis of official documents, including candidate visions and missions, election results issued by Indonesia's General Elections Commission (Komisi Pemilihan Umum, KPU), and media coverage of campaigns and religious issues; (2) in-depth interviews with key figures in each region; and (3) social media analysis.[26] The materials were analyzed thematically to compare how Islamic representation was articulated through religious institutions, campaign narratives, and socio-political networks across the three regional cases. [27]

B. Discussion

The electoral victories of the candidate pairs in Aceh, Jakarta, and East Java occurred within different political, institutional, and socio-religious configurations of Islamic representation. The three cannot be equated because the Muslim perspective on political parties and candidates is heterogeneous, though there are points of similarity and difference among the three regions within the broader theme of local political contestation.

Theoretically, the patterns observed across Aceh, Jakarta, and East Java can be mapped onto the complementary frameworks of identity politics and religious populism.[28] Identity politics—understood here as the strategic deployment of collective religious identity to mobilize electoral constituencies- takes markedly different institutional forms in the three regions. In Aceh, Islamic identity constitutes a structural and institutionalized basis of political legitimacy, embedded in qanun (Aceh's regional regulations, including those implementing Islamic law), the Ulema Consultative Assembly (MPU), and post-conflict political culture. In Jakarta, Islamic identity serves as a symbolic marker of cultural alignment, without enforcing formal religious governance frameworks. In East Java, Islamic identity works through relational and patronage networks embedded within pesantren culture and the organizational ecosystem of Nahdlatul Ulama.

Religious populism refers more specifically to political narratives that construct a morally defined religious community in relation to perceived political opponents or elites. In the three cases, however, Islamic representation assumes different forms that cannot be reduced

[26] Ernita Tri Kurniawati and Faiz Dwiki Ananta, "Social Media Activism: From Social Struggles to Political Content and Image," *Wasathiyah: Journal of Political Islam and Society* 1, no. 2 (August 2026): 133–44, https://doi.org/10.64595/wasathiyah.v1n2.p133-144.
[27] Gideon Sjoberg, "The Comparative Method in the Social Sciences," *Philosophy of Science* 22, no. 2 (April 1955): 106–17, https://doi.org/10.1086/287408.
[28] Haniefa Auliya Rahmah and Nik Nur Nazira Arisya Bt Nik Nazman, "Public Perception of Kiai Involvement in the 2024 Tulungagung Regent Election, Indonesia," *Wasathiyah: Journal of Political Islam and Society* 1, no. 1 (April 2026): 1–13, https://doi.org/10.64595/wasathiyah.v1n1.p1-13.

to populist antagonism alone. Aceh demonstrates the institutionalization of Islamic legitimacy, Jakarta illustrates the selective use of religious symbolism in electoral narratives, and East Java highlights the political significance of religious networks. These variations show how identity-based political mobilization is shaped by the institutional and cultural arrangements of each region.

1. Aceh Local Election: Islam as Structural Legitimacy

The winning candidate in the local elections in Aceh Province was a former commander of the Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, GAM) who was also active in local religious organizations. He succeeded in building a coalition among local parties (Partai Aceh), traditional dayah (traditional Islamic boarding school in Aceh) networks, and national politics. His campaign emphasized preserving Islamic law in Aceh, increasing the role of religious leaders in government, and criticizing the secularization of central government programs.[29] The candidate's association with religious leaders and commitment to Islamic values formed part of the legitimacy articulated during the electoral contest. In Aceh, Islamic representation therefore extends beyond campaign symbolism and operates within an established religious and institutional framework.[30]

The 2024 Aceh gubernatorial election was contested by two candidate pairs registered through the Independent Election Commission of Aceh (KIP Aceh). The Muzakir Manaf–Fadhlullah pair prevailed by 183,471 votes over the Bustami Hamzah–Fadhil Rahmi pair. The victorious coalition held 52 of the 81 seats in the Aceh People's Representative Council (DPRA), representing approximately 64% of the legislature, compared with 29 seats, or approximately 36%, held by the opposing coalition. This distribution reflects the substantial legislative support available to the winning ticket. The electoral outcome also emerged within a political setting shaped by religious legitimacy, former GAM networks, candidate profiles, and campaign strategies.

[29] M. N. Ichwan, "Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization: The Majelis Permusyawaratan Ulama, Sharīʿatization and Contested Authority in Post-New Order Aceh," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 22, no. 2 (May 2011): 183–214, https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etr026.

[30] Edward Aspinall, "Indonesia: The Irony of Success," *Journal of Democracy* 21, no. 2 (April 2010): 20–34, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.0.0157.

The vote shares of the two candidate pairs in the 2024 Aceh gubernatorial election are presented in Figure 1.

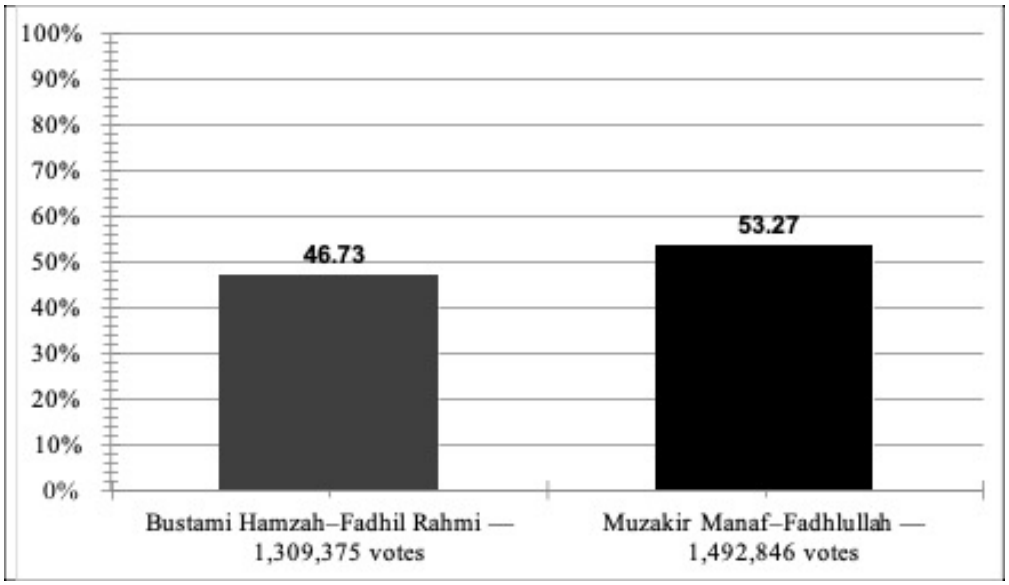


Figure 1: *Calculation based on the Aceh Independent Election Commission (KIP Aceh), Decision Number 52 of 2024 concerning the Determination of the Results of the 2024 Election of the Governor and Deputy Governor of Aceh.*

The dominance of structural Islamic narratives in local political struggles is significant: candidates who fail to position themselves within the ideological nodes of Acehnese Islam may face challenges in securing political legitimacy, even when supported by large national parties.[31] Therefore, in the context of Aceh, Islam is not merely a tool for political mobilization but rather becomes a normative structure and a source of legitimacy[32] for institutionalized electoral power, grounded in an understanding of Acehnese traditions and culture.

In his campaign declarations during the 2024 Pilkada, Muzakir Manaf consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining Aceh's Islamic identity and ensuring that the implementation of qanun remains the cornerstone of regional governance. Dayah figures who were still searching for a leader who dares to uphold Acehnese values, alumni of Islamic boarding schools, and ex-GAM networks supported this narrative and strengthened the argument that their leadership was culturally and structurally legitimate. Despite divergent views on GAM's political legacy, former GAM networks remained relevant to the electoral dynamics in Aceh.

[31] Muntasir Muntasir et al., "Power Structures and Religious Legitimacy: The Influence of Dayah Ulama in the Politics of Aceh Analyzed using Powercube Theory," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 13, no. 1 (2025): 437–62, https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v13i1.1625; Ali Mustafa, "Islamic Personal Branding Strategies in the 2024 Local Election in Central Aceh," *Jurnal Studi Komunikasi* 8, no. 3 (2024): 685–96, https://doi.org/10.25139/jsk.v8i3.8992

[32] Zulkarnaini, Ansor, and Masyhur, "Sharia in Power," 257–83.

The Role of Key Figures in the victory of the Muzakir Manaf election was reinforced by support from the central government. Muzakir Manaf stands as a symbol of struggle for the Acehnese people and represents a model of local leadership regarded as capable and legitimate. As the general chairman of the Aceh Party, he had the institutional bargaining power necessary to be nominated as the prospective leader of Aceh. Democracy served as the instrument through which the mandate was formally conferred.[33]

Muzakir Manaf possesses strong historical and symbolic legitimacy of the Aceh struggle, as demonstrated in various studies on incumbents with historical and symbolic capital. His role as a former GAM commander, combined with a resolute public presence, positioned him as a central figure in the narrative of the Aceh struggle. Although people outside Aceh have different perceptions of GAM, within Aceh, GAM leaders and the community view this legacy as embodying great ideals aimed at improving the welfare of the Acehnese people.[34]

Fadhlullah—as a candidate for deputy governor—provided symbolic national connection and electability. Before the 2024 Pilkada, he served as a member of the Indonesian House of Representatives (DPR RI) for two terms as a Gerindra Party member, which was an additional strength in his victory. The Gerindra Party had significant influence because it had recently delivered Prabowo Subianto as President of the Republic of Indonesia. Various national political parties—including the Democratic Party, PKB, PKS, PPP, and PDI-P—supported the pair, reinforcing the coalition's legislative majority in the DPRA.

The victory of Muzakir Manaf–Fadhlullah was thus supported by a coalition between the Aceh Party and national parties. The Aceh Party, with 20 of the 81 seats in the DPRA, constituted the initial capital and backbone of local support. This was complemented by the presence of national parties in the coalition, which expanded the support base to a more diverse set of constituencies. This model represents a hybrid form of political Islam within local Indonesian democracy—one that integrates structural Islamic legitimacy with national partisan coalitions.

2. Jakarta Local Election: Islam as a Moderate and Strategic Symbol

The 2024 Jakarta gubernatorial election differed from the 2017 contest, when religious and ethnic issues played a prominent role in the competition among Basuki Tjahaja Purnama

[33] Muhamad Taufik Kustiawan et al., "Islamic Leadership Contestation: Exploring The Practices of Conservative Islamic Movements In Indonesia," *Jurnal Ilmiah Islam Futura* 23, no. 2 (August 2023): 196, https://doi.org/10.22373/jiif.v23i2.14938.

[34] Saifuddin Dhuhri, "Art as a Cultural Instrument: The Role of Acehnese Art In Resolving Horizontal Conflict," *Jurnal Ilmiah Peuradeun* 4, no. 1 (January 2016): 89, https://doi.org/10.26811/peuradeun.v4i1.88.

(Ahok)–Djarot Saiful Hidayat, Anies Baswedan–Sandiaga Uno, and Agus Harimurti Yudhoyono–Sylviana Murni. The political polarization surrounding the 2017 election became an important reference point for subsequent debates over religious identity in Jakarta's electoral politics.

There are three candidate pairs in the 2024 Jakarta gubernatorial election. Valid vote acquisition and victory: Pramono Anung–Rano Karno with 2,183,239 votes or 50.07%; Ridwan Kamil–Suswono with 1,718,160 votes or 39.40%; and Dharma Pongrekun–Kun Wardana with 459,230 votes or 10.53%.

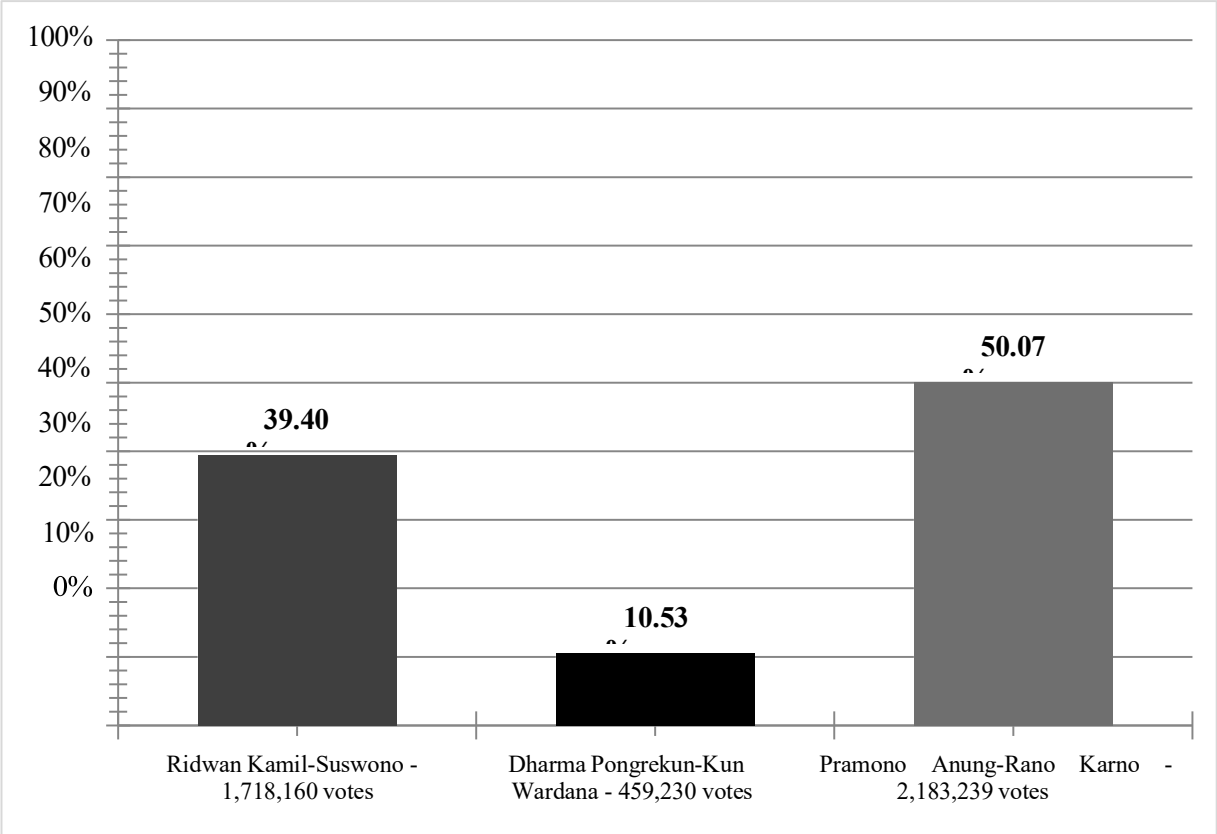


Figure 2: *Percentage of Valid Votes (%) on Candidate Pairs for the 2024 Jakarta Gubernatorial Election,* Calculation based on the KPU Jakarta

The winner of the 2024 Jakarta gubernatorial election is Pramono Anung, an experienced politician who has a cultural figure as his running mate. His public campaign narrative was not conservative but was oriented toward inclusivity and religious tolerance.[35] The campaign's emphasis on tolerance, morality, and social solidarity, without advocating

[35] Siti Nurhaliza, "Tekankan Toleransi, Pramono: Saya Akan Jadi Pemimpin Semua Agama," *ANTARA*, October 7, 2024, https://www.antaranews.com/berita/4382514/tekankan-toleransi-pramono-saya-akan-jadi-pemimpin-semua-agama.

sharia formalization, contrasted with the more overt religious polarization of Jakarta's 2017 electoral contest.[36] In the 2024 contest, Pramono Anung–Rano Karno's campaign projected an inclusive Islamic image rather than emphasizing explicitly exclusive religious symbolism.

Several political and campaign developments were associated with Pramono Anung–Rano Karno's electoral victory: first, the aggressiveness of the campaign machine, whereby the Pramono–Rano campaign team displayed a more aggressive campaign struggle than their opponents; second, support from Anies Baswedan as the last former Governor of Jakarta; third, the controversy of Suswono's statement about the 'widow card' at the end of October 2024, which caused a negative reaction in the community; and fourth, the perception of local representation, as Rano Karno's longstanding association with Si Doel, a popular character associated with Jakarta's Betawi community, strengthened his symbolic connection with Jakarta's local cultural identity.

The difference between Jakarta's 2017 and 2024 elections offers a theoretically important perspective on how Islamic politics in the capital has developed over time. In 2017, the mobilization of exclusionary Islamic feeling—especially through the 212 Movement's mass demonstrations against then-Governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (Ahok)—showed the strong electoral power of conservative religious mobilization within an urban, pluralistic setting. The successful prosecution of Ahok for blasphemy and the subsequent defeat of his gubernatorial slate indicated that identity-based religious populism could outweigh the advantages of technocratic incumbency in a major metropolitan area. By contrast, the 2024 local election (Pilkada) delivered a notable reversal: the candidate linked to conservative Islamic coalitions and identity-based networks (Ridwan Kamil–Suswono, supported by the Prosperous Justice Party and backed by Islamist-aligned constituencies) lost to a candidate who projected an inclusive, moderate Islamic image.

This reversal requires an analytical account that extends beyond strictly technical considerations such as coalition composition or campaign machinery. Multiple interconnected dynamics explain why inclusive Islamic narratives achieved wider acceptance in Jakarta in 2024 than conservative religious mobilization did in 2017. First is possible post-2017 disillusionment: after Anies Baswedan's five-year tenure as governor—backed by conservative Islamic networks—public assessments of his administration remained divided, with some

[36] Lia Wanadriani Santosa, "Pramono-Rano Sepakat Tak Gunakan Politik Identitas," *ANTARA*, September 15, 2024, https://www.antaranews.com/berita/4334815/pramono-rano-sepakat-tak-gunakan-politik-identitas; Widian, Satya, and Yazid, "Religion in Indonesia's Elections."

Jakarta residents expressing dissatisfaction with its performance. Accordingly, religious piety as a governance credential may have been evaluated alongside perceptions of government performance.[37] Second, demographic and generational shifts: Jakarta's electorate has become progressively younger and more urban, with millennial and Generation Z voters showing lower receptivity to identity-based political polarization and greater responsiveness to policy-oriented, technocratic discourse. Third, the fatigue of religious polarization: the intense religious–political conflict of 2016–2019, including the 212 Movement, the 2019 presidential election, and related social tensions, produced what sociologists call "polarization fatigue" among substantial segments of Jakarta's Muslim middle class—an audience that both prizes Islamic identity and rejects its use as an instrument for political division.

These dynamics correspond to Bayat's notion of post-Islamism in urban electoral settings: in a city marked by ethnic and religious diversity, the moral presentation of Islam as a force that universalizes rather than particularizes offers a framework of political legitimacy across heterogeneous urban constituencies.[38] Pramono Anung's campaign effectively mobilized Islamic rhetoric centered on social justice, anti-corruption, and communal harmony, without eliciting the exclusionary attitudes that had defined 2017. This indicates that inclusive Islamic narratives can gain momentum in Jakarta not in spite of its pluralism, but precisely because of it: pluralism provides a political setting in which inclusive Islamic narratives can be articulated alongside tolerance, urban cosmopolitanism, and cross-confessional solidarity.[39] Accordingly, this analysis further develops the theoretical claim regarding the context-dependent nature of religious populism: Islamic symbols may acquire different political meanings across electoral cycles, depending on coalition strategies, institutional settings, and changing configurations of urban electoral competition.

Unlike Aceh, where Islamic legitimacy is embedded in regional legal and governmental institutions, Jakarta represents a pluralistic electoral setting in which Islamic values are articulated primarily through selective symbolic and moral narratives. In the 2024 gubernatorial campaign, these narratives emphasized social justice, anti-corruption, solidarity, and community empowerment without promoting the formalization of Islamic law. This pattern

[37] Nabilah Muhamad, "Survei KIC: 56,7% Warga Jakarta Puas dengan Kinerja Anies Baswedan sebagai Gubernur," *Databoks*, June 6, 2024, https://databoks.katadata.co.id/pendidikan/statistik/b07b5c02d9f04f1/survei-kic-567-warga-jakarta-puas-dengan-kinerja-anies-baswedan-sebagai-gubernur

[38] Bayat, Post-Islamism.

[39] Amalinda Savirani and Edward Aspinall, "Adversarial Linkages: The Urban Poor and Electoral Politics in Jakarta," *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 36, no. 3 (December 2017): 3–34, https://doi.org/10.1177/186810341703600301.

illustrates the adaptation of Islamic representation to a metropolitan political environment characterized by diverse electoral constituencies.

3. East Java Local Election: Islam as a Socio-Cultural Connection

The East Java Provincial Election offers a distinct explanation compared to those of Aceh and Jakarta. The victory of Khofifah Indar Parawansa and Emil Dardak originated from the support of a broad coalition of political parties, almost all of which aligned behind them. The political map prior to the election was largely predictable, notwithstanding early uncertainty among potential candidates.

The results of the 2024 East Java gubernatorial election are presented in Figure 3.

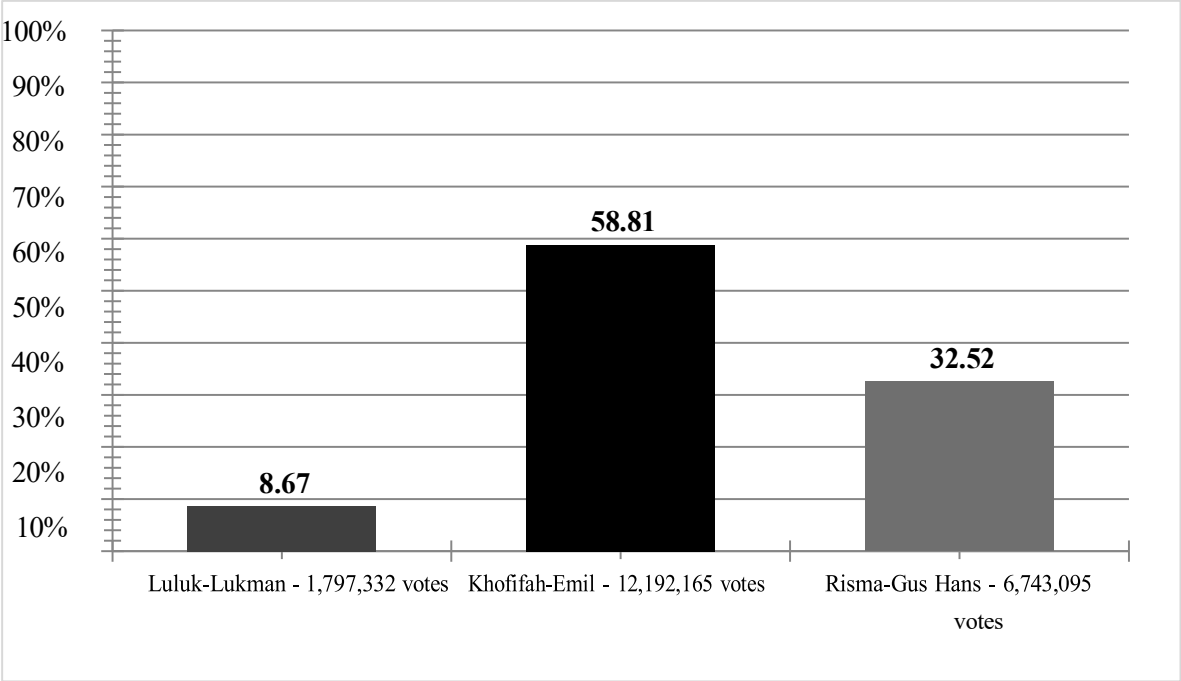


Figure 3: Vote Shares in the 2024 East Java Gubernatorial Election. Source: Calculation based on KPU East Java Decision No. 63 of 2024 concerning the Determination of the Results of the 2024 East Java Gubernatorial Election.

The 2024 East Java Pilkada was settled in a single round. Khofifah and Emil received direct backing from senior clerics affiliated with major Islamic boarding schools in East Java. This clerical support was reflected in the consolidation of student and alumni communities at each boarding school, going beyond mere symbolic involvement. The candidates highlighted cultural Islamic values—humility (*tawadhu'*), social connection through maintaining and strengthening relationships among members of the community and family lineages (*silaturahmi*), and mutual cooperation (*gotong royong*)—by incorporating them into everyday governance language rather than limiting them to formal religious argumentation.

In East Java, Islamic representation is closely embedded in cultural networks and established relationships between religious institutions and political actors. Pesantren and traditional Islamic organizations, particularly Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), provide social and organizational connections through which candidates engage with religious constituencies. Candidates with strong ties to the kiai community and the alumni networks of Islamic boarding schools possess a substantial competitive advantage, reflecting the relational depth that differentiates East Java's Islamic political culture. This suggests that the portrayal of Islam in East Java is grounded in social relationships, rather than serving as a mere formal symbol.[40]

The wide-ranging coalition backing Khofifah—comprising Gerindra, Golkar, Demokrat, PAN, NasDem, PKS, PPP, and PSI—held 72 seats in the East Java Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD), accounting for 60 percent of the legislature. Although many alumni of Islamic boarding schools have joined different political parties, they nonetheless rally under the banner of the pesantren community, demonstrating the persistent social solidarity of the pesantren network across formal party boundaries.

The Gerindra Party and the expanded Koalisi Indonesia Maju (KIM Plus) also helped secure victory through the broader Prabowo effect after the presidential election, fostering a perception of stability among voters who linked the coalition to President Prabowo Subianto. As the former governor and deputy governor, Khofifah and Emil entered the 2024 election with the political advantage of sustained public visibility through five years of provincial governance. Their incumbency provided opportunities to maintain public engagement through government programs and established political networks.

Support from pesantren communities and Nahdlatul Ulama networks was central to Khofifah–Emil's electoral strength, reinforcing their established religious and cultural legitimacy alongside incumbency and broad party support. Support from pesantren communities developed within Khofifah's longstanding connections to Muslimat NU (the women's organization of Nahdlatul Ulama) and her previous experience in provincial governance. Her political profile combined leadership within a major Islamic women's organization, a moderate Islamic public image, and political engagement extending beyond *Muslimat* NU, including connections with *Aisyiyah* (the women's organization affiliated with Muhammadiyah). Khofifah had moral and cultural legitimacy that other candidates lacked, thereby consolidating support from the village kiai group, santri, and the Muslimat network.

[40] Widian, Satya, and Yazid, "Religion in Indonesia's Elections."

Opponents Tri Rismaharini and Luluk Nur Hamidah were unable to match Khofifah's standing among Islamic boarding school networks and Nahdlatul Ulama leadership. Although Tri Rismaharini's deputy was a santri, this background was not enough to mobilize pesantren communities in support of the pair. Luluk Nur Hamidah, who was nominated by PKB, similarly could not consolidate the NU voter base because many prominent NU figures had already pledged their support to Khofifah.

Khofifah used a populist campaign style, engaging with traditional markets, women's organizations, religious study circles, and disability groups. Other candidates also pursued comparable outreach, but with less frequent and less extensive engagement. The campaign theme "East Java Rises from Below" merged a populist orientation with inclusive policy pledges, projecting an image of grassroots solidarity.

4. Fragmentation of Islamic Representation in the 2024 Regional Elections

The comparative analysis examines five dimensions: the basis of Islamic legitimacy, forms of representation, sources of political power, the role of religious figures, and electoral approaches. Across these dimensions, the three regions display distinct configurations of Islamic representation shaped by their institutional arrangements and political cultures. In Aceh, Islamic legitimacy is closely associated with sharia institutions, the Ulama Consultative Assembly (MPU), and post-conflict political traditions.[41] Political legitimacy in Aceh draws not only on administrative and electoral qualifications but also on religious credibility, dayah networks, and post-conflict political histories associated with GAM. The comparison reveals qualitatively distinct configurations across the five analytical dimensions. Aceh is characterized by the strongest institutional embedding of Islamic legitimacy, while Jakarta is distinguished by symbolic-electoral representation and East Java by relational religious networks. These categories are analytical types rather than ordinal rankings.

In contrast to Aceh, Jakarta is characterized by symbolic and moral forms of Islamic representation within electoral campaigns rather than the institutionalization of Islamic law in regional governance. This indicates that in the pluralistic capital city, Islam is represented as an electoral symbol used to construct a moral and inclusive image, rather than being rooted in an established legal system or religious patronage.[42] Candidates who succeeded in Jakarta were

[41] Ichwan, "Official Ulema and the Politics of Re-Islamization," 183–214; Muntasir et al., "Power Structures and Religious Legitimacy," 437–62.

[42] Hanifah Islamiyah and Siti Umaiyah, "Analisis Citra Politik Pasangan Calon Gubernur Jakarta dalam Pemenangan Pilkada 2024," *Academic Journal of Da'wa and Communication* 6, no. 1 (2025): 39–58, https://doi.org/10.22515/ajdc.v6i1.11594; Nurhaliza, "Tekankan Toleransi, Pramono."

not necessarily the most formally religious; rather, they were those who integrated Islamic principles with national rhetoric, tolerance, and technocratic effectiveness—thereby presenting Islam as a malleable symbol tailored to a divided urban electorate.[43]

Islam's trajectory in East Java reveals a distinctive arrangement in which it operates simultaneously as a cultural network and as a mechanism of electoral patronage. The strong ties between political candidates and established pesantren—particularly those affiliated with Nahdlatul Ulama—indicate that the authority of the kiai and the cohesion of the santri network serve as decisive conduits for electoral support. In this region, the expression of Islam is fundamentally relational and anchored in enduring socio-religious institutions.

Drawing on the preceding analysis, the findings demonstrate that Islamic representation in the 2024 gubernatorial elections varied across Aceh, Jakarta, and East Java, reflecting differences in institutional arrangements, political cultures, and sources of religious authority. This result further reinforces the view that Islamic politics in local democracy in Indonesia is a dynamic, varied, and adaptive phenomenon, responsive to the socio-political landscape in which it is embedded.

Viewed through the lens of identity politics and religious populism, the three cases demonstrate different approaches to mobilizing identity. In Aceh, Islamic identity operates both as a component of the legal requirements for regional leadership and as a source of political legitimacy, reflecting the province's distinctive institutional and religious framework. The sharia institutional framework further deepens this divide by embedding it in formal governance structures, thereby turning identity into a structural requirement rather than a mere campaign slogan.

Jakarta's 2024 Pilkada illustrates how Islamic references can be selectively incorporated into inclusive electoral messaging. Widian, Satya, and Yazid's analysis of religion as a populist strategy provides a relevant theoretical comparison,[44] although the available evidence does not establish that the Pramono Anung–Rano Karno campaign reproduced the antagonistic mechanisms typically associated with religious populism. Pramono Anung's team developed a narrative of an inclusive Islam, setting it apart from the identity-driven contestation of 2017, when conservative Islamic mobilization through the 212 Movement helped bring about Basuki Tjahaja Purnama's political defeat. The 2024 electoral outcome illustrates the political

[43] Kustiawan et al., "Islamic Leadership Contestation."
[44] Widian, Satya, and Yazid, "Religion in Indonesia's Elections."

relevance of moderate and inclusive Islamic narratives within a different configuration of candidates, coalitions, and campaign strategies from that of 2017.

East Java reflects a form of Islamic political mobilization embedded in social networks and patronage arrangements, rather than mobilization driven solely by ideology. Hadiz situates Islamic populism within broader struggles over political power and collective Muslim identity. The East Java case illustrates a more organizationally embedded form of Islamic representation, in which pesantren and NU networks connect religious authority with political mobilization.[45] This kind of identity politics is less confrontational than the identity mobilization observed in Aceh or in 2017 Jakarta; instead, it works through the everyday authority of the kiai and the affective solidarity of the santri community—a pattern that can also be examined in relation to Bayat's discussion of Islamic political engagement beyond the exclusive pursuit of formal Islamist agendas.[46]

Taken together, the three cases show that Islamic identity in Indonesia's local elections is not a single, uniform resource. Instead, it functions as a repertoire of context-dependent political instruments, the impact of which hinges on the match among the form of identity mobilization, the electorate's historical memory, and the institutional setting in each region. This theoretical synthesis shifts the analysis away from a mere account of election outcomes, toward a substantive contribution to comparative identity politics in Muslim-majority democracies.

The three regional configurations reinforce the social constructivist perspective adopted in this study, which understands Islamic representation as a political and social construction shaped by interactions among political actors, religious institutions, and their wider communities. Rather than indicating a hierarchy of Islamic political influence, the comparative findings identify distinct ways in which religious legitimacy is articulated and mobilized within local electoral competition.

In Aceh, the Islamic legitimacy of the Muzakir Manaf–Fadhlullah ticket was not merely an asset already available from established sharia institutions; rather, it was articulated through public discourse, references to qanun, and political engagement with established sources of religious authority. In Jakarta, the campaign team of Pramono Anung–Rano Karno intentionally built a narrative of "moderate, inclusive Islam" that rejected the confrontational religious script of 2017, thereby redefining the set of symbolic materials available for Islamic representation in

[45] Hadiz, "Imagine All the People?"
[46] Bayat, Post-Islamism.

a pluralist urban setting. In East Java, the meaning of Islamic legitimacy was constructed relationally through the pesantren–NU network, where everyday interactions among kiai, students, and candidates continuously reproduced the symbolic authority of Islamic learning as a political resource. These three constructive processes are institutionally specific and historically situated, confirming that Islamic identity in Indonesian local elections functions less as a transmitted ideology than as an enacted and co-produced social reality.

A further dimension that intensifies the engagement between identity politics and religious populism is the role of religious charisma—here defined not as an individual candidate's personal trait but as a socially produced resource shaped and conveyed through institutions. In East Java, religious charisma is embedded in genealogical and organizational connections to the kiai network: Khofifah's political authority is closely connected to her longstanding leadership of Muslimat NU and her established position within NU's organizational networks —a form of institutionalized religious authority that can be examined through Weber's concept of the routinization of charisma.[47] In Aceh, charismatic authority is partly structurally produced through the MPU and the formal ulema apparatus, lending it a bureaucratic dimension that reinforces its political efficacy without requiring individual candidates to embody extraordinary religious qualities. In Jakarta, by contrast, charisma is detached from institutional religious authority and constructed discursively through campaign messaging, media framing, and symbolic alignment with moderate Islamic values—consistent with Bayat's concept of post-Islamist political culture, where Islamic ethical sensibilities are mobilized without exclusive claims to divine sanction.[48] This tripartite differentiation of charismatic modalities—relational-institutional in East Java, structural-bureaucratic in Aceh, and discursive-symbolic in Jakarta—constitutes a theoretical contribution of this comparative study to the scholarship on religious leadership and electoral politics in Muslim-majority democracies, and extends the framework of religious populism beyond its conventional focus on ideological mobilization toward an attention to the institutional architectures through which charismatic authority is produced.

The comparative analysis also illuminates distinct modalities in the construction of 'the Islamic people' as a populist subject—a central mechanism in the theory of religious populism as developed by Hadiz[49] and Widian et al.[50] In Aceh, the Muslim community is formed not only

[47] Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (University of California Press, 2013).
[48] Bayat, Post-Islamism.
[49] Hadiz, "Imagine All the People?"
[50] Widian, Satya, and Yazid, "Religion in Indonesia's Elections."

through campaign rhetoric but through formal governance arrangements: the “Islamic people” of Aceh function at once as citizens and as religious subjects within a recognized sharia polity, which turns populist identity construction from a purely electoral tactic into a structural element of regional governance. The post-conflict memory surrounding Aceh’s autonomy negotiations further strengthens this shared identity by placing it within a narrative of a legitimate Islamic struggle and of institutional accomplishments. In Jakarta 2024, the populist portrayal of the Islamic people moved decisively away from the exclusionary boundary-setting evident in 2017, shifting instead to an inclusive account of the “progressive Muslim urban citizen”—a hybrid identity that brings together Islamic faith with pluralism, civic tolerance, and cosmopolitan urban life. This redevelopment implies that the 2024 outcome reflects a weaker electoral dominance of the antagonistic identity script associated with the 212-era mobilization than in 2017. Still, the overall electoral data do not demonstrate that Jakarta voters collectively rejected the 212 Movement or identity-based politics. This supports the view that populist mobilization grounded in Islamic identity is shaped by historical memory and can be rapidly reconfigured across election cycles. In East Java, by contrast, the Islamic people are constituted relationally through the affective solidarity of the santri community and through the patronage networks of the pesantren; this is a mode of identity politics that is less ideological than affective, less confrontational than communal, and more durable precisely because it is embedded in everyday social life rather than in episodic campaign mobilization.

The fragmentation of Islamic representation observed across these three regions is therefore not simply an empirical finding, but a theoretically generative result that calls into question unitary models of Islamic politics in Indonesia. Each region, while coherent, exhibits an irreducible configuration of the relationship among Islamic identity, populist mobilization, and electoral outcomes—configurations that are intelligible only when analyzed within their specific institutional histories and socio-cultural contexts. This finding is consistent with Mietzner's account of dispersed political power and locally specific forms of elite competition in Indonesia, while highlighting how religious legitimacy is articulated within different local electoral settings. It also reinforces the constructivist premise that religious meaning in electoral politics is produced through interactions among candidates, religious institutions, voters, and the historical experiences of each region.[51] For the study of identity politics, the comparative cases demonstrate that collective religious identity is not a fixed resource to be deployed but a

[51] Mietzner, “The Limits of Autocratisation in Indonesia.”

dynamic social construct that is continuously negotiated, contested, and reimagined across electoral cycles. The analytical task, as this study has pursued, is not to determine whether Islamic representation is 'genuine' or 'strategic'—a distinction that presupposes a stable authentic Islamic politics against which instrumentalized uses can be measured—but to map the specific socio-institutional conditions under which particular configurations of Islamic identity, charismatic authority, and populist mobilization become electorally effective in Indonesia's decentralized democratic landscape.

C. Conclusion

This study analyzes the strategic, cultural, and institutional contexts associated with the electoral success of regional head candidates in the 2024 Pilkada across three regions: Aceh, Jakarta, and East Java. The presence of Islam in Indonesia’s regional head races is highly contingent on local context, being shaped by legal frameworks, social-historical trajectories, and indigenous cultural practices. Although the three regions exhibit distinct socio-political characteristics—Aceh with its institutionalized Islamic legal framework, Jakarta as a pluralistic metropolitan area, and East Java with its established *Nahdliyin* (NU-affiliated) networks—the comparative analysis identifies a common pattern in which Islamic representation intersects with party coalitions, political leadership, and locally embedded sources of legitimacy. In Aceh, Muzakir Manaf combined the credibility of religious scholars with his former GAM network. In Jakarta, Pramono Anung earned public confidence through a moderate coalition and a technocratic public image. By contrast, in East Java, Khofifah Indar Parawansa leveraged the NU community's cultural resources while also benefiting from incumbency.

Placed within the wider theoretical framework of Islamic populism, religious populism as an electoral strategy, and post-Islamism, the three cases show that the relationship between Islam and electoral politics in Indonesia cannot be explained by a single model. In Aceh, Islam functions as a normative institutional framework that shapes political legitimacy and expectations of regional leadership. In Jakarta, Islam serves as a malleable symbolic resource for addressing identity sensitivities in a plural urban electorate. In East Java, Islam operates as a relational cultural network sustained through pesantren patronage and NU social authority. Together, these arrangements illustrate three contextually distinct modes of Islamic representation: institutional in Aceh, symbolic and inclusive in Jakarta, and relational in East Java. Each mode reflects the particular institutional, historical, and socio-cultural conditions in which electoral competition takes place.

This article contributes to the sociological understanding of local electoral politics and political Islam by demonstrating how Islamic representation operates through different institutional, symbolic, and relational configurations. The comparison highlights the significance of local political structures, religious authority, party networks, and leadership profiles in shaping the articulation of Islamic identity during electoral competition. Future research should broaden this comparative framework to second-tier regions and investigate how the digital mediation of Islamic identity—such as social media campaigns and Islamic influencer networks—is transforming the dynamics examined here.

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