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Religious identity politics in the political choices of nadhlatul ulama members in the east java regional elections

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Abstract

This study analyses the political decisions made by Nahdlatul Ulama members in regional elections in East Java in relation to religious identity politics in 2024. Examining this phenomenon is crucial because religious identity often plays a role in people's decision making regarding local politics. This study focuses on the ways in which religious identity influences democratic dynamics as well as citizens' attitudes, opinions, and political choices. Understanding the types of influence that religious identity has and the elements that contribute to this tendency is the objective of this study. Qualitative research with a sociological perspective was used as the methodology, which involved a literature review and analysis of various relevant secondary data sources. The findings of this study indicate that although religious identity can strengthen the emotional bond between voters and candidates, it can also cause social discord. Social experience, leadership, and cultural proximity also have an influence on citizens' political decisions in addition to religious considerations. To ensure that the use of religious identity continues to support strong democracy and does not cause social division, this study suggests the need for inclusive and prudent political education.

Keyword: *Identity, Religion, Politics, Voters, Democracy.*

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Introduction

The phenomenon of religious identity politics remains very much alive and evolving in Indonesia's democracy, particularly in the conduct of regional head elections (Pilkada). (Nasiri et al., 2025) state that the use of religious identity in local political contests can influence voter preferences, causing them to be swayed by religious affiliations and specific identity symbolism rather than purely rational-programmatic considerations. This situation demonstrates how religion is frequently used as a tool for political mobilization within the context of Pilkada (Susanto Susanto et al., 2025). This phenomenon is particularly evident in provincial elections in East Java, where political support often leverages strong ties with religious leaders and Islamic boarding schools. In their study on the political behavior of pesantren students in East Java, (Refra et al., 2025) found that social bonds within the pesantren community and advice from religious leaders have a significant influence on the political decisions made by students (Permata, 2023). These findings are reinforced by field study result showing that in several regional elections in East Java, candidates for regional leadership actively visited Islamic boarding schools, attended religious study sessions, and sought support or blessings from religious leaders as a strategy to attract the sympathy of voters with ties to the boarding school community. Additionally, interviews with voters in Surabaya revealed that recommendations from religious leaders are often used as the primary factor in determining political choices, even more so than considerations of a candidate's vision, mission, or platform (Oktaviani & Maulia, 2024). These findings indicate that religious identity is not merely a sociological characteristic but also serves as an effective local political tactic for mobilizing electoral support.

The importance of these religious networks grows even more significant when we consider the role of Islamic organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the social structure of East Java. NU members tend to view political participation through the lens of their religious group, particularly when selecting candidates for local leadership, according to a study by (Rizqullah & Afandi, 2025) (Voter Behavior). Cahyono highlights that political support in local leadership elections is often determined by the religious orientation of the NU community (Al-Fikri et al., 2025). Religious identity politics does not always have a positive impact on democracy. Because the narratives used in campaign strategies have a significant impact on how some groups view others, (Kumowal et al., 2024) explain that the exploitation of religious identity in political campaigns can lead to social polarization. If this issue is not properly addressed, it can erode social cohesion within multicultural communities (Wirawan, 2024). Research on the relationship between local political behavior and religious identity continues to evolve in the academic world. The dynamics of community-based religious support in regional elections in several regencies in East Java, for example, have been studied by (Kurdianto & Budiman, 2025). They found that structural factors such as educational

level, social media interaction, and physical proximity to candidates also play a role.

This study is important for understanding the role of religious identity politics, particularly within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community, in the regional elections in East Java (I Putu Sastra Wingarta et al., 2022). This study offers a novel perspective by emphasizing the moral authority of religious leaders in shaping political opinions— an aspect that has not been thoroughly examined in previous research, which has tended to focus on religious identity solely as a tool for political mobilization (Ario Tejo Sugiarto, 2025). Thus, this study views religious identity not merely as a political symbol or instrument but also as a source of legitimacy stemming from the moral influence of religious leaders in shaping the political preferences of the public. In the context of Surabaya, this phenomenon is evident in the active role played by kiai and NU figures in providing informal political guidance to their congregations, whether through religious study forums, pesantren activities, or religious social networks (Rofi'i et al., 2022). Political support or signals from religious figures often serve as an important reference for residents in making their choices, even in the absence of explicit formal campaigns (Nurmastuti et al., 2025). Furthermore, a candidate's proximity to the pesantren network and kiai figures in Surabaya is frequently leveraged as a strategy to secure social legitimacy in the eyes of voters. It is hoped that this research will enhance understanding of the role of religious identity in political tactics, as well as its impact on social cohesion and the quality of local democracy. The results of the analysis indicate that religious identity politics in the context of regional elections is intertwined with social structures, local power dynamics, and local culture (Dinar Astuti et al., 2023). For NU members in East Java, religious identity serves as a source of social legitimacy that significantly shapes political preferences and perceptions, particularly through the moral authority of religious leaders. NU members' historical ties to kiai, pesantren, and the NU organizational structure make collective religious-cultural factors a key element in shaping their political attitudes.

Methods

To gain a comprehensive understanding of how religious identity politics influences the political decisions made by members of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in the regional elections in East Java, this study employs a qualitative methodology from a political sociology perspective. In this study, the sociological approach employed draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice, specifically the concepts of habitus, capital, and field. This theory is relevant because it explains how the customs, values, and socio-religious structures embedded in the lives of Nahdliyin members influence their worldview and political decisions. In addition, the concept of symbolic capital is used to understand how the moral authority of kiai or religious figures plays a role in shaping political legitimacy and preferences at the local level. This strategy was chosen because the research

objective is to explain the meanings, perspectives, and socio-religious factors that influence the political decisions of Nahdliyin members, rather than to measure numbers or statistics. The descriptive-analytical study design employed explains the phenomenon of religious identity politics and then applies relevant theories including identity politics theory and sociological methods regarding voter behavior to analyze it. Through this method, the study can analyze how religious identity influences the dynamics of local democracy both as a social force and as a symbol.

The secondary data used in this study were obtained from a literature review of articles on political sociology, as well as news reports and documents regarding regional elections in East Java and the role of NU members. A search for documents and literature relevant to the research topic was used as the data collection method. The collected data was then analyzed qualitatively, which involved selecting relevant information, organizing it systematically, and drawing conclusions about how the findings and theories are interrelated. To provide a more comprehensive and objective picture of how religious identity politics influences the political decisions of NU members, the researchers compared a number of sources to ensure the accuracy of their analysis.

Result and Discussion

Concept of Identity Politics in Indonesia Democracy

Within the dynamics of Indonesian democracy, identity politics is becoming increasingly prominent, particularly in electoral contests such as local elections. Identity politics is a political tactic that exploits collective identities such as religion, ethnicity, or specific social groups to win public support. In Indonesia's religious society, people's political leanings are often heavily influenced by their religious identity. This is because religion functions as a social identity that strengthens social cohesion and spiritual identity (Yunus et al., 2023). Political candidates in Indonesia frequently use religious identity as a tactic to win votes in local elections. By participating in religious activities, engaging with religious leaders, and using religious symbols during political campaigns, candidates often project a religious image. The aim of this tactic is to enhance the candidate's credibility in areas with strong religious convictions. This phenomenon demonstrates how religious identity often plays a significant role in mobilising political support during municipal elections (Rustandi, 2025).

Identity Politics in The Context of Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) and East Java

As East Java is regarded as the social and cultural heartland of the Nadhlatul Ulama (NU) organisation, the dynamics of religious identity politics there possess unique characteristics. This is

understandable given that East Java is the historical and structural base of NU's development, characterised by the presence of numerous large Islamic boarding schools, a strong network of religious leaders, and a high concentration of Nahdliyin residents in the region (Abadi, 2024). These conditions mean that the interaction between religion, culture, and politics is more intense than in other regions, so that the practice of religious identity politics is not merely symbolic but is also integrated into the local social structure and power relations (Fauzi et al., 2025).

Tables and graphs, if any, are numbered consecutively with the table title and number placed above the table. For example:

Tabel 1. Interview Results on Political Choices

No	Name	Main consideration in political choice	Influence factor
1	Mrs. Yunus	Chooses based on familiarity and NU identity	Religious identity & kyai
2	Mrs. Sabar	Chooses what is already known/trusted	Religious identity & kyai
3	Mr. Rahman	Strong loyalty to NU regardless of candidates' vision	Organizational loyalty
4	Mr. Jumari	Influenced by close friends in NU	Organizational loyalty
5	Mr. Sudono	Regular involvement in NU activities leads to consistent support	Organizational involvement
6	Mr. Rahmad	Influenced by material support linked to candidate	Patronage factor
7	Mrs. Melani	Follows husband's political preference	Family influence
8	Mr. Hakam	Chooses based on vision, mission, and candidate track record	Rational evaluation
9	Mrs. Putri	Chooses based on vision, mission, and candidate track record	Rational evaluation
10	Mr. salim	Strong belief that NU is the most correct reference in choosing leader	Ideological commitment

As shown in the table, several patterns emerge. Some respondents, such as Mrs. Yunus and Mrs. Sabar, rely heavily on religious identity and familiarity in making political decisions. Meanwhile, respondents like Mr. Rahman and Mr. Salim demonstrate strong organizational and ideological loyalty to NU. On the other hand, respondents such as Mrs. Hakam and Mrs. Putri show a more rational approach by considering vision, mission, and track records of the candidates (Supratikno, 2023).

The importance of religious leaders, particularly kiai, who wield significant moral and social authority within the community, cannot be separated from the influence of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) in local politics. Kyai are regarded as figures possessing social and religious legitimacy within the NU tradition. Consequently, the community often uses the opinions or political stances of kiai as a guide when making political decisions during various elections (Herianto & Wijanarko, 2022). Islamic boarding schools play a significant role in shaping the social networks of the NU community, alongside the kiai. These schools serve as centres for fostering social relationships between kiai, students, and the community, in addition to functioning as institutions of religious education. Strong networks of solidarity often form throughout the community as a result of the social relationships forged through the pesantren. According to (Anshorah & Khotimah, 2025), these networks can serve as a foundation for mobilising political support in various local political contests.

In local politics, candidates contesting regional elections in East Java often seek to build strong relationships with the pesantren community and NU leaders. These relationships are forged through various social interactions, including visiting religious leaders, participating in religious events, and supporting social events within the pesantren community. In a country with a strong religious orientation, support from religious leaders is seen as providing significant social legitimacy for candidates, which is why these efforts are made, according to (Shofan, 2019). The use of religious symbols and religious narratives has become part of political campaign tactics in regional elections, in addition to strengthening ties with religious leaders. To gain public trust in their leadership, candidates often project a religious image. Social media, which enables political messages to reach a wider audience, has also contributed to the growth of religious narratives in political campaigns in the digital age (Nur Budiman et al., 2022).

Advances in communication technology have opened up new opportunities for the dissemination of political ideas based on religious identity. Social media has evolved into a powerful tool for promoting political narratives linked to religious identity and strengthening candidates' public image. Political statements with religious undertones can easily spread widely on social media and influence how the public views certain politicians (Kholilurohman, 2024). However, members of Nahdlatul Ulama do not always make the same political decisions. Due to differences in political agendas amongst the organisation's elite and religious leaders, support from the NU network may be divided during certain regional elections. This distribution of support indicates that an individual's political decisions are not always influenced solely by their religious identity (Mujani, 2020). Furthermore, patronage relationships between religious leaders and political elites have an impact on local political dynamics. Through various forms of social and political cooperation, religious leaders and political candidates often develop patron- client relationships. Through these connections, religious leaders gain access to resources that can be utilised for the benefit of their communities, whilst political candidates receive

social support from those communities (Alfarisi et al., 2024). The quality of democracy can also be affected by the excessive use of religious identity politics in political elections. Social polarisation and divisions within society based on specific group identities can be exacerbated by identity politics. Therefore, to prevent social conflict in a pluralistic society, the use of religious identity in politics must be handled with care (Mulyana et al., 2024).

The use of religious identity in politics does not always lead to social conflict within the Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) community, which is known for its tradition of moderate Islam. NU's religious tradition, which emphasises moderation, tolerance and unity, often helps to reduce the likelihood of conflict arising from the politicisation of religious identity. Overall, the role of religious identity in the political decisions of Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) members during the regional elections in East Java is a complex phenomenon influenced by various social, cultural and political variables. The political choices of NU members are influenced by a number of key factors, including the influence of religious leaders, pesantren networks, the use of religious symbols in political campaigns, and patronage relationships between political elites and the community. Therefore, any analysis of identity politics relating to NU must take into account the social and cultural dynamics of the communities that form the basis of the organisation's strength.

The quality of democracy in Indonesia is heavily influenced by identity politics, as well as by social networks and the influence of religious leaders. Through shared group identities, particularly religious identities, identity politics is often used as a tactic to bolster political support. Voters' loyalty to candidates perceived as sharing a close identity with them can be strengthened through the use of such identities. However, if identity politics is overused during the political contestation process, this can also lead to social polarisation (Mardiana et al., 2022). Concepts emphasising the importance of justice and ethics in political practice can also be used to understand identity politics from the perspective of Islamic political studies. According to this perspective, religious identity should serve as the foundation for moral principles in the administration of just governance focused on the common good, rather than as a tool to divide society. To prevent social instability in a pluralistic society, the use of religious identity in politics must be appropriate.

It is impossible to separate the dynamics of public perception regarding ever-evolving social and political issues from the phenomenon of identity politics in political contests. In Indonesia, political actors frequently utilize myths related to identity to influence public opinion and secure political support. This situation indicates that identity politics is closely linked to the development of discourse within society and structural elements in politics. Furthermore, if identity politics is not properly managed, it has the potential to impact constitutional stability. If religious identity is exploited to reinforce the stance of a particular group, this can trigger horizontal conflict when used as a tool for political mobilisation. To maintain democratic stability, it is important to ensure that political actions remain focused on the common good rather than merely the interests of a specific identity group. Research on identity politics also indicates that this phenomenon is linked to how society

perceives identity within social and political contexts, as well as political strategies. According to several studies, identity politics forms part of how society interprets the political reality it faces. To avoid conflicts arising from the politicisation of identity, public understanding of the concepts of tolerance and inclusive political awareness is crucial.

Identity Politics, Social Networks, and Political Behavior

The quality of democracy in Indonesia is heavily influenced by identity politics, as well as by social networks and the influence of religious leaders. Through shared group identities, particularly religious identities, identity politics is often used as a tactic to bolster political support. Voters' loyalty to candidates perceived as sharing a close identity with them can be strengthened through the use of such identities. However, if identity politics is overused during the political contestation process, this can also lead to social polarisation. Concepts emphasising the importance of justice and ethics in political practice can also be used to understand identity politics from the perspective of Islamic political studies. According to this perspective, religious identity should serve as the foundation for moral principles in the administration of just governance focused on the common good, rather than as a tool to divide society. To prevent social instability in a pluralistic society, the use of religious identity in politics must be appropriate.

This phenomenon demonstrates how the long-standing social ties between religious leaders and the community shape identity politics in a religiously based society, rather than emerging naturally. Because of these ties, religious leaders enjoy a high level of social trust, which makes it easier for the community to accept the Kiai's political views. Consequently, religious identity plays a significant role in mobilising political support in various local political contests across Indonesia. A number of national political events, including the 2017 Jakarta gubernatorial election, demonstrate the role of religious identity in politics. Many people view this election as a prime example of how religious identity is intensively utilised during the political mobilisation process. In this dynamic, public perceptions of the candidates contesting the election were heavily influenced by religious issues. This demonstrates how the public's political views during an election can be significantly influenced by their religious identity.

Religious identity must not be used in politics as a tool to divide society. Moral and ethical principles that can maintain harmony within a pluralistic society must be emphasised in political practice. To prevent social conflicts that could threaten the quality of democracy, the use of religious identity in political competition must be proportionate. The development of identity politics in recent years indicates that the role of the media has become crucial in amplifying the dissemination of identity narratives in the public sphere. Both conventional and digital media have the potential to accelerate the spread of political discourse related to religious identity. If identity-based themes are

overused in political coverage, media reporting may even contribute to the political polarisation of society. Therefore, the dynamics of identity politics in various political contests in Indonesia demonstrate that the public's political preferences are heavily influenced by their religious identity. Religious leaders, networks of Islamic boarding schools, and social ties within the NU community all exert a significant influence on the political preferences of Nahdlatul Ulama members in regional elections in East Java. However, to prevent social polarisation that could threaten democratic stability, the use of religious identity in politics must be handled with care. To prevent identity politics from turning into social conflict within society, it is vital to uphold the principles of moderation.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, religious identity politics influences the political choices of the public, particularly members of Nahdlatul Ulama in regional elections in East Java East Java. Religious identity can strengthen the emotional bond between voters and candidates who are perceived to share similar religious and ideological backgrounds, thereby becoming a factor in political decision-making. However, religious identity is not the sole factor influencing a community's political actions. Citizens' views and political decisions are also influenced by other factors such as cultural affinity, social experiences, and community leadership. Furthermore, if religious identity is misused in politics, it can lead to conflict or social instability. Therefore, to prevent religious identity from being exploited excessively in political practice, inclusive political awareness and education are required. With this approach, democracy can remain cohesive amidst societal diversity.

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