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## Authority of Religious Leaders And Formation of Political Opinion in Bakalan Village

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the role of the moral authority of religious figures in shaping the political opinions of rural communities. Based on the assumption that village politics tends to occur in a harmonious atmosphere with minimal open conflict, this study explores how moral legitimacy influences residents' political orientations. The research employed a qualitative approach with a case study design through social observation, cross-generational interviews, and reflection on local political dynamics. The analysis is based on Max Weber's theory of authority and legitimacy to understand how the influence of religious figures operates without direct coercion. The study's findings indicate that this influence is formed through collective trust and a culture of social harmony that limits the expression of differences in the public sphere. The younger generation tends to be more independent in accessing political information, while remaining within the framework of village social norms. Democracy operates procedurally, while deliberative space remains limited.*

**Keyword:** Moral Authority, Religious Figures, Political Opinion, Rural Communities

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## Introduction

Village politics is typically presented as being relatively stable and less divided than the national political processes. However, such a characterisation is prone to overgeneralization. The seeming social concord of rural communities is not a mere absence of conflict, but the outcome of certain social mechanisms that limit the expression of political differences (Haryanto et al., 2024). The creation of interpersonal relationships, especially those connected to political beliefs, in many village settings is crucial to the maintenance of social cohesiveness, kinship ties, and normative expectations of propriety (Rashid et al., 2019). Political life here is ingrained in everyday social behaviours and is tightly linked to religious ideals and communal standards.

In this setting, religious leaders have a prominent role to play not solely as ritual authority but also as moral characters whose impact is felt in social and political spheres (Rahmawati & Ikramatoun, 2025). Their influence does not come from formal institutional power but from long-term social relations, such as giving advice, mediating and participating in community life. Such authority can be considered through Max Weber's idea of legitimacy, especially the mix of traditional and charismatic power, where the influence is maintained by communal acknowledgement and social trust, rather than by formal compulsion.

Previous studies have shown the function of religious leaders in managing social cohesion and resolving conflicts in rural communities (Azhar et al., 2025). Although these studies emphasise the role of moral leadership in maintaining community cohesiveness, they emphasise social harmony and often neglect the precise processes by which moral authority impacts political opinion. This gap is particularly relevant as political opinions in rural societies are not only developed by formal political campaigns or institutional processes, but also by informal social contacts and moral concerns (Chun Tie et al., 2019).

This study operationalizes moral interpretation by understanding how citizens interpret and assess political decisions in terms of moral ideals like honesty, accountability and trustworthiness. Rather than being directly told to support a particular candidate, community members decode moral themes within religious and social contexts and link them to political actors (Rahmania & Raharjo, 2025). This technique means that influence is indirect, working through the internalisation of values rather than through direct political control. Simultaneously, social compromise is the inclination of individuals to prefer social concord over the explicit articulation of political differences, especially in public contexts where social connections are at stake (Huda & Nur, 2021).

In an age of increasing access to digital information, the relationship of moral authority and the creation of political opinion is complicated (Kökerer, 2025). Rural youth are no longer limited to one source of knowledge, but instead are able to access different political ideas through social media and online forums. This transition raises crucial considerations about how traditional moral authority

shape political beliefs. More information is available, but the public display of political differences in the village environment remains limited. The social values of politeness, respect and relational harmony continue to impact how people express their political beliefs. (Rofhani & 'Alaniah, 2023) found that cultural assumptions about social balance considerably affect interaction patterns and constrain the visibility of disagreement in public discourse. Consequently, political conversation typically moves to private or semi-private settings where individuals feel more confident expressing other views (Prasitiya et al., 2024).

It raises bigger considerations about what democracy means at the local level. Democratic procedural elements like voting are retained, but places for deliberation that would allow for open and critical debate remain limited (Brutu et al., 2024). From a Weberian perspective, this phenomenon can be viewed as a sort of legitimacy wherein authority is considered as socially suitable and consequently seldom openly questioned. In such settings, the impact of religious leaders is not experienced via direct instruction but via the normalisation of moral frameworks that shape political judgement (Brako, 2025).

Thus, the research is interested in understanding the processes via which moral authority influences political opinion in rural communities (Warsono & Muhtadi2022, 2022). Specifically, it asks the following question: How does moral authority influence political opinion in rural communities? This research analyses the role of moral legitimacy, social norms and patterns of interaction on political attitudes without overt coercion through the case study of Bakalan Village (Fauzi et al., 2019). This method also provides a platform for understanding how local democracy works within the tension between societal harmony and the desire for more deliberative political engagement.

## Methods

This research utilises a qualitative methodology with a case study framework to investigate the influence of moral authority on political opinion in a rural socio-religious setting. A qualitative technique is suitable as the research aims to comprehend meanings, attitudes, and social processes that quantitative measurement cannot adequately represent. The study was carried out at Bakalan Village, a community distinguished by robust socio-religious interactions and intimate social connections. Informants were chosen by purposive sampling, determined by their degree of engagement in village social life and their pertinence to the research subject. The sample comprised community members from various age cohorts to elucidate generational differences in political viewpoints and information accessibility.

Data were gathered using two principal methods. Initially, participant observation was undertaken during religious activities and routine social interactions to comprehend the communication and practice of moral ideals within the community. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate informants' experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of the political dynamics inside the hamlet. The interview approach permitted flexibility in exploring the connection between moral beliefs and political decisions. Furthermore, contextual reflection was utilised to analyse social conditions during significant political events, such as elections, to identify changes in interaction patterns and political expression. Data validity was confirmed through the triangulation of sources and methodologies by juxtaposing findings from observations and interviews.

Thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. The procedure encompassed multiple phases, including data reduction, coding, categorisation, and evaluation of significance. This process found patterns that elucidate the functioning of moral authority in shaping political opinion. The approach was informed by Max Weber's theory of authority and legitimacy, specifically the notions of traditional and charismatic authority, to elucidate how influence is established and sustained by social acknowledgement rather than coercion. This examination examines the ways by which moral legitimacy is established and its impact on the formation of political thought in both public and private domains, within the framework of village social harmony.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **Moral Authority as Socially Recognized Legitimacy**

The results indicate that religious leaders hold a pivotal and lasting role within the social framework of Bakalan Village (Amrillah & Novi Fitia Maliha, 2025). Their influence encompasses not just official religious duties, such as leading prayers and delivering sermons, but also permeates daily social life, including mediation of familial disputes, advice in personal decision-making, and participation in community interactions. This ingrained presence enables religious leaders to serve as moral reference points, with their opinions continuously sought and regarded by community members. Empirical data indicate that this position is sustained through long-term social interactions rather than institutional authority (Deliyati et al., 2025). Community members repeatedly engage with religious leaders across various social contexts, including religious gatherings, informal discussions, and communal events. These interactions gradually produce a form of relational trust that underpins their authority.

One informant explained: *"If there are problems at home... we usually ask him first... it feels more reassuring."* (Interview with JK) This exemplifies Weberian legitimacy founded on social acknowledgement. The assertion demonstrates that loyalty is founded not on duty but on perceived

reliable authority. In this context, authority manifests as a social process, perpetually recreated via daily encounters and collective experiences. This discovery corresponds with the theoretical framework established by Max Weber, who categorises various forms of power according to their legitimacy sources.

In Bakalan Village, the authority of religious leaders can be understood as a fusion of traditional and charismatic authority (Rusmana et al., 2024). Traditional authority is manifested in the enduring cultural expectation that religious leaders act as moral exemplars within the society. This expectation is ingrained in local customs, wherein religious leaders are perpetually engaged in social and cultural endeavours. Charismatic influence arises from the leader's perceived personal attributes, including composure, knowledge, and the capacity to offer non-judgmental counsel. Another informant noted: *"He usually doesn't blame us right away... sometimes we become aware ourselves after hearing his explanation."* (Interview with DA)

The absence of direct coercion further highlights the nature of this authority. Religious leaders do not possess formal power to enforce decisions or impose sanctions. Instead, their influence operates through moral persuasion and symbolic legitimacy. Community members retain the autonomy to make their own choices, including in political matters. As expressed by another informant: *"When it comes to choosing a leader, we still have our own choices... advice is just a reference."* (Interview with BP)

This condition suggests that authority in the village is not hierarchical in a formal sense, but relational and negotiated. The community does not passively accept influence; rather, they actively interpret and evaluate the guidance provided (Rusmana et al., 2024). However, the consistent recognition of the religious leader's moral standing ensures that their opinions remain influential within the decision-making process. Authority, therefore, is not imposed but socially validated. Furthermore, the findings reveal that the transmission of moral influence does not rely solely on formal religious settings. Informal interactions play a crucial role in shaping the legitimacy of religious leaders. Moral messages are often conveyed through casual conversations following religious activities or during everyday encounters (Muhammad Saleh et al., 2023). These interactions create a more accessible and less hierarchical form of communication, allowing values to be internalized gradually. One informant described: *"Sometimes after the study session, we have casual chats... from there, he gives advice about life."* (Interview with JK)

The casual nature of these contacts fosters the normalisation of moral authority in everyday life. The messages are interpreted as recommendations that individuals can tailor to their own

circumstances, rather than being seen as directives. This underscores the notion that legitimacy is dynamic and perpetually shaped by social interaction. The role of religious leaders underscores the interplay of formal and informal systems within the community. Although formal institutions like municipal government are present, they do not entirely delineate the social order. Moral legitimacy serves as an alternate source of influence that informs individuals' comprehension of norms, values, and societal expectations (Christian & Laksmana, 2025). The authority of religious leaders constitutes a type of symbolic power that functions in conjunction with, rather than in opposition to, institutional government systems.

Nonetheless, it is crucial to recognise that this type of authority does not denote full control. The existence of individual agency is most apparent in circumstances like political decision-making. Community members may regard and heed the counsel of religious leaders, however they ultimately possess the autonomy to interpret and act upon such counsel independently (Hervouet, 2021). This suggests that moral power operates inside a realm of negotiation rather than domination (Alquezar-Yus, 2022).

The findings indicate that moral authority in Bakalan Village is primarily a socially acknowledged kind of legitimacy arising from continuous engagement, cultural expectations, and perceived personal integrity. Utilising Weber's framework reveals that power transcends mere structural position, instead manifesting as a relational reality rooted in collective acknowledgement. This type of legitimacy allows religious leaders to shape social and political perspectives without resorting to coercion, illustrating how power can function subtly through moral and symbolic channels in rural communities (Ahdarrijal & Rahmawati, 2024)

### **Mechanism of Moral Influence in Political Opinion Formation**

The findings indicate that the impact of religious leaders on political opinion in Bakalan Village functions through indirect and value-based processes rather than direct political instructions. Rather than directing community members to endorse specific politicians or parties, religious leaders express overarching moral concepts that individuals then interpret and use in assessing political options (Saputra et al., 2024). This approach suggests that the creation of political opinions is facilitated by moral reasoning instead of direct persuasion. Empirical evidence indicates that ethical messages are often conveyed in religious assemblies, sermons, and informal discussions. These messages underscore principles like as integrity, accountability, reliability, and social responsibility. Significantly, these ideals are not situated inside a particular political context, but rather as universal ethical standards relevant to leadership. One informant stated: *"He never mentions candidates... he talks about choosing a leader who is honest and trustworthy... we decide ourselves who fits."* (Interview with JK)

This trend indicates that religious leaders serve as moral translators, converting abstract ethical concepts into socially significant norms (Khotimah, 2025). In this study, moral interpretation denotes the process by which individuals associate overarching moral values with particular political actors or decisions, guided by their personal judgement. The lack of clear political endorsement enables individuals to preserve their autonomy while remaining impacted by the offered moral framework. This mechanism can be analysed sociologically using the concept of legitimacy as defined by Max Weber. Authority is effective not by imposing decisions, but by influencing the criteria for decision-making. In this instance, religious leaders affect not the result directly, but the criteria employed by the community for evaluation (Hoffmann, 2025).

The process of political opinion formation can be delineated into multiple analytical stages. Moral ideals are initially expressed in a generalised manner through religious discourse. Secondly, these ideals are assimilated by community members through continual exposure and social engagement. Third, individuals utilise these values while evaluating political candidates, frequently in private or informal contexts. This multi-phase process demonstrates that influence is cumulative and ingrained in daily social interactions (Forbes, 2022)

The findings also indicate that this mechanism is reinforced by the social context of the village, where maintaining harmonious relationships is prioritized. Open political debate is often avoided due to concerns about social tension, particularly in a community characterized by close interpersonal ties and kinship networks. One informant explained: *"We don't usually talk about politics in public... it can cause misunderstandings... it's better to keep things peaceful."* (Interview with AR)

This condition limits the presence of explicit political discourse in public spaces, thereby increasing the significance of indirect forms of influence. In the absence of open debate, moral narratives become a key medium through which political ideas circulate. Rather than engaging in argumentative exchanges, individuals rely on shared moral frameworks to guide their judgments. As a result, political opinion formation becomes a more subtle and internalized process. Moreover, the findings reveal that political discussions tend to occur in smaller, more private settings, such as conversations among family members or close friends. In these spaces, individuals feel more comfortable expressing differing opinions without risking social conflict. This suggests that the formation of political opinion is not a collective public process, but a fragmented and relational one. One informant noted: *"We usually talk about politics only with close people... everyone has their own choice, but we respect each other."* (Interview with DA) sources, encompassing personal experiences and media exposure. This signifies that moral power does not function in isolation, but engages with wider informational contexts. This conclusion indicates that impact should not be perceived as a linear

or deterministic process. Although religious leaders play a role in forming the moral framework,

individuals actively interpret and negotiate these effects. The significance of agency persists, since community members selectively implement moral principles based on their individual viewpoints and experiences (Haliza Rizqica Fadillah et al., 2024)

The enduring nature of moral authority indicates that specific evaluative standards stay consistent despite the availability of varied information sources. Even when individuals obtain political information via digital media or external networks, the ethical standards established by local authority figures persist in shaping their judgements. This illustrates the robustness of culturally ingrained legitimacy in influencing political conduct. The lack of specific political guidance enables religious leaders to preserve their status as impartial moral authority. By eschewing clear political affiliation, they maintain their credibility among various elements of the population. This impartiality bolsters their validity, as they are regarded as guiding principles rather than advocating particular interests. As a result, their impact becomes more palatable and less disputed (Blair et al., 2021).

The findings reveal that the influence mechanism in Bakalan Village is defined by indirectness, moral mediation, and contextual adaptation. Political ideas are not imposed but rather developed through moral interpretation, influenced by societal norms and relational dynamics. Utilising Weber's paradigm reveals that legitimacy functions not via coercion, but through the internalisation of values that influence individual decision-making (Li, 2024). This analysis indicates that in rural communities characterised by robust social cohesion, political influence is frequently integrated into daily moral discourse rather than formal political communication. Comprehending this mechanism offers a more sophisticated insight into the role of authority in influencing political behaviour beyond explicit expressions of power (Turale, 2024).

### **Social Harmony and the Limitation of Public Political Expression**

The findings indicate that the formation of political opinion in Bakalan Village is closely shaped by the social norm of maintaining harmony, which simultaneously structures and limits the expression of political differences in public spaces. Rather than functioning as an arena for open debate, the village public sphere is characterized by cautious communication practices that prioritize social cohesion over explicit disagreement. Empirical data suggest that political discussion is often perceived as a potentially disruptive activity. Community members tend to associate open disagreement with the risk of social tension, particularly in a setting where interpersonal relationships are dense and long-standing. The prevalence of kinship ties, neighborhood proximity, and repeated social interaction creates a context in which individuals are highly aware of the consequences of conflict. One informant explained:

*"If politics is discussed openly, it can lead to misunderstandings... it's better to keep the atmosphere good."* (Interview with AR)

This pattern challenges the assumption that the absence of visible conflict necessarily indicates consensus or political neutrality. Instead, the data suggest that the apparent calmness of village politics is better understood as a form of regulated expression, where disagreement is not eliminated but strategically managed. In this study, this condition is conceptualized as *social harmony*, referring to a collectively maintained norm that prioritizes relational stability over confrontational discourse. Within this framework, individuals do not refrain from forming political opinions; rather, they adjust the way those opinions are expressed. Political preferences are frequently kept within private or semi-private domains, such as family conversations or discussions among close friends. These spaces allow for more flexible and open exchanges without threatening broader social relationships. As noted by one informant: *"We usually only talk about politics with people we are close to... everyone has their own choice, but we respect each other."* (Interview with DA)

The restriction of public political expression may also be perceived as a type of societal compromise. In this study, social compromise denotes the tacit accord among community members to eschew actions that could disturb social equilibrium, including explicit political conflict. This compromise is not formally negotiated; rather, it arises from collective expectations regarding acceptable behaviour within the society. This requirement corresponds with the concept of legitimacy as defined by Max Weber. Authority and social order are upheld not by coercion, but by the internalisation of rules that delineate acceptable conduct. In Bakalan Village, the principle of harmony serves as a regulating mechanism that influences individual engagement in political affairs. Instead of being externally imposed, these standards are perpetuated via daily encounters and reciprocal expectations.

The results suggest that the restricted scope of public discourse does not inherently diminish political engagement in a procedural context. Community members persist in participating in formal democratic activities, including voting and attending political rallies. Nonetheless, the deliberative aspect of democracy defined by free discourse and critical examination continues to be limited. Political engagement is thus dualistic, it manifests in formal participation but is less apparent in public discourse. This differentiation is crucial in assessing the characteristics of local democracy. The lack of overt dissent should not be construed as indifference or a deficiency in political consciousness. Rather, it signifies an alternative way of political activity, wherein individuals manoeuvre between personal inclinations and communal anticipations. In this setting, silence or constraint may be regarded as a socially significant action rather than a passive state. (Christian & Laksana, 2025).

Furthermore, the principle of harmony strengthens the indirect processes of impact addressed in the preceding section. Due to the constraints on open political persuasion, moral discourse emerges as a more acceptable and efficacious means of influencing political opinion. Religious leaders, as ethically credible persons, can shape evaluative frameworks without breaching the principle of non-confrontation. Their statements are perceived as guidance rather than political interference, hence increasing their support among the community. This state creates a possible contradiction between stability and openness. Although social harmony fosters harmonious relationships, it may also inhibit critical participation and the expression of different viewpoints. Managing this tension is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of political life in rural settings. (Prasitiya et al., 2024; Khotimah, 2025)

The results indicate that political expression in Bakalan Village is present, albeit contextually constrained. Individuals perpetually negotiate the timing, location, and manner of expressing their ideas according to the social context. Public areas are regulated by rules of civility and moderation, whereas private settings permit increased latitude. This dual structure facilitates the coexistence of diversity and stability without necessitating overt hostility. The investigation reveals that social harmony functions as both a cultural ideal and a structural mechanism influencing political communication. By constraining the visibility of dissent in public arenas, it alters the formation and expression of political beliefs. From a Weberian perspective on legitimacy, this state might be perceived as a socially maintained order wherein norms, rather than explicit regulations, govern political conduct.

### **Young Generation and Negotiated Autonomy**

The findings indicate that the younger generation in Bakalan Village occupies a distinct position in the process of political opinion formation, characterized by broader access to information and a more flexible interpretative capacity. Unlike older generations who rely more heavily on local social structures, younger individuals engage with multiple sources of political information, particularly through digital media. This expanded access introduces new perspectives that interact with, rather than replace, existing moral frameworks. Empirical data show that digital platforms such as social media serve as important channels for accessing political content. Young individuals actively follow news, watch political discussions, and observe diverse opinions circulating at the national level. One informant stated: *"Now we can just check Instagram or TikTok... there are many different opinions there... we can compare them."* (Interview with BP)

The presence of varied knowledge does not inherently result in total autonomy from local authority frameworks. The findings indicate a process of negotiated autonomy, wherein young individuals integrate external knowledge with internalised social norms. In this study, negotiated autonomy denotes the ability of individuals to formulate their own viewpoints while remaining within

This state can be comprehended theoretically through Max Weber's framework of legitimacy. Although access to information can broaden perspectives, the credibility of local authority figures, especially religious leaders, continues to influence the evaluative framework for interpreting information. Consequently, authority does not vanish but is recontextualized within a more intricate informational landscape. The results indicate that young individuals actively participate in comparison assessment. They actively evaluate several perspectives rather than passively accepting information from a singular source before establishing their conclusions. This procedure demonstrates an elevated level of reflexivity in political comprehension. This reflexivity coexists with persistent social expectations, especially about respect and civility towards elders and community leaders. One informant explained: *"On social media we can speak more freely... but in the village, especially in front of older people, we choose our words carefully."* (Interview with BP)

This pattern highlights a dual structure of expression. In digital spaces, individuals experience fewer social constraints, allowing for more open articulation of opinions. In contrast, within the village social environment, expression is regulated by norms of respect and harmony. As a result, young individuals adapt their communicative behavior depending on the context, demonstrating an awareness of the social implications of their actions. Political discussions among the younger generation also tend to occur in semi-private or informal settings, such as peer groups or online messaging platforms. These spaces provide opportunities for interaction that are less constrained by hierarchical social norms. One informant noted: *"Sometimes in WhatsApp groups, we share political news and comment... it's more relaxed, sometimes even joking."* (Interview with AR)

These exchanges indicate that the younger generation is not apathetic towards political issues, but participates in manners that diverge from conventional patterns of engagement. Informal and digital environments provide as alternate platforms for discourse, enabling individuals to examine varied viewpoints without overtly confronting existing societal frameworks. The enduring presence of moral authority is apparent. Despite young folks having access to extensive knowledge, the moral ideals imparted by religious leaders persist in shaping their assessment of political figures. This suggests that digital exposure does not entirely supplant local sources of legitimacy. It establishes a multifaceted interpretative process wherein several elements are amalgamated. (Khotimah, 2025; Rusmana et al., 2024)

This circumstance also exposes a possible conflict between autonomy and conformity. Young individuals have the capacity to make independent judgements. Conversely, they function within a social milieu that prioritises unity and reverence. Instead of addressing this contradiction, individuals navigate it by selectively expressing themselves in specific settings while exercising restraint in others.

This negotiated autonomy contests the notion that generational shift results in a total modification of political behaviour. The results indicate both continuity and change. As access to information increases, the prevailing social norms that govern behaviour continue to exert influence. This illustrates the robustness of local cultural frameworks in influencing the expression and comprehension of political concepts. Moreover, the interplay between digital media and local customs demonstrates that political socialisation transcends a singular area. Rather, it transpires within various domains that interact and exert effect upon one another. The younger generation traverses these domains, amalgamating global information streams with locally ingrained beliefs.

The analysis indicates that the younger generation in Bakalan Village does not only adopt new forms of political activity, but actively negotiates their position within established social systems. The concept of negotiated autonomy illustrates that the formation of political opinions is influenced by both increased access to information and persistent legitimacy patterns. This underscores the notion that power, instead of vanishing, evolves within different situations and persistently affects political behaviour in nuanced and indirect manners. (Weber, 1978; Ahdarrijal & Rahmawati, 2024)

## **Conclusion**

This research shows that religious leaders play an important role in the social life of the Bakalan Village community, not only in religious activities but also in everyday social issues. Religious leaders are considered moral figures trusted by the community due to the closeness built thru long-standing social interactions. In terms of politics, religious leaders do not have a direct influence on political decisions. Instead, they have an impact on the moral values conveyed in religious activities and everyday conversations, which the community uses to assess leadership. Village communities tend to maintain harmonious social relationships, which means that open political discussions are not very dominant in public settings. On the other hand, the younger generation now has greater access to political information thanks to advancements in digital technology. The way the younger generation talks about politics is still influenced by the habit of respecting and honoring elders. Showing that although democracy in Bakalan Village is implemented thru formal processes such as elections, the social values and moral legitimacy that develop within the village community continue to influence it.

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