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Transactional politics and abstention in Indonesia: An Islamic political ethics perspective

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Abstract

In many Indonesian villages, electoral participation is often driven more by material incentives from political candidates than by civic consciousness. This study examines how patron-client relations shape political participation and why the absence of material incentives leads to abstention in Turi Village, Lamongan Regency, Indonesia during the 2024 local elections, viewed through the perspective of Islamic political ethics. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 6 informants, non-participant observation, and documentation analysis. The findings show that political participation in Turi Village is largely transactional, with voters expecting benefits such as cash, rice, or cooking oil. When such incentives are absent, voter participation declines, and abstention becomes a socially accepted practice reinforced by peer influence and low political trust. From the perspective of Islamic political ethics, these practices contradict the values of trustworthiness (amanah), justice ('adl), and honesty (sidq), and may be categorized as bribery (risywah). The study concludes that religiosity alone is insufficient to encourage ethical democratic participation amid persistent socio-economic dependency and transactional political culture. Strengthening democratic participation therefore requires structural reforms, increased political trust, and the reinforcement of Islamic ethical values oriented toward public welfare (maslahah).

Keywords: Patron-Client, Abstention, Local Elections, Islamic Political Ethics, Money Politics

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Introduction

Local Head Elections (*Pilkada*) constitute one of the primary instruments within a democratic system, functioning to determine regional leaders directly by the electorate. Political participation in local elections serves as a crucial indicator in assessing the quality of democracy within a given region. However, in practice, political participation is not always grounded in democratic awareness, but is also influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors prevailing within society. (Suwardi & Budiyanto, 2020). This condition gives rise to various dynamics in voting behavior, including the persistence of money politics as a significant issue in the implementation of local democracy in Indonesia. Recent studies demonstrate that clientelistic electoral practices continue to persist within democratic systems because economic vulnerability and unequal access to political resources encourage voters to prioritize short-term material benefits over long-term democratic accountability. (Bardhan, 2021).

A phenomenon that is closely associated with money politics is the emergence of patron-client relations between political actors and society. From the perspective of political sociology, patron-client relations represent reciprocal yet asymmetrical relationships, in which patrons, as resource holders, assist clients, while clients reciprocate through political support. (Sadat & Basir, 2025). Such relationships tend to foster transactional political loyalty, wherein voters' choices are not based on the quality of candidates, but rather on material incentives received. Empirical studies indicate that money politics not only shapes voter preferences but also contributes to the development of a pragmatic political culture within society. (Gisselquist, 2024). In many developing democracies, patron-client exchanges operate not only through vote buying, but also through social reciprocity, informal obligations, and local political networks that normalize transactional participation within electoral competition. (Westphal et al., 2025).

Political participation becomes highly contingent upon the presence of material incentives. When such incentives are no longer available, political loyalty tends to diminish, consequently leading to a decline in participation rates. This phenomenon is closely related to the emergence of abstention behavior (*Golput*), defined as the act of not exercising one's voting rights. Abstention is generally influenced by various factors, including low levels of trust in candidates, dissatisfaction with governmental performance, and the perception that political participation does not yield direct benefits. (Widodo et al., 2026). In certain cases, abstention also emerges as a consequence of the weakening of patron-client relations that previously functioned as a driving force for political participation. (Delmendo, 2026).

This phenomenon is reflected in the dynamics of local elections in Turi Village, Lamongan Regency, where shifts in patterns of political participation have been observed. Based on field interviews, it was found that the community's decision not to participate in local elections is closely associated with the absence of material incentives from candidates.

Table 1. Number of Voters and Abstention in Turi Village

No.	District	Village	Polling Station (TPS)	Permanent Voter List (DPT)	Voters Who Exercised Rights
1.	Turi	Turi	001	552	361
			002	529	384
			003	520	376
			004	544	379
			005	352	266
		Total		2.497	1.766

Source: General Election Commission (KPU) of Lamongan Regency, 2026

This condition is further substantiated by data from the General Election Commission (KPU) of Lamongan Regency, which indicates that in Turi Village, out of a total Permanent Voter List (DPT) of 2,497 individuals, only 1,766 voters exercised their voting rights. In contrast, 731 voters, or approximately 29.27%, abstained. This figure demonstrates that the level of abstention in Turi Village is relatively high compared to other villages within the same region, such as Tambakploso Village, which recorded a participation rate of 87.59% and an abstention rate of only 12.41%. This disparity reflects a significant variation in political participation across regions, thereby positioning Turi Village as a relevant and strategic locus for further investigation. The relatively high abstention rate suggests underlying issues in political participation dynamics that are not solely attributable to individual factors but are also closely related to patron-client relations and broader social conditions. (In'Amuzzahidin, 2016).

Islamic political ethics conceptualizes this phenomenon as a deviation from normative principles. Political participation, in this regard, is regarded as a moral responsibility grounded in the principles of trustworthiness (*amanah*), justice (*'adl*), and honesty (*sidq*). Material interests should not drive the selection of leaders, but rather by their integrity and capacity to promote public welfare (*maslahah*) (Bingham, 2023). Practices involving material inducements in political processes, such as money politics, may be categorized as bribery (*risywah*), which is strictly prohibited in Islam due to its detrimental effects on justice and integrity in decision-making. (Maigari et al., 2026). Therefore, political loyalty established through patron-client relations is inconsistent with the ethical values of Islam.

Patron-client relations and transactional politics have become persistent features of democratic practices in many developing countries. Political clientelism operates through contingent exchanges in which voters provide political support in return for material benefits distributed by political actors

(Bjønness & Kolstad, 2026). In political sociology, patron-client relations are not merely understood as moral deviations, but also as social mechanisms shaped by economic dependency, unequal access to resources, and pragmatic survival strategies within society (Atthahara et al., 2025). This condition demonstrates that political participation is frequently influenced by transactional calculations rather than civic consciousness or ideological commitment. Within this framework, the persistence of money politics in religious societies raises an important sociological question regarding why Islamic ethical values such as *amanah*, *'adl*, and *sidq* often fail to shape democratic political participation despite the strong religiosity of the community. Therefore, Islamic political ethics in this study is not only positioned as a normative framework, but also as an analytical perspective for understanding how religious values are negotiated, instrumentalized, and contested within local political practices (Adlin et al., 2022).

The scholarly literature on political clientelism has expanded over the past decade, where researchers document its dominance across differing democratic contexts. (Guelmamen et al., 2025) established the fundamental framework to understand patron-client exchanges as possible trades of material benefits in return for political support. Moreover, (A. Fauzi et al., 2018) explained this phenomenon in uneven socio-economic structures widespread in agrarian and developing countries. In the last few years, (Jumardin et al., 2026) grounded that clientelistic electoral actions happen within democratic systems due to economic vulnerability and unequal distribution of political resources that encourage citizens to prioritize short-term material benefits over long-term democratic accountability. While, (Djuyandi et al., 2025) explored how patron-clientalism extends beyond direct vote buying through social reciprocity, informal obligations, and local political networks that normalized these transactional relationships.

In the Indonesian context, scholars have studied clientelism at multiple levels of governance. (Scott, 1972) documented the systemic integration of vote buying in Indonesian electoral politics, where material transactions have become a normalized attribute of democratic competition. Furthermore, (Noor et al., 2025) analyzed how money politics in Indonesian elections should prioritize the need for institutional reforms to counter clientelist norms. (Colorafi & Evans, 2016) examined patronage politics in village-level elections in West Java, while (A. M. Fauzi et al., 2025) reiterated how social assistance programs were leveraged to reinforce clientelist relationships as politically motivated in presidential elections. (Suhirman et al., 2025) Further showed how vote buying is not stigmatized in public perception in West Java, undermining democratic legitimacy.

Existing research is prone to focus on individual-level explanations for low political trust, dissatisfaction with government performance, or rational disengagement (Zou & Liang, 2026). However, few studies have directly examined the structural exhaustion of patron-client relations and abstention, leaving a gap in exploring why voters who previously participated through transactional incentives tend to disengage entirely rather than shifting toward procedural participation. Whereas Laxman & Ansari argue that patronage politics happen because voters perceive electoral participation

merely as an immediate material benefit, this is alarming because removing this dynamic will produce political disengagement rather than rational civic engagement. Existing studies on Islamic political ethics largely position concepts such as *amanah*, *‘adl*, and *ṣidq* as normative moral principles of leadership (Atanasov, 2026). However, limited research has applied Islamic political ethics analytically to explain how religious values are negotiated within transactional political practices in local democracies.

Comparative studies from Southeast Asia, specifically from the Philippines, demonstrate that clientelistic political behavior continues not only due to individual opportunism but also because patronage systems are socially accepted within local democratic culture. (Teehankee, 2014). However, existing comparative studies have also not sufficiently explained how Islamic ethical values interact with these transactional political processes within Muslim majority societies. By situating Indonesia’s case within broader Southeast Asian clientelistic approaches, this study contributes a relative perspective on how religiosity, socioeconomic dependency, and political pragmatism connect in forming democratic participation for future elections, both national and local.

This study offers three main contributions. First, it demonstrates that the weakening of patron-client relations may lead not to rational democratic participation, but to political disengagement and higher abstention rates. Second, it explains how abstention behavior becomes socially reproduced through communal conformity and local political pressure. Third, this study positions Islamic political ethics not merely as a normative framework, but also as an analytical perspective for understanding how religious values are negotiated within transactional political practices. These debates indicate that transactional political participation should not merely be understood as an individual electoral preference, but also as a product of broader socio-economic dependency, political distrust, and moral negotiation within local democratic practices.

Abstention behavior in Turi Village cannot merely be interpreted as political apathy, but also as a consequence of the weakening of patron-client relations. This indicates that political participation has not been fully grounded in rational and ethical awareness. Therefore, this study seeks to examine more comprehensively how patron-client relations in local elections influence abstention behavior and how this phenomenon can be analyzed through the perspective of Islamic political ethics, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of local democratic dynamics and promoting more ethical political participation.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze patron-client relations in local elections (*Pilkada*) and their implications for abstention behavior (*Golput*) from the perspective of Islamic political ethics in Turi Village, Lamongan Regency. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables an in-depth understanding of social phenomena through participants’ experiences, perceptions, and actions within their natural context (Stafford, 2022). Turi Village was

chosen as the research site due to its relatively high abstention rate in the 2024 local election, with approximately 731 residents not participating in the election process. Research informants were determined using purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. The purposive sampling criteria included residents registered in the Permanent Voter List of Turi Village who did not participate in the 2024 local elections and were considered capable of providing relevant information regarding abstention behavior, money politics, and patron-client relations. Snowball sampling was subsequently applied to identify additional informants through recommendations from previous participants until data saturation was achieved. This study involved 6 informants consisting of 1 village head as a supporting informant and 5 abstention voters as the primary informants. Data collection techniques included semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and documentation. To ensure data credibility and validity, source triangulation was employed by comparing findings from interviews, observations, and official election-related documents (Higashijima & Washida, 2024).

The analytical process began with transcription of interview results, followed by coding procedures to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and themes related to abstention behavior, money politics, political trust, and patron-client relations. The coded data were then categorized using thematic analysis to explain broader patterns of transactional political participation and the influence of socio-economic dependency within the local democratic context. Coding and thematic categorization are important processes in qualitative analysis because they allow researchers to interpret patterns and meanings within the data systematically. (Anita Kristina et al., 2026). The analyzed data were subsequently presented in descriptive narrative form to facilitate interpretation and conclusion drawing. Furthermore, this study utilized Islamic political ethics as a normative analytical framework to evaluate political practices within the community. This framework draws upon classical Islamic political thought, particularly Al-Mawardi, which emphasizes principles such as trustworthiness (*amanah*), justice (‘*adl*), honesty (*sidq*), and the prohibition of bribery (*risywah*). These principles were used to examine whether political participation and patron-client practices in Turi Village aligned with or contradicted the ethical values of Islamic political thought.

Result

Political Participation Based on Material Interests

The results show that political participation of the people in Turi Village in local elections (*Pilkada*) is not entirely based on awareness as citizens, but is influenced by material incentives. This is reflected in informants’ statements such as, “Usually it can be around Rp50.000, so there is motivation to come.” This statement indicates that community involvement in previous local elections was driven by direct benefits received. In this context, political participation is not understood as a moral responsibility, but rather as an activity that has economic exchange value.

In the absence of such incentives during the 2024 local elections, community participation

declined. One informant stated, “If this time there is none, I also choose not to come.” This shows that the decision to participate is highly dependent on the availability of material benefits. This finding is consistent with studies on political clientelism which show that voter participation can be driven by material incentives rather than civic awareness (Muhtadi, 2019).

Money Politics as a Practice of *Risywah* in Local Elections

The research findings also show that the practice of assisting in local elections becomes part of the pattern of relations between political actors and society. One informant stated, “Usually it is in the form of distributing necessities such as rice and cooking oil to residents.” This practice indicates the existence of an exchange of interests between candidates and the community, which forms patron-client relations. In this condition, assistance is not only understood as a form of concern, but also as a means to influence the political choices of society.

This finding is in line with research which shows that patronage and clientelism operate through the distribution of material resources to influence voters’ preferences in local elections. (Undang, 2025). Thus, the practice of money politics in local elections not only affects voter behavior, but also reflects a transactional political relationship between candidates and the community.

Weakening of Patron-Client Relations and the Emergence of Abstention

The results show that when money politics is no longer a driving factor, patron-client relations between political actors and society weaken. This has an impact on the decline of community participation in local elections. One informant stated, “*Saiki sepi seh mbak, ga ono rame-rame ngunu,*” which indicates reduced community involvement in the electoral process. Interview findings also indicate that the community no longer feels a sense of attachment to candidates in the absence of material provision. This condition shows that previous political participation was highly dependent on reciprocal relationships that were material in nature. This finding is consistent with the argument that clientelistic relationships tend to weaken when material incentives are absent, leading to reduced voter engagement (Dewantara & Singh, 2026).

The weakening of patron-client relations in Turi Village does not necessarily indicate the strengthening of rational democratic participation. Instead, the findings suggest the emergence of political disengagement rooted in disappointment and distrust toward political actors. When transactional incentives disappeared, many voters did not shift toward programmatic political participation, but rather toward abstention behavior. According to Gherghina and Nemcok (2023), clientelism often persists because voters perceive electoral participation primarily through immediate material benefits rather than ideological or policy considerations.

The Influence of the Social Environment on Abstention Behavior

The interview results also show that the social environment influences political participation. One

informant stated, “*Tonggoku akeh sing ora melu, dadi yo aku ora melu.*” This statement indicates that the decision not to participate is not entirely individual, but is also influenced by social conditions in the surrounding environment.

Abstention behavior in Turi Village also reflects the influence of social conformity and collective political norms within the local community. Individual political decisions are shaped not only by personal preferences, but also by surrounding social environments that influence perceptions regarding participation. Consequently, abstention should not merely be interpreted as an individual decision, but also as a socially reproduced political culture.

Low Political Trust and Its Implications for Political Ethics

Table 2. Findings of Patron Client Relations and Their Implications for Abstention

Research Finding	Observed Condition	Implication for Participation	Islamic Political Ethics Perspective
Participation based on material incentives	Voting driven by cash or in-kind goods	High turnout when incentives present	Contradicts <i>Amanah</i> ; voting is reduced to a transactional exchange rather than a civic responsibility.
Money politics	Distribution of rice, and cooking oil by candidates	Fosters transactional political loyalty	Constitutes <i>risywah</i> ; undermines electoral justice and integrity
Weakening of patron-client relations	Absence of material provision in 2024 election	Significant decline in voter participation; emergence of abstention	Reveals that participation was not grounded in ethical awareness; fails to embody <i>amanah</i>
Influence of the social environment	Peer conformity: ‘My neighbors do not vote, so I will not either’	Collective, socially reproduced abstention	Contradicts individual political responsibility; undermines ‘ <i>adl</i> ’ as civic participation for collective welfare
Low political trust	Skepticism toward candidates and leaders; perception that elections produce	Reinforces abstention; disengagement from democratic process	Reflects weak institutionalization of <i>sidq</i> and ‘ <i>adl</i> ’ in leadership; corrodes trust in public institutions

The results also show a low level of public trust in political actors. One informant stated, “I have lost trust in politics since the corruption issues.” This statement indicates a skeptical attitude toward the political process and the actors involved in it. In addition, there is also the view that the results of local elections do not bring significant change, as stated by an informant, “Whoever becomes Regent, the condition of Lamongan remains the same.”

This condition shows that low public trust influences political participation. This finding is also related to studies which show that dissatisfaction with political processes and governance can reinforce pragmatic and transactional political behavior. (Libecap, 2025).

The table shows that abstention behavior is influenced not only by individual factors but also by patron-client relations, social conditions, and low political trust, which overall do not yet reflect the values of Islamic political ethics.

Discussion

Patron Client Relations and the Orientation of Political Participation

The relationship between political actors and the community in Turi Village demonstrates a strong patron-client pattern in shaping political participation. This relationship operates through a mechanism of interest exchange, in which political support is given in return for material assistance as well as social closeness. As a result, political participation is not grounded in rational awareness and civic responsibility, but is instead influenced by dependency relations that are transactional in nature. This pattern indicates that the participation formed is instrumental, meaning that it emerges when there are direct benefits and weakens when such incentives are no longer present.

This condition reflects the persistence of clientelistic democracy in which political participation is closely connected to material dependency and unequal socio-economic relations. (Scott, 1972) argues that patron-client relations often emerge within vulnerable communities where access to political and economic resources is unequally distributed. In such conditions, political loyalty becomes transactional because citizens perceive electoral participation as a practical strategy for securing short-term economic benefits. This finding indicates that political participation in Turi Village is shaped not only by individual political preferences, but also by structural socio-economic pressures that reinforce pragmatic political behavior. (Yanti et al., 2023) argues that clientelism frequently develops within contexts where democratic institutions remain weak, and citizens perceive political participation primarily as a mechanism for accessing economic resources rather than influencing public policy.

Money Politics as *Risywah* and the Decline of Participation

Money politics in local elections persists not merely because of individual opportunism, but also due to structural socio-economic conditions that create dependency between political actors and society. In many local democratic contexts, material assistance is perceived as a practical response to everyday economic insecurity, particularly among lower-income communities. Consequently, electoral exchanges become socially normalized and are often understood as reciprocal obligations rather than ethical violations. Electoral clientelism therefore persists because voters often perceive material redistribution as a practical form of political responsiveness in situations where public welfare distribution remains unequal. This condition reflects what (Suwardi & Budiyanto, 2020) describes as the embedded nature of clientelism within unequal socio-economic structures, where political support is exchanged for short-term material security rather than long-term democratic accountability. In the context of Turi Village, economic pragmatism appears to shape political behavior more strongly than civic consciousness, thereby reinforcing transactional participation patterns.

Risywah should not only be understood as a theological prohibition, but also as an analytical concept for examining how transactional political culture becomes socially legitimized within democratic practices. In contexts where economic dependency and political distrust are dominant, material exchanges between candidates and voters are frequently interpreted as normal political behavior rather than ethical violations. This demonstrates that religious moral values are often negotiated within pragmatic socio-political realities. As (Bingham, 2023) argues, tensions between ethical ideals and material interests deeply shape moral economic practices in Muslim societies. Therefore, the persistence of money politics in local elections reflects not only individual moral failure, but also broader structural conditions that normalize transactional political relations.

Risywah contradicts the principle of justice because it creates inequality in the electoral process and eliminates objectivity in determining political choices. When such practices are no longer present, previously established patron-client relations weaken. Consequently, political participation also declines significantly. This condition indicates that participation that was previously high did not fully reflect independent political awareness, but instead depended on transactional relationships. Conceptually, participation built through such mechanisms tends to be unsustainable and easily declines when the source of exchange is no longer available. (Jumardin et al., 2026).

Social Factors, Trust, and the Orientation of *Maslahah*

In addition to material factors, abstention behavior is also influenced by social dynamics and the level of public trust in political actors. The decision not to participate is not entirely individual, but is formed through social interactions that develop within the community. When the tendency not to vote becomes a collective pattern, such behavior is further strengthened as a social norm. This indicates that political participation is influenced not only by internal individual factors, but also by the social

environment that shapes perceptions and political actions. This finding is consistent with studies in the Philippines showing that electoral participation is often influenced by ingrained patronage systems and localized political machines. Whereas in many *barangays* and municipalities, political candidates often distribute cash assistance, food packages, infrastructure favors to the district, and emergency aid during electoral campaigns to gain voter loyalty, especially among economically disadvantaged households (Delmendo, 2026). However, these decades-long practices create a political direction in which participation becomes contingent on reciprocal material exchange rather than desire for civic commitment.

Similar to the findings in Turi Village, where citizens' disengagement during the 2024 local elections occurred due to weakened patronage networks and the candidate's failure to provide expected benefits, this demonstrates that political participation in clientelistic models is sustained less by democratic trust than by transactional social relations. Thus, abstention behavior should be understood not just as an individual political choice, but as a sociologically conditioned mechanism shaped by long-standing structures of dependency, reciprocity, and communal political expectations. These situations further indicate how transactional political culture represents a larger structural feature of Southeast Asian local democracies, where religiousness, social obligation, and economic vulnerability interplay within patron-client relationships.

Low levels of trust in political actors strengthen the tendency toward abstention. This lack of trust arises from political experiences that do not result in significant change, leading to the perception that participation does not have a meaningful impact. From the perspective of Islamic political ethics, this condition is related to the weak implementation of the principles of honesty (*ṣidq*) and justice (*‘adl*) in leadership practices. When political coalitions and local electoral practices are perceived as primarily pragmatic and transactional, democratic legitimacy declines, which in turn weakens public participation (Sadat & Basir, 2025).

Socioeconomic conditions also influence the orientation of political participation. The prioritization of daily needs causes political participation to be considered a secondary concern. This indicates that political orientation has not yet been directed toward public welfare (*maslahah*), but is still dominated by short-term individual interests. In Islamic political ethics, political participation should be directed toward efforts to realize collective welfare through the selection of trustworthy leaders, so that individual interests do not override collective societal goals.

The table demonstrates that patron-client relations in Turi Village cannot be understood merely as individual political behavior, but as part of a broader socio-political structure shaped by economic dependency, transactional political culture, and local social norms. The table also shows that Islamic political ethics functions not only as a normative framework, but as an analytical perspective for examining how the principles of *amanah*, *‘adl*, *ṣidq*, and the prohibition of *risywah* are negotiated and weakened within democratic political practices.

Table 3. Sociological Interpretation of Patron-Client Relations and Islamic Political Ethics

Empirical Finding	Sociological Interpretation	Islamic Political Ethics
		Perspective
Vote buying practices	Rooted in economic dependency and structural inequality; normalized as reciprocal political exchange	Normalization of <i>risywah</i> ; corrupts electoral justice.
Abstention behavior		Weak implementation of <i>amanah</i> ; participation as civic duty unfulfilled
Participation contingent on incentives	Clientelistic political culture where electoral engagement is instrumental rather than civic	Shift from <i>maslahah-oriented</i> participation to material pragmatism.
Community conformity in political choices	Social pressure and local political norms override individual civic judgment.	Weak internalization of <i>sidq</i> and <i>'adl</i> ; ethical autonomy subordinated to social conformity

This condition reflects a broader paradox within democratic societies in which strong religiosity does not automatically produce ethical political participation. This paradox demonstrates that religiosity does not automatically transform democratic behavior when socio-economic dependency and transactional political culture continue to dominate everyday political practices. (Atthahara et al., 2025). In many clientelistic democracies, religious moral values coexist with transactional political practices because political behavior is often shaped more by socio-economic insecurity and pragmatic survival strategies than by normative ethical commitments. As (Djuyandi et al., 2025) argue, clientelism persists when citizens perceive electoral participation through immediate material benefits rather than long-term democratic accountability. Therefore, the case of Turi Village contributes to wider debates in political sociology regarding the limitations of moral and religious frameworks in transforming democratic behavior under conditions of structural inequality and economic dependency.

Implications for Islamic Political Ethics in Local Democracy

The dynamics occurring in Turi Village show that patron-client relations and money politics practices have a significant influence on the quality of political participation. The weakening of these relations reveals that previous participation was not built upon ethical awareness, but rather on transactional relationships. This condition highlights a gap between political practices and the values of Islamic political ethics.

The principles of *amanah*, *‘adl*, and *sidq* function not merely as moral ideals, but also as analytical tools for evaluating how democratic participation is shaped, negotiated, and constrained by socio-economic dependency and transactional political culture. However, the observed practices indicate that these values have not yet fully become the foundation of political behavior. Therefore, strengthening political awareness based on moral values is essential to encourage the creation of more ethical and integrity-based participation. This finding indicates that improving democratic participation requires not only moral appeals, but also structural efforts to reduce socio-economic dependency and strengthen public trust in political institutions.

The social interactions observed in Turi Village convey important implications for village-level democratic governance. The findings illustrate that when electoral participation is primarily driven by material transactions rather than civic consciousness, the quality of local democracy and the significance of practicing their right to vote are fundamentally compromised. Candidates who win through patronage politics instead of pragmatic appeal experience weakened accountability pressures, creating conditions in which local governance remains expanding networks rather than public welfare delivery, which further strengthens clientelism that can also lead to corruption and underdevelopment of their constituents. The high abstention rate of 29.27% in Turi Village, as the polar opposite of Tambakploso Village’s 12.41%, reveals that communities with deeper patron-client relationships face a structural trap. When patronage networks weaken, participation collapses instead of mobilizing citizens to achieve principled civic engagement. This finding suggests that village democracy in Indonesia requires not only anti-money politics enforcement but also progressive and deliberate efforts to build alternative frameworks for political participation grounded in policy information of the community’s socio-economic contexts, candidate quality assessment, and voter education.

Contribution to Local Democratic Development

The study’s findings contribute to continuous initiatives to improve healthier local democratic practices in Indonesia by analyzing the structural conditions that must be resolved for democratic participation to become substantive rather than performative. Three structural factors were considered critical: first, socioeconomic dependency that makes material incentives rational for economically vulnerable voters. Second, low political trust generated by decades of unfulfilled commitments to provide effective governance and meaningful change. Lastly, the absence of civic education efforts that could reframe electoral participation as a moral responsibility as a Muslim and a civic right as an Indonesian citizen, rather than as economic transactions. The findings also suggest that strengthening local democracy requires a holistic approach of intersectional anti clientelism reforms, social protection and services programs to reduce economic vulnerability, transparency mechanisms to rebuild satisfaction, and community-based civic education that connects democratic participation with tangible governance outcomes. These insights are relevant beyond Indonesia’s context, offering further critical discussions and applications to clientelistic democracies across Southeast Asia and the

Global South.

Conclusion

Patron-client relations in local elections in Turi Village demonstrate that political participation remains strongly influenced by transactional political culture and socio-economic dependency. The findings reveal that electoral participation is shaped not only by civic awareness, but also by material incentives, social environment, and low political trust. When transactional incentives weaken, political participation declines and abstention behavior increases, indicating that democratic participation has not yet been fully grounded in independent political consciousness. These conditions further show that religiosity alone does not automatically strengthen ethical political participation when pragmatic interests and clientelistic political practices continue to dominate local democracy.

This study contributes to the development of Islamic political science by positioning Islamic political ethics not merely as a normative framework, but also as a critical analytical perspective for understanding transactional democracy within contemporary local politics. From this perspective, practices of money politics and patron-client relations reflect contradictions with the principles of *amanah*, *'adl*, *sidq*, and the prohibition of *risywah*. The study therefore emphasizes that strengthening democratic participation requires not only moral appeals, but also broader structural efforts to reduce socio-economic dependency, strengthen public trust, and encourage more ethical, integrity-based, and public welfare-oriented political participation.

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