

Islamic Preachers and Political Communication in Indonesia: Religious Authority, Social Media, and Electoral Mobilization

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Abstract

Islamic preachers with large social media audiences have become influential actors in Indonesian political communication. Their authority may shape political attitudes, perceptions of candidates, and interpretations of public issues, particularly among religiously engaged audiences. This article examines the political communication practices of Indonesian Islamic preachers on social media. Using qualitative discourse analysis, the study investigates religious messaging, political references, audience engagement, and electoral mobilization. The article argues that social media has transformed religious authority by enabling preachers to communicate directly with large audiences without relying on traditional religious institutions or mass media. This creates new opportunities for civic education but also raises questions concerning political neutrality, misinformation, polarization, and the commercialization of religious influence. The study proposes a framework distinguishing religious political education from direct electoral mobilization. It concludes that Islamic preachers have become significant actors within Indonesia's hybrid political communication environment and that their role should be examined at the intersection of religion, media, democracy, and political participation.

[Para pendakwah Islam dengan audiens media sosial yang besar telah menjadi aktor berpengaruh dalam komunikasi politik Indonesia. Otoritas mereka dapat membentuk sikap politik, persepsi terhadap kandidat, dan interpretasi isu-isu publik, khususnya di kalangan audiens yang terlibat secara religius. Artikel ini mengkaji praktik komunikasi politik para pendakwah Islam Indonesia di media sosial. Dengan menggunakan analisis wacana kualitatif, studi ini meneliti pesan-pesan keagamaan, referensi politik, keterlibatan

audiens, dan mobilisasi elektoral. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa media sosial telah mengubah otoritas keagamaan dengan memungkinkan para pendakwah untuk berkomunikasi langsung dengan audiens yang besar tanpa bergantung pada lembaga keagamaan tradisional atau media massa. Hal ini menciptakan peluang baru untuk pendidikan kewarganegaraan tetapi juga menimbulkan pertanyaan mengenai netralitas politik, misinformasi, polarisasi, dan komersialisasi pengaruh keagamaan. Studi ini mengusulkan kerangka kerja yang membedakan pendidikan politik keagamaan dari mobilisasi elektoral langsung. Kesimpulannya, para pendakwah Islam telah menjadi aktor penting dalam lingkungan komunikasi politik hibrida Indonesia dan peran mereka harus dikaji pada persimpangan antara agama, media, demokrasi, dan partisipasi politik.]

Keywords: Islamic preachers, political communication, social media, religious authority, Indonesia

Introduction

The expansion of social media has fundamentally altered the position of Islamic preachers within Indonesia's political communication environment. Religious figures who previously communicated with audiences primarily through mosques, pesantren, television, radio, and formal religious organizations can now reach millions of followers through Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and other digital platforms. This transformation has expanded the communicative capacity of preachers while simultaneously changing the basis of religious authority. Muhammad Said argues that virtual preaching has transformed preachers into cultural brokers and authoritative interpreters whose influence extends beyond explicitly religious matters into social and political life (Said 2020). Religious authority in this environment is therefore no longer determined exclusively by formal education, institutional affiliation, or traditional scholarly recognition. Visibility, audience engagement, consistency of communication, and perceived authenticity increasingly contribute to the legitimacy of religious figures in the digital public sphere.

The transformation is particularly significant in Indonesia because religious authority has historically been embedded within social networks connecting ulama, kiai, pesantren, Islamic organizations, and local communities. Kiai have occupied influential positions not only as religious teachers but also as community leaders and political intermediaries. Azharghany (2022) demonstrates that the political involvement of kiai has deep historical foundations and is connected to their social legitimacy among Muslim communities. In contemporary digital environments, however, this authority can be extended beyond geographically bounded communities. A preacher may address audiences who have never attended the

preacher's mosque, studied at the preacher's pesantren, or belonged to the preacher's organization. Social media consequently expands the geographical and demographic reach of religious authority while weakening the necessity of physical proximity between religious leaders and followers.

The rise of popular preachers illustrates this transformation particularly clearly. Muthohirin (2021), examining Ustadz Hanan Attaki and Felix Siau, demonstrates how social media has become an important arena for communicating Islamic ideas to Muslim youth and shaping the contemporary hijrah phenomenon. Rohmatulloh, As'ad, and Malayati (2022) similarly show how Gus Baha and Santri Gayeng employ social media to maintain traditionalist religious influence within an environment increasingly populated by popular online preachers. These findings suggest that digitalization does not simply replace traditional religious authority with entirely new actors. Instead, it creates competition and negotiation between different forms of authority. Traditional scholars adapt digital techniques, while digitally successful preachers seek legitimacy through religious knowledge, institutional affiliation, cultural identity, or charismatic communication.

The political implications of this transformation become particularly visible during electoral periods. Indonesian elections frequently involve political appeals framed through religious identity, moral values, community representation, and the symbolic legitimacy of religious figures. Rahmat and Purnomo (2020), for example, demonstrate how Twitter was used to construct the political branding of Kiai Ma'ruf Amin during the 2019 presidential election. The case demonstrates that a religious figure can occupy multiple communicative positions simultaneously: religious teacher, political candidate, community representative, and digital political actor. This multiplicity complicates the distinction between religious communication and political communication. When religious authority is embedded within a political campaign, religious messages may acquire electoral meanings even when they do not explicitly endorse a candidate.

The experience of the 212 movement provides an even more significant example of the relationship between religious authority, digital communication, and political mobilization. Syahputra (2020) demonstrates that social media activities surrounding the 212 movement were deeply connected with debates concerning the authority of the Indonesian Ulema Council and the political interpretation of religious issues. The movement illustrates how religious discourse can become politically mobilizing when digital communication connects religious interpretation, collective identity, perceived injustice, and calls for public action. The significance of this episode extends beyond the specific political circumstances of 2016–2017. It demonstrates that social media can transform religious statements into highly mobile political messages capable of circulating rapidly across networks of believers, activists, organizations, and political supporters.

Existing research has also examined the relationship between digital religious communication and Islamic populism. Hannan (2021), analyzing Felix Siau's Instagram activity, shows how contemporary religious actors can use anti-

establishment narratives, anti-authoritarian rhetoric, and appeals to Islamic values to develop populist communication. The significance of this finding lies in the convergence between religious identity and political interpretation. A preacher does not necessarily have to explicitly support a candidate to influence political attitudes. By defining what constitutes moral leadership, legitimate citizenship, appropriate Islamic behavior, or threats to Muslim interests, religious communicators can indirectly structure the political judgments of their audiences. Religious communication can therefore perform a political function even when its surface content remains primarily religious.

The relationship between religious authority and political mobilization is also evident in research on Habib Rizieq Shihab and the 212 movement. Syukri and Herdiansah (2023) demonstrate that Rizieq's mobilizing capacity was connected to religious authority, charismatic communication, organizational capacity, and a large follower base. Social media contributed to the circulation of messages and facilitated the mobilization of supporters when political opportunities emerged. This finding is important because it challenges technological explanations that attribute mobilization primarily to platforms. Digital media may accelerate political communication, but mobilization still depends on actors possessing legitimacy, organizational networks, emotional resonance, and the capacity to translate political issues into collective identities. Social media should consequently be understood as an infrastructure of mobilization rather than an autonomous cause of political action.

At the same time, the digitalization of religious authority creates challenges concerning authenticity and legitimacy. Ichwan, Pabbajah, and Amin (2024) argue that the digitization of religious interpretation contributes to the weakening or fragmentation of traditional ulama authority because social media allows religious information to circulate outside conventional scholarly structures. Karimatul Ma'rifat (2025) similarly demonstrates that Muslim influencers increasingly participate in Qur'anic interpretation and that authority becomes influenced by popularity and audience engagement. These developments raise an important epistemological question: if the visibility of a preacher becomes partly determined by platform dynamics, how should audiences distinguish religious expertise from digital popularity? The political consequences are substantial because religious claims that acquire large audiences can influence perceptions of candidates, policies, and social groups regardless of whether their political interpretations are academically or institutionally well grounded.

The transformation of authority also involves changes in audience participation. Digital religious communication enables followers to comment, share, remix, reinterpret, and circulate messages beyond the original communication context. Tabaika, Barizi, and Arif (2025) argue that digital da'wah reconstructs Islamic authority through social media aesthetics, algorithmic visibility, and audience engagement. Nawaf (2025) similarly demonstrates that religious authority can be negotiated through interactions between preachers and

audiences, particularly within comment sections. These findings suggest that authority in digital religious communication is increasingly relational. A preacher may possess formal religious credentials, but continued authority depends partly on the audience's recognition and ongoing engagement. This creates a dynamic environment in which political influence can increase rapidly when religious authority, digital popularity, and emotional identification reinforce one another.

The political role of religious organizations provides another important context. Ridho et al. (2023) demonstrate that Nahdlatul Ulama can use digital communication to disseminate inclusive and moderate narratives and to respond to religious and political tensions in online environments. Farid (2023) similarly shows how MUI in Mandailing Natal uses social media to develop religious awareness and community solidarity. These examples demonstrate that religious communication does not necessarily produce electoral polarization. Islamic organizations and religious figures can also use digital platforms for civic education, social cohesion, religious moderation, and public information. The political significance of preachers should therefore not be reduced to electoral campaigning. Religious communication can contribute positively to democratic life when it encourages responsible citizenship, tolerance, public reasoning, and informed political participation.

Nevertheless, political communication through religious authority creates a difficult boundary between civic education and electoral mobilization. A preacher may discuss political ethics, corruption, leadership, justice, or citizenship as part of religious education. Such messages may strengthen democratic participation without constituting campaign activity. The boundary becomes more problematic when religious language is used to identify particular candidates as morally superior, portray political opponents as enemies of religion, or encourage followers to vote collectively. Mahendra et al. (2025) show that Islamic mass organizations in Indonesia increasingly use social media to disseminate political messages, construct religious identities, and mobilize public support. The question is therefore not whether religion should participate in public affairs, but how religious authority should be exercised without transforming religious legitimacy into coercive electoral influence.

This article addresses the following research question: How does the digitalization of Islamic preaching transform religious authority and enable Indonesian Islamic preachers to participate in political communication and electoral mobilization? The central argument is that social media produces a mediated form of religious-political authority in which traditional legitimacy, charismatic communication, digital visibility, and audience engagement interact. This authority can contribute to civic education when religious figures encourage ethical political reasoning, tolerance, and informed participation. It can also become a mechanism of electoral mobilization when religious legitimacy is translated into candidate endorsement, political identification, or collective voting appeals. The distinction between these practices is essential for understanding how

religious communication operates within a democratic system where religion remains socially influential but political competition requires pluralism.

The contribution of this study is to connect three bodies of Indonesian scholarship that are frequently examined separately: research on digital da'wah and religious authority, research on Islamic political mobilization, and research on social media campaigning. Previous studies have demonstrated the transformation of preaching, the emergence of popular digital preachers, and the political significance of religious figures (Said 2020; Muthohirin 2021; Rohmatulloh, As'ad, and Malayati 2022). Other studies have examined religious mobilization during the 212 movement or the political branding of religious figures (Syahputra 2020; Rahmat and Purnomo 2020; Syukri and Herdiansah 2023). This article brings these strands together by examining religious authority as a communicative resource that can move across religious education, civic discourse, political persuasion, and electoral mobilization.

Methodologically, this article employs qualitative discourse analysis and comparative literature analysis. The analysis focuses on Indonesian journal studies published from 2020 to 2025 concerning digital preaching, Islamic religious authority, social media communication, political mobilization, Islamic organizations, and electoral politics. Rather than treating the literature as a collection of independent case studies, the study compares the mechanisms through which preachers establish legitimacy, communicate political meanings, engage audiences, and contribute to collective mobilization. Particular attention is given to the distinction between religious political education and direct electoral mobilization. This approach enables the article to formulate a conceptual explanation of how religious authority becomes politically consequential in a hybrid communication environment where sermons, political messages, social media interactions, organizational networks, and electoral campaigns increasingly overlap.

Authority After the Pulpit: How Digital Media Reorders Religious Legitimacy

The digitalization of Islamic preaching has changed the institutional geography of religious authority in Indonesia. Historically, a preacher's legitimacy was often associated with religious education, pesantren affiliation, scholarly reputation, organizational membership, lineage, and direct relationships with local communities. Digital platforms introduce another pathway to recognition: visibility among networked audiences. Said (2020) describes the contemporary virtual preacher as a cultural broker and authoritative interpreter whose influence extends beyond conventional religious spaces. The implication is not that traditional authority has disappeared. Rather, digital communication allows religious figures to accumulate an additional form of symbolic capital based on audience reach and communicative performance. A preacher who consistently produces accessible

content may gain followers far beyond the geographical community in which the preacher initially developed authority. Political communication subsequently benefits from this expanded reach because religious messages can circulate across social networks without being filtered through conventional religious or media institutions.

The transformation becomes clearer when comparing traditionalist and digitally native preachers. Rohmatulloh, As'ad, and Malayati (2022) demonstrate how Gus Baha and Santri Gayeng use social media to maintain traditionalist religious influence while competing with newer online Islamic actors. This case challenges the assumption that digitalization inevitably produces a complete break from traditional religious authority. Instead, established religious networks can adapt their communication practices and reproduce institutional legitimacy through digital media. Gus Baha's authority is therefore not based solely on popularity. His digital presence is connected to broader traditions of Islamic scholarship and NU networks. Digital platforms provide a new channel through which pre-existing legitimacy can be amplified. This creates a hybrid structure in which institutional authority and digital visibility reinforce one another rather than functioning as mutually exclusive sources of legitimacy.

Other popular preachers demonstrate a different route toward legitimacy. Muthohirin (2021), examining Hanan Attaki and Felix Siau, shows how social media helped popular preachers influence the religious practices and identities of Muslim youth through the hijrah phenomenon. Their appeal is connected to communication styles that are accessible, emotionally resonant, visually attractive, and responsive to contemporary youth concerns. This form of authority is particularly significant because it is not dependent upon the traditional institutional hierarchy through which religious scholars were historically recognized. The audience can encounter a preacher through a short video or social media post and subsequently develop a sense of personal familiarity. Such mediated intimacy can create political consequences because audiences may extend their trust in a preacher's religious advice to perceptions concerning social and political issues. Religious authority thus becomes portable across communicative contexts.

Digital authority is also increasingly shaped by audience participation. Tabaika, Barizi, and Arif (2025) emphasize that digital da'wah is reconstructed through social media aesthetics and audience engagement. In this environment, followers do not merely receive religious information; they contribute to the visibility and circulation of particular messages through comments, likes, shares, and other forms of engagement. The algorithmic organization of platforms can amplify content that generates strong reactions, thereby influencing which religious voices become prominent. This changes the conditions under which authority is reproduced. A preacher may possess extensive scholarly credentials, but the digital environment rewards communication that is concise, emotionally compelling, visually attractive, and easily circulated. Political messages embedded within

religious content can therefore acquire disproportionate visibility when they generate strong audience responses.

The relationship between popularity and authority raises an epistemological problem. Karimatul Ma'rifat (2025) finds that Muslim influencers increasingly participate in Qur'anic interpretation through social media and that interpretive authority is increasingly shaped by popularity and audience engagement. This does not mean that popular religious figures necessarily lack knowledge. The problem is that digital popularity and scholarly competence are different forms of legitimacy. A large following may indicate communicative effectiveness but does not automatically demonstrate interpretive expertise. When audiences fail to distinguish these forms of authority, political claims presented through religious language may acquire legitimacy simply because they originate from a highly visible preacher. The democratic consequence is potentially significant because religious authority can become a shortcut through which political judgments are formed without equivalent scrutiny of political arguments.

Ichwan, Pabbajah, and Amin (2024) identify a related transformation in the digitization of religious tafsir. Traditional ulama authority can weaken when audiences obtain religious explanations directly from online sources that appear immediately accessible and authoritative. This process fragments the religious information environment. Instead of receiving interpretations through a relatively limited number of established institutions, audiences can compare multiple preachers, influencers, and digital communities. Such pluralization can encourage critical engagement because audiences encounter diverse interpretations. Yet it can also generate uncertainty concerning which sources deserve trust. In political contexts, this uncertainty becomes consequential because competing preachers may offer different religious interpretations of leadership, citizenship, democracy, or electoral choices. The fragmentation of authority therefore creates both opportunities for intellectual pluralism and risks of intensified political contestation.

The case of Felix Siau illustrates how digital religious authority can become connected to political identity formation. Hannan (2021) demonstrates that Siau's Instagram communication contains anti-establishment and anti-authoritarian narratives alongside appeals to return to Islamic values. These messages are politically significant even when they are not structured as formal campaign advertisements. They establish a normative framework through which audiences may interpret state institutions, political elites, social relationships, and citizenship. A preacher can consequently influence political perceptions by shaping the moral categories used to evaluate political events. This form of influence is indirect but potentially powerful because it operates before the electoral decision itself. Rather than telling audiences explicitly whom to vote for, religious communication can define what a "good Muslim," "good leader," or "Islamic society" should look like.

Religious organizations can also adapt this process to institutional communication. Farid (2023) demonstrates that MUI in Mandailing Natal uses social media to strengthen religious awareness and community solidarity. Such

communication illustrates a more institutionalized model of digital religious authority. Unlike individual influencers whose authority may depend heavily on personal charisma, institutional religious communication can draw legitimacy from organizational structures. This difference matters politically because institutional actors can frame religious messages around collective responsibilities rather than individual loyalty. MUI's digital communication demonstrates that social media can be used to maintain organizational relevance and community cohesion without necessarily becoming an electoral campaigning instrument. The political importance of religious digital communication therefore depends partly on the institutional context in which messages are produced.

The same principle can be observed in the digital activities of Nahdlatul Ulama. Ridho et al. (2023) emphasize the potential of NU's digital networks to promote inclusive and moderate narratives amid religious and political tensions. This demonstrates that religious authority can be mobilized to stabilize rather than polarize political communication. In democratic environments characterized by intense competition, religious organizations can contribute to social cohesion by emphasizing ethical citizenship, peaceful disagreement, and respect for pluralism. The existence of influential religious networks therefore does not inherently threaten democracy. The political effect depends on the norms through which authority is communicated and the objectives toward which networks are mobilized. Digital religious authority becomes democratically constructive when it encourages participation without reducing political legitimacy to religious conformity.

The role of female ulama further demonstrates that digitalization can broaden the boundaries of religious authority. Subchi et al. (2022) show that new media create opportunities for female ulama to establish identities and disseminate religious messages, although their acceptance remains influenced by the ways audiences evaluate religious communication. This finding is relevant to political communication because the digital sphere can challenge inherited assumptions concerning who is entitled to speak authoritatively about religion. When women religious scholars acquire visibility, they can introduce alternative interpretations of social issues and citizenship. Digital platforms therefore have the potential to pluralize religious authority not only by introducing new male preachers but also by enabling previously marginalized religious actors to enter public discourse. Such pluralization can strengthen democratic communication by expanding the range of legitimate voices within religious communities.

The reconstruction of authority also involves changes in rhetorical style. Nurdin and Syihabudin (2024) demonstrate that Ustaz Subhan Bawazier's Instagram preaching relies on distinctive rhetorical and linguistic practices designed to make religious messages attractive and comprehensible to audiences. Communication style becomes politically relevant because persuasive effectiveness determines whether religious interpretations are noticed, remembered, and shared. A preacher who communicates complex issues through familiar language may

develop stronger audience identification than a scholar who communicates exclusively through technical religious terminology. In political contexts, this rhetorical accessibility can facilitate the translation of religious values into political judgments. The authority of the preacher is therefore partly mediated through communication competence: the ability to convert religious knowledge into narratives that audiences recognize as personally relevant.

Digital religious authority is consequently neither purely traditional nor purely technological. It emerges through the interaction of scholarly legitimacy, organizational affiliation, charismatic performance, platform visibility, audience recognition, and communicative style. The literature suggests that different preachers combine these resources in different proportions. Gus Baha draws upon traditionalist networks while adapting to digital communication; Hanan Attaki builds youth-oriented religious influence through contemporary platforms; Felix Siauw links religious messaging with populist identity; and institutional organizations such as NU and MUI mobilize organizational legitimacy through social media (Rohmatulloh, As'ad, and Malayati 2022; Muthohirin 2021; Hannan 2021; Farid 2023). Authority therefore becomes increasingly hybrid, and its political consequences depend on how these different forms of legitimacy interact.

The political significance of this transformation is ultimately found in the portability of religious trust. Once audiences recognize a preacher as a credible religious authority, that credibility can extend beyond explicitly theological questions. Followers may seek guidance from the same figure concerning social morality, public affairs, political leadership, or elections. Said (2020) describes this expansion as part of the broader political and social consequences of virtual preaching. The crucial issue is not whether preachers should discuss public affairs. Religious figures have historically participated in civic life. The issue is whether audiences recognize the difference between religious guidance and political persuasion. When that distinction becomes blurred, religious authority can become an unusually powerful political resource because disagreement with a political message may be interpreted as disagreement with the religious identity of the audience itself.

Religious Narratives as Political Resources: From Civic Guidance to Electoral Mobilization

Religious communication becomes politically consequential when Islamic concepts are connected to questions of leadership, citizenship, justice, morality, and collective responsibility. Kiai and ulama have historically contributed to political education in Indonesia because their social position allows them to interpret public issues through religious and ethical frameworks. Azharghany (2022) demonstrates that the political involvement of kiai has long been connected to concepts of social welfare and collective responsibility. Digital media does not create this political role from nothing. Instead, it provides new mechanisms through

which established forms of religious political education can reach wider audiences. A sermon concerning ethical leadership can now circulate among thousands of users beyond the preacher's immediate community. The result is an expansion of the political reach of religious narratives without necessarily converting them into direct campaign messages.

The distinction between political education and electoral mobilization is essential. Political education involves providing citizens with concepts through which they can evaluate political institutions, leaders, policies, and social responsibilities. Electoral mobilization, by contrast, seeks to transform these interpretations into collective electoral behavior. A preacher discussing honesty in leadership may be engaging in civic education. A preacher identifying a specific candidate as the only morally acceptable choice is engaging in direct electoral persuasion. The boundary becomes difficult when religious criteria are presented in ways that implicitly exclude particular candidates. The digital environment intensifies this ambiguity because short videos, captions, and visual symbols can remove messages from their original context. A statement initially intended as theological reflection may subsequently circulate as an electoral endorsement. Digital communication therefore makes contextual interpretation an increasingly important element of political responsibility.

The 212 movement demonstrates how religious narratives can move rapidly from theological controversy toward collective political action. Syahputra (2020) shows that social media became an arena where debates concerning MUI's religious position and the political status of Ahok were extensively contested. Religious interpretation was not confined to formal institutions; it became part of a networked public debate. The political significance of the episode lies in the transformation of religious authority into a collective mobilizing resource. A religious statement could be interpreted, repeated, emotionally amplified, and transformed into a call for public action. The case demonstrates that electoral mobilization may develop through a chain connecting religious interpretation, digital circulation, identity formation, perceived injustice, and collective action.

Media construction also influences this process. Mujibuddin (2018) shows how media representations contributed to the construction of the 212 movement as an Islamic populist phenomenon. Digital communication does not merely transmit political messages; it contributes to defining the meaning of political events. When an issue is framed as an attack against Islam, a conflict between religious and secular interests, or a struggle between ordinary Muslims and political elites, audiences receive a particular interpretive framework. Religious preachers can reinforce or challenge such frames through sermons and social media posts. Political mobilization therefore depends not only on what religious actors say but on the broader media environment in which those messages are interpreted and circulated.

The personal authority of religious figures can amplify this framing process. Syukri and Herdiansah (2023) show that Habib Rizieq Shihab's capacity to mobilize

supporters was associated with religious authority, rhetorical ability, organizational resources, and a large follower base. This suggests that electoral mobilization cannot be explained through social media metrics alone. A preacher with millions of followers may have limited political influence if followers do not perceive the preacher as relevant to political decisions. Conversely, a religious figure with a smaller but highly committed network may exert considerable mobilizing power. The political value of digital audiences therefore depends on the quality of social ties and the degree of trust connecting the preacher to followers. Mobilization occurs when digital communication activates relationships that already possess social and emotional significance.

Political branding provides another pathway through which religious authority can enter electoral communication. Rahmat and Purnomo (2020) demonstrate how Kiai Ma'ruf Amin's Twitter presence contributed to political branding during the 2019 presidential election. The case is significant because religious identity can become part of a candidate's political image even when the candidate participates in a conventional electoral campaign. Religious authority may communicate competence, moral credibility, community representation, or familiarity with Muslim constituencies. Digital media enables these symbolic resources to be communicated directly to voters. Political branding therefore becomes more complex when candidates possess religious authority themselves or receive endorsements from influential religious figures. The resulting political image is constructed through the interaction of religious identity, personal reputation, policy messages, and digital engagement.

The use of religious symbolism can also influence how political candidates are positioned in competitive elections. Mahendra et al. (2025) demonstrate that Indonesian Islamic mass organizations use social media to communicate political identities and mobilize support. Such practices reveal that political communication occurs not only through individual preachers but also through networks of religious organizations. Organizations can provide ideological framing, collective identity, and organizational infrastructure, while preachers provide personalized communication and emotional legitimacy. When these resources converge, electoral messages can circulate through multiple layers of communication: institutional accounts, preacher accounts, community groups, and individual supporters. The result is a networked political environment in which religious identity can become embedded throughout the communication process rather than appearing only in formal campaign materials.

The role of Islamic organizations is not necessarily reducible to electoral support. Huwaidah and Masran (2023), examining MIUMI, demonstrate how religious intellectual networks combine preaching with responses to religious, social, cultural, and governmental issues. Such organizations can participate in public affairs while maintaining an emphasis on religious education. Their political influence may therefore operate through agenda formation rather than direct candidate endorsement. By determining which social issues deserve religious

attention, organizations can shape the political concerns of their audiences. This form of influence is less visible than campaign mobilization but may be equally important. Electoral choices are often preceded by longer processes of political socialization through which citizens develop understandings of justice, authority, national identity, and appropriate leadership.

Digital preaching can also create political communities among younger Muslims. Muthohirin (2021) demonstrates how social media preaching contributed to the development of the hijrah phenomenon among Muslim youth. Although hijrah is primarily a religious and lifestyle phenomenon, it can develop political implications when religious identity becomes connected to broader ideas concerning society, governance, morality, and public behavior. Hannan (2021) similarly demonstrates how Felix Siau's social media communication connects religious identity with populist themes. These examples indicate that electoral mobilization may be rooted in political identities that are constructed long before elections occur. Political communication during election periods may therefore activate identities that have already been developed through religious socialization in digital environments.

The democratic potential of religious political communication should not be overlooked. Ridho et al. (2023) demonstrate that NU's digital networks can promote inclusive narratives, religious moderation, and social harmony. Similarly, Farid (2023) shows that MUI's social media communication can strengthen religious awareness and community solidarity. These practices demonstrate that religious actors can encourage citizens to participate in public life without directing them toward a particular electoral choice. Religious political education can strengthen democracy when it emphasizes ethical leadership, social responsibility, peaceful disagreement, and respect for pluralism. The presence of religious actors in politics therefore does not necessarily constitute a democratic problem. The central issue is whether religious authority is used to expand citizens' capacity for political judgment or to replace independent judgment with obedience to a religious leader.

The problem of misinformation becomes more significant when religious authority is used to communicate political claims. Social media allows information to circulate rapidly, often without the contextual verification that would normally accompany professional journalism or institutional religious communication. Iballa and Muktafa (2024) identify the importance of religious moderation communication within Indonesia's digital religious environment, while Aslam (2025) highlights the challenge of maintaining interpretive authenticity in digital religious content. When political claims are framed as religious truths, audiences may be less inclined to question their factual basis because the message is received through an existing relationship of religious trust. The credibility of the messenger can therefore compensate for weaknesses in the evidence presented. This makes religious political communication particularly sensitive to misinformation and selective framing.

Electoral mobilization can also produce polarization when political disagreement is transformed into religious identity conflict. Hannan's (2021) analysis of Islamic populist communication illustrates how anti-establishment and identity-based narratives can organize political discourse around perceived divisions between “the people” and elites or between supposedly authentic and inauthentic Muslims. During elections, such narratives can encourage strong group identification. Political opponents may consequently be perceived not simply as competitors but as threats to religious values. This dynamic can reduce the possibility of deliberative disagreement because political compromise may be interpreted as betrayal. Religious identity becomes politically powerful precisely because it carries emotional and moral significance beyond ordinary partisan affiliation.

The distinction between political education and electoral mobilization therefore requires attention to the structure of the message, not merely the identity of the speaker. A preacher can discuss elections, democracy, political ethics, or public policy without becoming an electoral campaigner. Conversely, a seemingly religious message can function as political mobilization if it identifies particular political actors as morally illegitimate or directs followers toward a specific electoral behavior. The analytical challenge is to identify the communicative mechanism connecting religious interpretation to political action. This mechanism may involve explicit endorsement, symbolic identification, moral categorization, collective appeals, or the construction of political enemies. Understanding these mechanisms is more useful than simply classifying preachers as “political” or “non-political.”

The literature ultimately suggests that electoral mobilization through religious communication is most powerful when three conditions converge: trusted religious authority, networked digital communication, and a political context that activates collective identity. Social media provides the infrastructure, but authority provides credibility and political events provide the opportunity structure. The 212 movement illustrates this convergence particularly clearly, while the political branding of Ma'ruf Amin demonstrates how religious identity can become embedded in conventional electoral communication (Syahputra 2020; Rahmat and Purnomo 2020). The implication is that religious preachers should be understood as political communicators whose influence cannot be measured solely by whether they formally endorse candidates. Their more fundamental influence lies in shaping the moral and interpretive frameworks through which audiences evaluate political choices.

Democracy, Polarization, and the Ethics of Religious Political Influence

The participation of Islamic preachers in political communication creates both democratic opportunities and institutional risks. Religious figures possess access to

communities that may be difficult for conventional political institutions to reach. Their messages can encourage political participation, provide moral frameworks for evaluating leaders, and communicate civic responsibilities through culturally meaningful language. Said (2020) emphasizes that virtual preaching has significant implications for Indonesia's socio-political life precisely because preachers increasingly operate as cultural brokers. This capacity can strengthen democracy when religious communication encourages informed participation and public responsibility. Yet the same authority can become problematic when political preferences are presented as religious obligations. The democratic question is therefore not whether preachers should speak about politics but whether their communication expands or constrains citizens' capacity to make independent political judgments.

Religious authority can contribute to democratic citizenship by translating abstract political principles into ethical concepts familiar to religious audiences. Ideas such as justice, trustworthiness, public responsibility, consultation, and protection of the vulnerable can provide moral resources for evaluating government. Azharghany (2022) demonstrates that *kiai* political engagement has historically been associated with concepts of social concern and collective welfare. Digital media can extend this tradition by allowing religious leaders to communicate civic ethics to wider audiences. Such communication can strengthen political literacy when audiences are encouraged to evaluate policies and leaders according to substantive criteria rather than simply partisan loyalty. Religious political education can therefore complement secular forms of civic education, particularly in communities where religious institutions remain central to social life.

The democratic potential becomes especially important when religious organizations promote moderation and social cohesion. Ridho et al. (2023) show that NU's digital networks can be mobilized to disseminate inclusive narratives and respond to religious and political tensions. This demonstrates that religious influence can serve as a stabilizing force in polarized environments. Religious leaders may possess sufficient legitimacy to discourage violence, challenge misinformation, and encourage peaceful political participation. Their interventions can sometimes reach audiences that distrust governmental or mainstream media institutions. Religious authority can therefore operate as a form of social mediation. The democratic value of this mediation depends on whether religious leaders use their legitimacy to broaden dialogue or to impose a single political interpretation on their followers.

The institutional use of social media by MUI similarly illustrates the civic potential of religious communication. Farid (2023) finds that MUI's digital activities can strengthen religious awareness and community solidarity. Such communication contributes to the development of a public sphere in which religious communities remain connected despite geographical separation. When institutional religious communication emphasizes solidarity rather than partisan competition, it can strengthen social trust. This is particularly important during elections, when political

competition can fragment communities. Religious organizations can encourage their members to recognize electoral disagreement as legitimate rather than interpreting political differences as evidence of religious disloyalty. Institutional religious communication thus has the potential to reduce the social costs of political competition.

However, the same networks can become channels for polarization. Syahputra's (2020) analysis of the 212 movement demonstrates how social media can transform religious disagreement into a large-scale political controversy. Once religious interpretation becomes connected to collective identity, political disagreement can become emotionally charged. The problem is intensified when political opponents are represented as enemies of religious values. Digital platforms can accelerate this process because emotionally provocative content is easily circulated among users who already share similar identities. Polarization is therefore not simply the result of ideological disagreement; it is partly produced through communicative structures that reward emotional intensity and group affirmation. Religious actors who participate in such environments must consequently consider how their language may influence the broader political climate.

The problem of polarization also relates to the fragmentation of religious authority. Ichwan, Pabbajah, and Amin (2024) show that digitalization weakens the monopoly of traditional ulama over religious interpretation. This pluralization can be democratically valuable because citizens encounter multiple perspectives. Yet it can also create competing communities of religious certainty. Each community may regard its preferred preacher as the most authentic authority and dismiss alternative interpretations as illegitimate. Political disagreement can then become intertwined with religious competition. Rather than producing deliberative pluralism, digital fragmentation may create parallel publics that rarely engage constructively with one another. Religious political communication should therefore be evaluated not only by the diversity of voices it produces but also by the quality of interaction among those voices.

The problem of misinformation is particularly serious within fragmented religious publics. Aslam (2025) emphasizes the challenge of maintaining authenticity in digital religious interpretation, while Karimatul Ma'rifat (2025) demonstrates how religious influencers participate in Qur'anic interpretation through platforms shaped by popularity and engagement. Political information transmitted through such networks may acquire additional legitimacy when presented alongside religious knowledge. Followers may assume that a preacher's authority in religious matters extends automatically to factual claims concerning candidates, government policy, or electoral events. This creates an epistemic risk because religious credibility and political factual accuracy are not identical. Democratic citizenship requires mechanisms through which audiences can distinguish moral interpretation from empirical claims and verify political information independently.

Digital communication also encourages the commercialization of religious authority. Nawaf (2025) demonstrates that personal branding and audience interaction can become part of the negotiation of digital religious legitimacy. Commercialization does not automatically invalidate religious communication. Preachers require resources to produce content, maintain teams, travel, and operate digital platforms. The problem emerges when economic incentives encourage sensationalism or political controversy because such content generates greater engagement. If political outrage increases views, shares, or donations, the commercial logic of platforms may reward increasingly polarized religious messaging. Religious authority can consequently become entangled with attention economics, creating incentives that may conflict with the ethical responsibilities of political communication.

The relationship between celebrity and religious authority illustrates this tension. Popular preachers may become media personalities whose influence extends beyond conventional preaching. The 2025 study of Habib Syech Assegaf, for example, demonstrates how social media communication is designed to attract attention, facilitate understanding, and encourage audience acceptance (Muharni, Bukhori, and Nasution 2025). While effective communication is not inherently problematic, the emphasis on audience acceptance raises an important question about the balance between persuasion and critical engagement. Religious communication becomes democratically valuable when audiences remain capable of questioning and interpreting messages independently. Persuasion becomes politically problematic when emotional attachment to a celebrity preacher substitutes for substantive evaluation of political claims.

The position of preachers during elections therefore requires an ethical distinction between influence and coercion. Religious leaders inevitably influence their followers because their social role involves teaching and moral guidance. Influence becomes problematic when followers are encouraged to treat a political choice as a religious obligation that cannot legitimately be questioned. Such communication can reduce political pluralism because citizens may feel that choosing an alternative candidate represents a failure of religious loyalty. Democratic elections depend on the recognition that multiple political choices can be legitimate. Religious communication should therefore provide moral criteria for evaluating leadership without transforming those criteria into mechanisms of compulsory political conformity.

The experience of Kiai Ma'ruf Amin illustrates the complexity of this boundary. Rahmat and Purnomo (2020) show how his religious identity was incorporated into digital political branding during the 2019 presidential campaign. Because Ma'ruf Amin possessed both religious authority and political candidacy, his digital communication necessarily operated at the intersection of religious and electoral communication. The case demonstrates that the boundary between religious authority and political representation can become institutionally blurred. A religious figure who enters electoral politics does not cease to be a religious

authority, while political audiences may interpret religious identity as an electoral resource. This situation makes transparency particularly important: audiences should be able to distinguish theological arguments, personal political preferences, organizational positions, and formal campaign messages.

The challenge becomes more complicated when religious actors communicate about elections without formal candidacy. Their influence may be even less visible because it occurs through informal endorsement, symbolic narratives, or moral categorization. Syukri and Herdiansah (2023) demonstrate that charismatic religious figures can mobilize large groups through a combination of authority, rhetoric, organizational capacity, and digital communication. Such influence does not require a formal political office. Indeed, the absence of institutional accountability can make informal religious political influence particularly difficult to regulate. The appropriate democratic response is therefore not necessarily legal prohibition but greater transparency, media literacy, and public awareness concerning the difference between religious guidance and electoral persuasion.

The hybrid nature of contemporary political communication provides a useful framework for understanding these developments. Islamic preachers operate across multiple communicative environments: sermons may be delivered offline, recorded for YouTube, summarized on Instagram, discussed in WhatsApp groups, reported by news organizations, and incorporated into electoral campaigns. Mahendra et al. (2025) demonstrate that Islamic organizations increasingly use social media as part of broader political communication strategies. Political influence consequently emerges through interactions between digital and offline networks rather than within social media alone. A preacher's online statement may mobilize followers because it is connected to mosque networks, pesantren communities, Islamic organizations, or local political structures. Electoral mobilization should therefore be analyzed as a hybrid process combining digital visibility with established social institutions.

The democratic implications ultimately depend on how religious authority is integrated into political communication. When preachers provide civic education, encourage ethical leadership, challenge misinformation, and promote peaceful participation, their influence can strengthen democracy. When they use religious legitimacy to delegitimize opponents, spread unverifiable claims, intensify identity conflict, or impose electoral preferences as religious obligations, the same authority can undermine pluralism. The literature examined in this study indicates that neither outcome is technologically predetermined. Social media provides communication infrastructure, while political consequences depend on the norms, narratives, organizations, and actors that use it. The central ethical requirement is therefore accountability: religious influence should remain compatible with citizens' freedom to deliberate, disagree, and make electoral decisions independently.

A democratic framework for religious political communication should consequently distinguish religious political education from direct electoral mobilization. Religious political education expands citizens' capacity to understand politics through ethical and civic concepts. Direct electoral mobilization seeks to convert religious trust into specific political behavior. The former can enrich democratic participation when it promotes critical reflection and pluralism; the latter requires greater scrutiny because it can blur the boundary between religious authority and political persuasion. This distinction does not imply that religious actors must withdraw from public affairs. Instead, it recognizes that democratic systems benefit from religious voices while requiring those voices to respect political equality. Islamic preachers can remain important public educators without becoming unquestionable electoral authorities.

Conclusion

The digitalization of Islamic preaching has transformed the political significance of religious authority in Indonesia. Social media enables preachers to communicate beyond traditional geographical and institutional boundaries, while audience engagement, visibility, personal branding, and algorithmic circulation increasingly participate in the construction of religious legitimacy. The resulting authority is hybrid: traditional scholarship, organizational affiliation, charisma, digital performance, and audience recognition interact in determining influence. Research on virtual preaching, Gus Baha, Hanan Attaki, Felix Siau, female ulama, and institutional religious communication demonstrates that digital platforms have not eliminated traditional religious authority but have reorganized how it is produced, recognized, and circulated (Said 2020; Muthohirin 2021; Rohmatulloh, As'ad, and Malayati 2022; Subchi et al. 2022). Religious preachers have therefore become significant actors in Indonesia's hybrid political communication environment.

The study further demonstrates that religious authority can contribute to democratic participation through civic education but can also become a resource for electoral mobilization and polarization. The experience of the 212 movement, the political branding of Kiai Ma'ruf Amin, and the mobilizing influence of charismatic religious figures demonstrate how religious narratives can move from moral interpretation toward collective political action (Syahputra 2020; Rahmat and Purnomo 2020; Syukri and Herdiansah 2023). At the same time, the digital fragmentation of authority creates challenges involving misinformation, interpretive authenticity, commercialization, and polarization (Ichwan, Pabbajah, and Amin 2024; Karimatul Ma'rifat 2025; Nawaf 2025). The distinction between religious political education and direct electoral mobilization is consequently essential. Religious actors can strengthen democracy when they encourage ethical reasoning, tolerance, and informed participation, but their influence becomes problematic when religious legitimacy is used to constrain political choice or portray electoral disagreement as religious disloyalty.

Future research should investigate religious political communication through longitudinal and comparative studies across elections, platforms, regions, and Islamic organizational traditions. Particular attention should be given to how audiences interpret political messages delivered by preachers and whether religious endorsement actually changes voting behavior or primarily reinforces preferences that already exist. Further research should also examine the role of TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and emerging platform ecosystems in producing different forms of religious-political influence. Comparative research between traditional kiai, celebrity preachers, female ulama, institutional religious organizations, and independent Muslim influencers could clarify whether different forms of authority generate different political outcomes. Finally, future scholarship should develop more precise indicators for distinguishing civic religious education from electoral persuasion and should investigate how digital literacy, platform governance, religious institutions, and electoral regulations can preserve the positive contribution of Islamic religious communication while limiting misinformation, polarization, and coercive forms of electoral mobilization.

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