



Moral Flexibility in the Conduct of PKS and PKB Muslim Politicians in West Java (2023–2025)

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Abstract: This study aims to examine the mechanisms of moral disengagement and moral flexibility in the political behavior of religious actors in post-reform Indonesia. Moral disengagement is defined as a socio-cognitive process that enables individuals to commit unethical actions without experiencing internal moral conflict, while moral flexibility refers to the contextual and situational application of moral values. Employing a qualitative method with a critical discourse analysis approach, this research analyzes political texts, speeches, ideological documents, and religious narratives that reflect power practices. The research scope includes religion-based political actors and Indonesia's democratic public sphere. The findings indicate that moral disengagement is institutionalized through euphemistic language, moral justification, and diffusion of responsibility, whereas moral flexibility operates as an adaptive mechanism that alleviates tension between normative values and political interests. The main challenges involve the lack of empirical psychological data and the complexity of discourse interpretation. This study recommends strengthening critical ethical literacy and promoting political leadership models grounded in moral accountability. This research provides a conceptual integration of moral disengagement and moral flexibility within the context of religious politics in Indonesia, contributing to the expansion of moral psychology into the sociology of power.

Keywords: democracy; ethics; moral disengagement; moral flexibility; political psychology; religious politics.

1. Introduction

Morality is a normative measure used by society to judge whether an action is right or wrong, good or bad, in both the personal and socio-political spheres. In the context of Indonesian politics, morality is often a marginalized variable, as political practices are more often driven by a focus on power, electoral victory, and short-term pragmatic interests than by considerations of public ethics. This phenomenon is evident in various political contests, where political actors frequently employ manipulative strategies such as money politics, smear campaigns, disinformation, hoaxes, and the exploitation of identity sentiments to gain mass support. These practices demonstrate that politics is no longer positioned as a space for ethical deliberation to fight for the public interest, but rather as an arena for free struggle that justifies any means (Hawing & Hartaman, 2021). In this situation, political ethics no longer functions as a normative guideline, but is reduced to symbolic rhetoric used only during campaigns and abandoned once power has been achieved (Mukhtar, 2021a). This condition indicates a moral crisis in the political system, in which the boundaries between personal, party, and public interests blur, leading politicians to often fail to make ethical decisions when faced with power dilemmas.

Conceptually, morality is not merely a set of external rules but an internal system of awareness that guides individuals in assessing and controlling their actions. Morality originates from the word *mores*, meaning custom or tradition, which later developed into an evaluative principle about how humans should act (Maiwan, 2018). Morality simultaneously involves cognitive, affective, and

behavioral dimensions, so that moral individuals not only know what is good but also have an inner drive to do it (Septiana et al., 2021). From a moral psychology perspective, the formation of moral behaviour involves the process of analysing situations, assessing values, selecting actions, and consistently implementing those actions. However, in socio-political practice, this process is often distorted by structural pressures, group interests, and power incentives that encourage individuals to adjust their moral standards for personal or collective gain (Septiana et al., 2021). This explains why politicians who normatively understand ethical values can still commit immoral acts when they are in a power system that is permissive of violations (Mukhtar, 2021b).

Moral disengagement refers to a psychological mechanism that allows individuals to justify unethical actions through various cognitive strategies such as moral justification, euphemistic labeling, favorable comparisons, shifting responsibility, and dehumanizing the victim (Thornberg, 2023). Through this mechanism, individuals can disconnect from their moral standards and actual behavior, weakening, or even eliminating, feelings of guilt and self-control. In a political context, moral disengagement explains how politicians can engage in corruption, manipulation, and ethical violations without experiencing significant internal conflict, because these actions have been cognitively reconstructed as "political strategy," "systemic demands," or even "in the public interest." Research shows that moral disengagement is positively correlated with fraudulent and unethical behavior in organizations, including political and government institutions (Septiana et al., 2021).

In Indonesia, various empirical data indicate that the degradation of political morality is not a sporadic phenomenon, but rather a recurring structural pattern. The practice of money politics remains a dominant strategy in regional and legislative elections, despite being formally prohibited by regulations (Hawing & Hartaman, 2021). Meanwhile, cases of political corruption continue to rise, with the majority of perpetrators coming from the political elite holding strategic positions in the legislative and executive branches. Data from the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) shows that hundreds of politicians have been implicated in corruption cases in the past two decades, ranging from members of the House of Representatives (DPR), regional heads, to political party leaders (Sariyanti et al., 2024). Furthermore, ethical violations in parliament are also a routine phenomenon, such as fictitious attendance records, inappropriate behavior during sessions, and conflicts of interest in public policymaking (Mukhtar, 2021a). These facts indicate that the Indonesian political system suffers from a serious moral deficit, where legal and ethical norms fail to effectively constrain the behavior of political actors.

Interestingly, this moral degradation also occurs among Muslim politicians who ideologically use Islam as a source of values and guidelines for political ethics. Islamic parties such as the National Awakening Party (PKB) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) explicitly affirm their commitment to political morality, honesty, justice, and public responsibility. PKB, for example, adopts the Islamic values of *Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah* as the moral basis of its struggle, while maintaining Pancasila as the formal state ideology, thereby positioning Islam as a source of substantive ethics rather than state law (Dhakhiri & Djafar, 2015). PKS, on the other hand, develops an identity as an ideological Islamic party that seeks to integrate sharia values with modern democratic mechanisms through a strategy of inclusion, moderation, and a political egalitarian approach (Sulaeman et al., 2022). However, in practice, both parties remain engaged in pragmatic political dynamics that often demand moral compromise to maintain their existence and power.

This is where a major paradox emerges: Muslim politicians invoke religious symbols as a source of moral legitimacy, yet are simultaneously trapped within a logic of power that normalizes unethical practices. They find themselves in a tension between the idealism of Islamic ethics and the competitive, transactional, and intrigue-filled political reality. In this situation, religious symbols are often used as political capital to build a moral image in the public eye, while their internal practices do not always reflect the claimed values (Akbar et al., 2019). This situation raises a critical question: to what extent is the political morality claimed by Muslim politicians truly internalized in their actual behavior, and to what extent does it merely serve as a symbolic strategy to gain electoral support (Wahyudi, 2022).

Theoretically, the discourse on political morality in Indonesia is also influenced by two extreme poles: a normative-ethical approach that emphasises the integration of religion and politics (high politics), and a sceptical-relativistic approach that views morality as a subjective construct. The high politics approach, as developed by figures such as Gus Dur and Amien Rais, positions religion as a source of ethical values to limit power, fight for social justice, and protect minority groups (Yusdania, 2023). However, on the other hand, the sceptical approach, as represented by the Pyrrhonic tradition, rejects claims of absolute moral truth and emphasizes the relativity of values in complex social contexts (Ardiwinata et al., 2024). The tension between these two approaches reflects a fundamental dilemma in contemporary political ethics: whether morality should be positioned as a binding universal principle or as a flexible construct always subject to the context of power.

The main research gap in this study lies in the lack of empirical research specifically examining the moral flexibility of Muslim politicians in everyday political practice, particularly in the context of Islamic parties such as the National Awakening Party (PKB) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS). Most previous research remains normative, ideological, or descriptive, focusing on party doctrine, ideological platforms, and religious discourse in politics, without delving deeply into how Muslim politicians concretely negotiate moral values when faced with pressures of power, party interests, and electoral demands (Dhakhiri & Djafar, 2015). Furthermore, studies on moral disengagement in the Indonesian political context are still very limited, even though this concept offers a strong analytical framework for understanding the cognitive justifications behind politicians' unethical behavior (Septiana et al., 2021).

Based on these conditions, the main objective of this study is to analyze the moral and ethical flexibility of Muslim politicians, particularly those from the National Awakening Party (PKB) and the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS), in dealing with the dynamics of political power. This study aims to identify how Islamic moral values are practiced, negotiated, or even negated in concrete political actions, both in relations with the community and within the party's internal structure. Furthermore, this study aims to uncover the mechanisms of moral disengagement used by Muslim politicians to justify pragmatic actions, and to evaluate the extent to which religious symbols function as ethical commitments or merely as instruments of political legitimacy. Thus, this study is expected to contribute not only to the development of Islamic political ethics theory but also to provide a critical understanding of the moral realities of politics in contemporary Indonesia.

2. Research Method

This research uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to analyze the moral behavior of Muslim politicians from the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) in West Java for the 2023–2025 period. The study focuses on the phenomenon of moral flexibility in political practice, particularly when political actors face a dilemma between the ideals of moral values and the strategic demands of power. This study views political behavior as a meaningful social action, thus analyzing it through the subjective understanding of actors, the dynamics of party structures, and the surrounding social context (Sugiyono, 2018a).

The theoretical framework used refers to Max Weber's theory of social action, which distinguishes between instrumental rational action, value-oriented rational action, traditional rational action, and affective rational action. This perspective is combined with the theories of cognitive dissonance (Festinger), moral disengagement (Bandura), and moral flexibility (Bartels) to explain how politicians negotiate the tension between internal moral beliefs and external political interests. Cognitive dissonance is understood as a state of psychological discomfort resulting from inconsistencies in attitudes and actions, which encourages individuals to rationalize. Moral disengagement explains the mechanism of releasing moral control through justification, shifting responsibility, and attribution of blame, while moral flexibility shows that changes in moral decisions are situational and adaptive, not merely a form of hypocrisy.

Research data was obtained from social situations encompassing political actors, venues, and activities (Sugiyono, 2018b). The sampling technique used theoretical sampling with six key

informants, consisting of three PKS elites and three PKB elites at the provincial level. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentation in the form of party archives, scientific publications, and digital media. Interviews were used to explore the subjective meanings and moral strategies of actors, while documents served as a source of triangulation to reconstruct political practices and moral narratives constructed by politicians.

The research was conducted at the West Java Regional Leadership Council of PKS and PKB in Bandung, representing the dynamics of contemporary Islamic politics at the provincial level. The location was chosen based on the electoral significance of the two parties and the intensity of the role of their political elites in shaping moral, ethical, and power discourse in the public sphere.

3. Research Results and Discussion

3.1. Moral Disengagement Theory in Social Psychology

The theory of moral disengagement in social psychology provides a sharp conceptual framework for understanding how humans who are fundamentally committed to moral values can commit unethical, harmful, and even inhumane acts without feeling deeply guilty. Moral disengagement is not the absence of morals, but rather a cognitive and affective process that allows individuals to temporarily suspend self-control mechanisms, so that violations of internal moral standards no longer trigger significant inner conflict (Bembenutty, 2023). From a recent perspective in social psychology, moral disengagement is understood as a dynamic self-regulatory mechanism, in which individuals actively reconstruct the meaning of their actions to remain aligned with their self-image as good moral agents (Hussain et al., 2021). In other words, humans do not cease to be moral beings, but rather change the way their morality operates to live in peace with actions that actually conflict with their values.

Essentially, moral disengagement is rooted in the failure or weakening of the self-regulation system, namely the individual's ability to monitor, assess, and control behavior according to internalized moral standards. The self-regulation process begins with moral monitoring, namely the awareness of whether an action is in line with one's values, followed by evaluation of the consequences and action planning. If moral standards are met, individuals will experience a strengthening of self-esteem (self-reward); conversely, if they are violated, internal sanctions will arise in the form of guilt, shame, or regret (Haffajee, 2025). However, contemporary psychological research shows that this mechanism can be cognitively deactivated through a series of mental strategies that make moral violations feel subjectively acceptable (Balaskas et al., 2025). At this point, moral disengagement functions as a bridge between values and actions, allowing individuals to violate moral standards without sacrificing their identity as a good person.

In the modern social context of competition, structural pressures, and performance demands, moral disengagement has become increasingly relevant. Individuals no longer live in a simple moral space, but rather in a complex web of relationships, where ethical decisions often clash with economic, political, or social status interests. Recent studies show that moral disengagement often arises in organizational, political, and professional situations, where individuals must make difficult decisions that impact others, but are wrapped in the logic of instrumental rationality and performance targets (Johnson & Ronald Buckley, 2015). In such situations, moral violations are not perceived as mistakes, but as part of the demands of social roles, so that feelings of guilt gradually fade and are replaced by seemingly reasonable cognitive justifications.

One of the primary mechanisms of moral disengagement is moral justification, which links harmful actions to a perceived higher goal. Through this mechanism, individuals see themselves not as perpetrators of harm, but as agents of change, champions of values, or defenders of truth. Violence can be perceived as a sacrifice for justice, manipulation as a strategy for stability, and lies as a tool for the common good (Brandajs, 2025). Recent research has shown that moral justification is particularly powerful in ideological and political contexts, where moral narratives are often used to normalize ethically problematic actions (Weintraub & Gibson, 2025). In this way, morality no longer functions as a constraint on action, but as a symbolic legitimation of the violation itself.

Euphemistic labeling enhances the effect of moral justification through the power of language. Language is not simply a means of communication, but rather a cognitive medium that shapes how humans perceive reality. When harmful actions are labeled with neutral or even positive terms, their negative emotional content is significantly reduced. In the organizational world, termination of employment can be described as restructuring, violence can be described as enforcing order, and fraud can be described as optimizing resources (Ibarra & Kitsuse, 2024). Social psychology research shows that consistent use of euphemisms can decrease empathy for victims and increase tolerance for unethical behavior (Ogunfowora et al., 2025). In other words, language functions as a moral veil that makes violations seem normal and acceptable.

Advantageous comparison is also an important mechanism in moral disengagement. Through this strategy, individuals compare their actions with behaviors perceived as worse, making their offenses appear relatively minor. Someone committing a minor offense may feel less guilty because someone else has committed a greater crime. In a political context, local violence can be justified by comparing it to a more severe global tragedy (Väyrynen, 2022). Recent research suggests that this mechanism operates through the cognitive contrast effect, where moral standards shift based on the comparative context, rather than fixed normative principles (Lind, 2023). As a result, the line between right and wrong becomes relative and dependent on who is being used as a benchmark.

The shifting of responsibility and the diffusion of responsibility further weaken individuals' moral control. When responsibility is shifted to superiors, systems, or institutional orders, individuals perceive themselves as mere implementers, not decision-makers. In large organizations, responsibility is often dispersed among many actors, so no single individual feels fully at fault. Research in organizational psychology suggests that hierarchical structures and complex task allocations can increase moral disengagement, as individuals lose their sense of agency over the impact of their actions (Zhao et al., 2022). Under these conditions, moral violations are no longer perceived as personal choices, but as inevitable consequences of the system.

The mechanism of ignoring or distorting consequences also plays a crucial role in maintaining moral disengagement. Individuals tend to downplay the harmful effects of their actions or even refuse to acknowledge them altogether. When consequences are not directly visible, or the victim is socially distant, empathy weakens and guilt decreases. Recent research suggests that psychological distance from the victim increases the tendency for individuals to ignore moral consequences, particularly in digital and bureaucratic contexts (Gillingham et al., 2025). Thus, the more abstract the victim, the more likely moral disengagement is to occur.

Dehumanization is one of the most extreme mechanisms of moral disengagement, as it directly destroys the foundations of empathy. When victims are no longer viewed as fully human but rather as objects, enemies, or inferior entities, moral barriers collapse. Social history shows that mass violence is almost always preceded by a process of symbolic dehumanization, in which certain groups are labeled as threats, diseases, or subhuman beings (Kelman, 2017). Contemporary studies in political psychology confirm that dehumanization increases the legitimacy of violence and decreases moral sensitivity to the suffering of others (Lang, 2020). Under these conditions, perpetrators not only feel no guilt but also feel morally justified.

Conversely, the concept of the power of humanization suggests that empathy and personalization can limit moral disengagement. When individuals interact directly with the victim, see their facial expressions, hear their voices, and concretely experience their suffering, the moral disengagement mechanism is weakened. Research shows that interpersonal contact and personal narratives increase the activation of moral emotions, such as empathy and guilt, thereby reducing the tendency to commit cruel acts (Scaffidi Abbate et al., 2022). Humanization thus functions as a moral brake, restoring awareness that victims are human subjects, not merely objects of action.

Attribution of blame completes the chain of moral disengagement mechanisms by shifting responsibility to the victim or the circumstances. In this process, individuals perceive themselves as provoked, coerced, or placed in a situation without choice. Violence is perceived as a defensive reaction, manipulation as a result of pressure, and oppression as a response to threat (Vázquez et al., 2024). Social

psychology research shows that attribution of blame to the victim reduces guilt and increases moral justification for aggressive actions (Saladino et al., 2025). In this way, the perpetrator not only frees himself from guilt but also perceives himself as a victim entitled to fight back.

The process of moral disengagement does not occur suddenly, but rather through gradual stages. Initially, individuals may commit minor offenses that still cause discomfort. However, with repetition and normalization, the internal moral rebuke weakens. Actions that initially felt wrong become habits, then routines, and ultimately identities. Longitudinal studies show that moral disengagement is psychologically addictive, as each cognitive justification that successfully reduces guilt strengthens the tendency to repeat similar behavior in the future (Cao, 2025). At the extreme, individuals may commit cruel acts without any moral reflection at all.

In relation to moral flexibility, moral disengagement theory provides a psychological foundation that explains how moral flexibility can transform into moral disengagement. Moral flexibility, as understood in Bartels's approach, suggests that the application of moral values is highly context- and situation-dependent (Liu et al., 2022). However, when this flexibility is not constrained by robust ethical reflection, it can transform into moral disengagement, a condition in which individuals no longer simply adjust their values but completely deactivate their moral control (Botha & Freeman, 2023). Thus, moral flexibility represents a gray area, while moral disengagement represents a dark area, where moral values no longer function as a compass but rather as symbolic ornaments that lose their control.

Moral disengagement theory suggests that the primary problem with human morality lies not in the absence of values, but rather in the human cognitive ability to negotiate, postpone, and even deactivate those values for the sake of specific interests (Bandura, 2017b). Morality is not an automatic system, but rather a psychological struggle field that is constantly negotiated between drives, interests, social pressures, and self-identity. In the complex contemporary social world, moral disengagement is both an adaptive and dangerous mechanism, as it allows humans to survive psychologically, but at the high cost of the erosion of empathy, responsibility, and humanity itself (Falla et al., 2023). This is where morality is no longer simply about knowing what is right, but about having the courage to remain disturbed by what is wrong.

3.2. Moral Flexibility

Moral flexibility, according to Daniel M. Bartels, refers to the view that individuals cannot always be judged “immoral” or “hypocritical” when the same moral values are applied differently in different situational contexts. In other words, even if an individual holds a relatively stable set of moral principles, their practical application is strongly influenced by external conditions, social pressures, ethical dilemmas, and the anticipated consequences of an action (Bartels et al., 2015). Bartels asserts that this moral inconsistency does not necessarily reflect hypocrisy but rather indicates an adaptive, context-dependent moral nature. In complex situations, individuals often make moral adjustments in response to conflicts between normative demands and social reality. This also reveals the limitations of overly rigid ethical approaches, particularly deontology, which assumes the absolute applicability of moral rules in all situations (Cushman et al., 2013).

In normative ethics discourse, the debate between consequentialism and deontology serves as an important framework for understanding moral flexibility. Consequentialism assesses the morality of actions based on their outcomes or consequences, so an action is considered right if it produces the greatest benefit for the greatest number of people (Horta et al., 2022). In contrast, deontology emphasizes moral obligations and rules that must be obeyed regardless of the consequences, such as the prohibitions against killing or lying, which must not be violated under any circumstances (Sola, 2023). In practice, individuals often exhibit patterns of thinking closer to utilitarianism—the main variant of consequentialism—especially when faced with emergency situations that require choosing the action with the greatest social impact, even if it means sacrificing certain moral principles.

This phenomenon is even more evident in the context of ethical dilemmas, situations in which someone must choose between two courses of action that each carry serious moral implications.

Research in moral psychology shows that individuals tend to be more utilitarian when the focus is on the end result, but become more deontological when attention is paid to the nature of the action itself, particularly when the action involves direct violence against another individual (Bostyn et al., 2022). Thus, human moral judgment is determined not only by the normative principles held, but also by situational framing, emotions, and perceptions of agency and responsibility.

Furthermore, the concept of protected values explains why individuals often disregard considerations of consequences when dealing with certain values considered sacred or non-negotiable, such as human rights, family life, or religious beliefs (Lepore & Cunningham, 2024). In these circumstances, moral decisions are no longer calculative but are instead driven by strong normative intuitions. However, research also shows that in other contexts, individuals are willing to transgress moral boundaries to achieve outcomes deemed more socially optimal. This pattern indicates that moral judgment is situational and dynamic, with individuals shifting between deontological and consequentialist logics depending on the context, the focus of attention, and the pressures they face (Bartels et al., 2015). Thus, moral flexibility represents the psychological reality of human moral decision-making, which is never completely consistent but always negotiated within the space between principles, emotions, and practical interests.

3.3. National PKS and PKB Profile–West Java

The history of the birth of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) cannot be separated from the momentum of the collapse of the New Order in 1998, a political event that not only opened the floodgates of electoral democracy but also liberated long-suppressed ideological expression, including Islamic political aspirations. PKS emerged from the *campus da'wah* movement, which grew since the 1970s as a cultural response to the Soeharto regime's political repression of political Islam, particularly after the dissolution of Masyumi and the marginalization of Islamic figures within the state power structure (Suryana, 2021). PKS's early roots can be traced to the Islamic education network, the Campus Da'wah Institute, and Muslim student activism, which utilized campus mosques as spaces for the articulation of Islamic ideology and incubators for political cadres. The transformation of the Justice Party into PKS in 2002 marked a strategic shift from an exclusively ideological party to an open party that sought to bridge Islamic idealism with the realities of electoral democracy. In this context, PKS does not merely position itself as an Islamic party, but rather as a *da'wah* party that integrates religious morality into the ethos of political professionalism, with the slogan 'clean, caring, and professional' as an ethical narrative continuously reproduced in the public sphere.

Unlike the PKS, which emerged from the modernist traditions of campuses and the transnational Islamic education movement, the PKB grew from the cultural roots of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and the Nahdlatul Ulama tradition, which from the outset positioned religion as a source of social ethics, not as a state ideology. The PKB declaration on July 23, 1998, by NU kiai, with Gus Dur as its central figure, reflected the historical desire of the *santri* (Islamic students) to return to the political arena after a long withdrawal from practical politics following the New Order party fusion. The PKB did not emerge from the womb of the educated urban middle class like the PKS, but from a network of village kiai, traditional Islamic boarding schools, and a rural mass base that viewed politics as an extension of social service. In NU's logic, politics is not an arena for ideologization, but rather a space for endeavors to safeguard the welfare of the people, strengthen moderation, and avoid ideological extremism that has the potential to divide national unity (Gema et al., 2022).

These genealogical differences produce subtle yet profound ideological differences. The PKS is formally based on Islam, with a vision of making faith values the foundation of all aspects of life, including political power. From the perspective of PKS cadres, there is no dichotomy between religion and state, as Islam is understood as a total and integral system of life, governing both the private and public spheres (Suryana, 2021). Politics, in this view, is not a space for pragmatic compromise, but rather a field of *da'wah* (preaching) that demands moral consistency, adherence to collective party decisions, and a willingness to sacrifice personal ambitions for the benefit of the congregation. The

concept of *samina wa ata'na*, frequently cited within the PKS, reflects an ethos of ideological obedience, in which decisions of the syuro assembly are viewed as moral mandates that must be carried out even if they conflict with personal desires. In contrast, the PKB is formally grounded in Pancasila and positions itself as a religious nationalist party rather than an Islamic one. However, PKB's ideology remains rooted in NU's Islamic values of *tawassuth* (conscience), *tasamuh* (compassion), and *tawazun* (balance), which emphasize moderation, tolerance, and balance between religious and state interests (Gema et al., 2022). In PKB's narrative, religion is an ethical inspiration, not an ideological blueprint, so politics must prioritize universal goodness, not sectarian truth.

This ideological difference is also reflected in how the two parties interpret political dogma. For the PKS, dogma is not understood as rigid indoctrination, but rather as a continuous process of moral education, in which cadres are trained to interpret political activity as worship, a mandate from God, and a social responsibility (Suryana, 2021). Within this framework, statehood is never separated from religiosity, so public policy, legislative behavior, and even the interpersonal relationships of politicians must comply with Islamic ethics. This dogma gives rise to a normative political ethos, where corruption, manipulation, and symbolic violence are seen not simply as violations of the law, but as spiritual betrayal. In contrast, the PKB's political dogma is more cultural than normative. PKB rejects the idea of an Islamic state and a caliphate, and asserts that the Unitary State of the Republic of Indonesia (NKRI) is a state of theological and historical agreement, legitimate in accordance with the fatwas of the nation's founding scholars (Gema et al., 2022). From this perspective, religion serves as a source of morality, not as a state legal system, so politics must be conducted within a pluralistic, inclusive, and adaptive national framework to social realities.

The behavioral integrity values of Muslim politicians in the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) demonstrate how party ideology shapes the moral habitus of its cadres. In the PKS, integrity is articulated as a unity between personal character and ideological commitment, where politicians are required to display public piety consistent with private piety. Integrity is measured not only by legal compliance but also by daily practices that reflect Islamic ethics, from family relationships to political interactions (Suryana, 2021). Here, politics becomes an arena for moral proving, not simply electoral competition. Conversely, the PKB interprets integrity within the framework of universal goodness rather than theological truth. In the view of PKB politicians, goodness is an interfaith value acceptable to all, while truth is particular and potentially conflict-inducing (Gema et al., 2022). Therefore, political integrity is measured by the extent to which politicians help the weak, fight for social justice, and maintain harmonious pluralism, rather than by symbols of religiosity such as clothing or rituals.

The participation of Muslim politicians from the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) in public life also exhibits distinct yet complementary patterns. PKS tends to build a participation network through a well-organized cadre structure, encompassing various work areas such as employment, economics, and social issues, making social activities part of political outreach (Suryana, 2021). In PKS's logic, social service, labor advocacy, and disaster relief are not merely electoral strategies but manifestations of faith in action. Meanwhile, PKB relies on the legislative and executive roles of its cadres as the primary medium of participation, utilizing the state budget to address public issues, from education and health to infrastructure (Gema et al., 2022). Within this framework, participation is not always structured internally within the party but rather functionally through state institutions.

From a theoretical perspective, the differences between PKS and PKB represent two major strands of contemporary Indonesian Islamic politics: normative-ideological Islam and cultural-moderate Islam. PKS emphasizes the internalization of Islamic values as the foundation of all political activity, while PKB emphasizes the contextualization of Islamic values within a pluralistic national framework. Both claim morality as the basis of legitimacy, but with different orientations: PKS on normative piety, PKB on universal goodness. In the West Java context, this difference is even more pronounced because PKS is strong in urban areas with an educated middle-class base, while PKB is more rooted in rural areas with a strong Islamic boarding school tradition (Gema et al., 2022)

Ultimately, the profiles of PKS and PKB demonstrate that Muslim politics in Indonesia is never singular, but rather a constant negotiation between text and context, between faith and reality, between idealism and pragmatism. PKS and PKB both strive to make religion a source of public ethics, but with different strategies and articulations. PKS presents religion as an integral political ideology, while PKB presents religion as a down-to-earth moral inspiration. In Indonesia's pluralistic democratic space, the existence of these two models actually enriches the political landscape, demonstrating that Islam can be present in politics not merely as a symbol of identity, but as a source of values that are continually tested in the practice of power (Suryana, 2021).

3.4. Moral Disengagement of Muslim Politicians from PKS and PKB in West Java

The phenomenon of moral disengagement in Muslim political practices in West Java demonstrates how power operates not only through structural and institutional instruments but also through subtle psychological mechanisms often unnoticed by political actors. Within Bandura's theoretical framework, moral disengagement is understood as a series of cognitive processes that enable individuals to engage in actions contrary to their own moral values without experiencing significant guilt (Concha-Salgado et al., 2022). In the context of PKS and PKB politicians, this mechanism emerges not in the form of an overt rejection of Islamic ethics, but rather through rationalization, moral justification, euphemistic labeling, and favorable comparisons, gradually shifting the meaning of good and evil into a gray area. This is where politics becomes an arena of paradox, where purported religious piety negotiates with the logic of power, which is rife with pragmatic interests (Hidayat, 2021).

In the practice of money politics, moral disengagement is evident through the use of language that softens the meaning of actions. PKS politicians, for example, tend to reject the terms *sogokan* or *suap* and replace them with terms like campaign props, social media, or transportation costs, as if this shift in terminology is sufficient to alter the moral nature of the action. This kind of euphemistic labeling is a classic mechanism of moral disengagement, where language is no longer simply a means of communication but becomes an ideological instrument that shapes ways of thinking and justifies problematic practices (Bandura, 2017a). By referring to money as transportation, politicians indirectly shift the moral burden from themselves to the system, as if they were merely carrying out administrative procedures rather than manipulative practices. From a political psychology perspective, this kind of language serves to reduce the cognitive dissonance between their religious identity as pious Muslims and the political reality that demands ethical compromise.

PKB politicians exhibit a more complex pattern of moral disengagement, as justifications are based not only on language but also on utilitarian logic that prioritizes victory. Money politics is no longer viewed as an absolute violation, but rather as a balancing strategy in an already corrupted field. When an opponent gives one hundred thousand, giving twenty thousand is considered not a bribe, but a minimal effort to maintain the chance of victory. Within this framework, morality is no longer measured by the legitimacy of an action, but rather by its relative comparison with others perceived as worse (Tabroni et al., 2022). This mechanism, called advantageous comparison, justifies wrongdoing by comparing it to more extreme actions, making one's own mistakes appear minor and acceptable (Li et al., 2014). At this point, politics is no longer understood as a space for implementing Islamic values, but as a field of emergency that allows minor violations to prevent greater harm.

Moral justification is also evident when PKB politicians assert that political victory is mandatory, as only with power can one truly help society. This argument reflects a dangerous theological logic, as the instrumental value of power is used as a pretext to defer ethical principles. In more literary terms, power is treated as a path to social paradise, while minor sins along the way are seen as unavoidable costs. In Islamic ethics, the ends never justify the means, and true good is measured by the alignment of the process with moral values, not solely by the end result (Elmahjub, 2022). However, in political practice, this kind of rationalization feels more convincing, as it offers the illusion that minor transgressions can be atoned for with major policies in the future.

In the context of smear campaigns, moral disengagement emerges through the difference in meaning between smear campaigns and negative campaigns. PKS politicians tend to distinguish between the two by placing slander as a prohibited area, while disseminating information about an opponent's weaknesses is considered legitimate as long as it does not violate the law. This terminological difference reflects euphemistic labeling, where morally problematic actions are presented as rational and legal (Malik & Ryan, 2025). By calling it a negative campaign, politicians shift the focus from the ethical impact on the public to purely technical and legal aspects. In practice, the line between criticism and slander becomes blurred, as the information disseminated is often selective, disproportionate, and designed to damage the opponent's reputation.

PKB politicians, while normatively rejecting smear campaigns, also demonstrate a moral justification mechanism when they state that such practices exist but are not dominant. This statement implicitly acknowledges the existence of deviations but simultaneously neutralizes them by emphasizing the party's ideological commitment to public welfare and blessings. This mechanism is called diffusion of responsibility, where moral responsibility is not solely assumed by the individual or the party, but rather spread across the broader social system and context (Tuvo et al., 2022). In this way, mistakes are not entirely denied, but neither are they recognized as serious structural failures. Politics once again appears as a gray area, where minor mistakes are considered acceptable as long as they do not damage the party's overall image.

In corrupt practices, moral disengagement operates through favorable comparisons and attributions of blame. PKS politicians emphasize the existence of internal mechanisms such as ethics councils and sharia councils, as if the existence of these institutions were sufficient to guarantee morality. When a cadre is implicated in a case, the error is positioned as an individual weakness, rather than a structural problem with the party. This constitutes a form of displacement of responsibility, where responsibility is shifted to individual perpetrators, while the system is assumed to remain clean (Souter, 2022). However, from a political ethics perspective, the recurrence of corruption cases actually indicates institutional gaps that allow for continued irregularities.

PKB politicians exhibit a similar pattern, but with a more philosophical rationalization. Corruption is viewed as a test of faith, so individual failure is interpreted as a lack of spiritual resilience, rather than as a failure of the political system. In symbolic language, politics is depicted as a dirty pool that inevitably splashes anyone who steps into it. This metaphor reflects the naturalization of deviance, where corruption is seen as an inherent risk of power, rather than a violation to be absolutely rejected (Khaled et al., 2025). Thus, moral disengagement operates through normalization, making deviant acts appear an integral part of political reality.

Comparisons with other countries, such as Denmark, which has low levels of religiosity but low levels of corruption, also reflect the mechanism of advantageous comparison (Belhaj Slimene et al., 2024). By comparing the religious but corrupt context of Indonesia, politicians seem to want to demonstrate that religion is not a primary determinant of moral behavior. This argument implicitly absolves individuals of ethical responsibility, as deviance is seen as a structural phenomenon that transcends personal capacity. Within the framework of moral disengagement, such comparisons serve to reduce guilt and reinforce permissive attitudes toward corruption (Lişman & Holman, 2022).

In the practice of collusion, moral disengagement emerges through the linguistic ambiguity surrounding open, secret cooperation. PKS politicians reject the term "collusion" but acknowledge the existence of cooperation with ministries and companies. The use of the term "cooperation" instead of "*persekongkolan*" reflects euphemistic labeling, where potentially unethical practices are presented as legal and beneficial (Clarke et al., 2025). Language once again becomes an ideological tool that blurs the line between public interest and group interests. PKB politicians, while emphasizing the principle of openness, are not entirely free from ambiguity, as transparency often stops at the level of rhetoric, while practices on the ground remain difficult to verify.

The moral disengagement of Muslim politicians from the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) in West Java demonstrates that religious identity does not

automatically guarantee moral integrity in political practice. Instead, religiosity is often used as a symbolic resource to strengthen moral justifications for problematic actions. More reflectively, religion has transformed from an ethical compass into an ideological shield, protecting political actors from guilt and public criticism (Hidayat, 2021). Herein lies the greatest paradox of contemporary Islamic politics: transcendental values that should curb the desire for power are instead negotiated for pragmatic interests.

Moral disengagement is not simply an individual issue, but also a structural issue of political culture that is permissive of deviation. As long as victory is considered more important than the process, as long as language is used to obscure reality, and as long as moral responsibility is shifted to the system or opponents, politics will continue to be a space for ethical compromise. In this context, PKS and PKB cannot be understood as single actors who are entirely guilty or wholly innocent, but rather as part of a political ecosystem that normalizes moral ambiguity. Muslim politics in West Java, for all its rhetorical beauty, still grapples with the tension between religious idealism and the realism of power, between the light of values and the shadow of interests (Tabroni et al., 2022). It is in this space that moral disengagement finds its home, not as a momentary aberration, but as a survival mechanism in a political world that continually demands compromise.

3.5. Moral Flexibility in the Behavior of PKS and PKB in West Java

The phenomenon of moral flexibility in the behavior of Muslim politicians from the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) in West Java cannot be understood simply as an individual ethical deviation, but rather as a structural dynamic born of the encounter between normative Islamic idealism and the pragmatic reality of democratic politics, rife with negotiation of interests. Morality, in this context, no longer stands as a rigid, absolute construct of values, but rather as a constantly evolving field of interpretation, shaped by the currents of the situation, electoral pressures, and strategic calculations faced by political actors. At this point, morality is not only a principle held in faith but also a symbolic resource negotiated to maintain legitimacy before the public while maintaining position in the competitive arena of power (Mukhtar, 2021a). Moral flexibility becomes a kind of survival mechanism, an art of compromise between what should be and what is possible, between ideal demands and the limitations of political reality that demands speed, flexibility, and the ability to read the winds of power.

In practical decision-making, pragmatism is the most visible manifestation of moral flexibility. PKS and PKB politicians in West Java often find themselves in a dilemma that forces them to choose between value consistency and political effectiveness. Cross-ideological coalitions, for example, illustrate how moral principles, initially asserted normatively, must negotiate with pressing electoral demands. Alliances with parties that have a secular orientation or even conflict with the ideological values of Islamic parties are no longer viewed as a betrayal of values, but rather as strategic moves to ensure continued power and access to political resources (Wahyudi, 2022). In this logic, morality is not abandoned but redefined as the ability to choose the path most likely to yield long-term political benefits, even if it means sacrificing ideals previously held dear.

Changes in morality based on situation and context are also strongly evident in local politics in West Java, a region with a distinctive cultural character, where social harmony, polite language, and emotional closeness with constituents are crucial for building trust. PKS and PKB politicians often adapt their moral stances to local sensitivities, so that political decisions are not always based on strict ideological principles, but rather on more fluid social considerations. In this context, morality becomes dynamic, shifting to maintain good relations with religious figures, traditional leaders, and cultural networks that have significant influence over community political preferences (Nurjaman, 2021). When ideological values clash with local aspirations, politicians tend to choose a path of compromise, putting constituent interests above more abstract normative commitments, in order to maintain stable political support.

Moral flexibility is also evident when politicians face ambiguous political dilemmas, particularly in internal party conflicts or when deciding on a stance on controversial national policies. In such

situations, a deontological approach that demands absolute adherence to norms is often trumped by a utilitarian approach that emphasises practical consequences. PKS and PKB politicians tend to calculate the social, economic, and electoral impacts of each decision, then choose the option deemed most politically advantageous, even if it means suspending some of their moral values (Maiwan, 2018). This is where morality transforms into an instrument of instrumental rationality, a logic of action that measures goodness not by the purity of intentions, but by the results achieved in a political landscape full of uncertainty.

Political strategies that adapt to changing social values further emphasize that morality in politics never exists in a vacuum. Issues of religion, social welfare, and economic justice are often central to campaign narratives, but the underlying moral substance continues to shift with changing public tastes and power dynamics. PKS and PKB politicians respond not only to internal party ideological demands but also to pressures from public opinion, social media, and global discourse on democracy and human rights (Sariyanti et al., 2024). In this context, moral flexibility becomes an adaptive strategy for staying relevant, reinterpreting old values to suit the times without explicitly acknowledging a shift in principles.

The biggest challenge of moral flexibility is moral consistency itself. Politicians often find themselves trapped in situations where they must defend certain values in one context, but abandon them in another for practical reasons. This inconsistency is not always recognized as an ethical problem, as every decision is framed within a rationalized narrative that appears politically sound. In the long run, this pattern has the potential to breed moral fatigue, where the line between right and wrong becomes increasingly blurred, replaced by more pragmatic questions about whether an action is effective (Mukhtar, 2021b). Morality is no longer a compass, but a flexible map that can be folded and unfolded as the political journey demands.

Politicians' views on moral violations also demonstrate a high degree of flexibility. Violations are not always understood as absolute wrongdoing, but rather as part of the adaptation process in the face of structural pressures and political competition. In many cases, PKS and PKB politicians construct moral justifications that emphasize the good intentions and noble goals behind problematic actions. Pragmatic coalitions, policy compromises, and even practices normatively considered unethical are often justified in the name of the public interest or long-term political stability (Wahyudi, 2022). Here, morality functions as a narrative of legitimacy, not as a clear boundary that must not be crossed.

Social and political pressures reinforce this tendency. In a competitive political arena, politicians feel compelled to adapt to the prevailing logic of the game. Constituent support, relationships with party elites, and competition with other actors create a situation where moral compromise becomes almost inevitable. Moral flexibility is no longer an option, but a structural requirement for survival in a political system that values success by gaining votes and access to power, rather than solely by ethical integrity (Nurjaman, 2017). In such conditions, moral consistency is often sacrificed for political efficiency.

The utilitarian approach to decision-making further reinforces this pattern. PKS and PKB politicians often weigh actions based on calculations of the greatest benefit for the largest group, even if it means violating certain moral principles. Party stability, electoral victory, and the continuity of social programs are the primary justifications for sacrificing deontological values that demand absolute adherence to norms. In this logic, morality becomes a negotiable variable, not an inviolable foundation (Atari & Zewail, 2025). The end result is an increasingly instrumental politics, where ethical values are reduced to tools for achieving strategic goals.

The difficulty in maintaining moral consistency is also closely related to the instrumental rationality that dominates politicians' thinking. This rationality drives political actors to always seek the most effective means to achieve their goals, often ignoring deeper ethical dimensions. In practice, the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) utilize instrumental rationality to design campaign strategies, build coalitions, and manage their public image. However, when this rationality is not framed by political ethics, it has the potential to give rise to a distortion of

democracy, where victory becomes the primary goal without considering the quality of the process (García-Marzá & Calvo, 2024). Politics then becomes a space of cold calculation, rather than an arena of moral devotion.

In this context, moral flexibility can be understood as a process of moral adaptation born from the complex interaction between Islamic values, the pragmatic demands of democracy, and the local socio-cultural realities of West Java. Moral flexibility is not entirely synonymous with moral degradation, but it is also inseparable from the risk of serious ethical erosion. It serves as a mechanism for negotiating values, a middle ground that allows politicians to maintain moral legitimacy while simultaneously maintaining power. However, this middle ground is fragile, as it can easily degenerate into a permanent justification for repeated deviations (Wahyudi, 2022).

The central paradox of contemporary Islamic politics lies in the fact that parties that ideologically emphasize morality are engaged in intense value compromise. Religious symbols and narratives are strategically used to construct an image of piety, while political actions on the ground often follow pragmatic logics that contradict normative ideals. This research does not stop at assessing right and wrong, but seeks to understand how moral flexibility is produced, justified, and maintained as a survival strategy in a political system that demands relentless flexibility (Maiwan, 2018).

The proposed idea from this research is that Muslim politicians need to find a middle ground between ideals and rationality, not by normalizing moral violations, but by minimizing them through ongoing ethical reflection. Moral flexibility is acceptable only if accompanied by self-control mechanisms, awareness of long-term impacts, and a commitment not to make it a habit. Without boundaries, moral flexibility has the potential to breed empathy blindness, where politicians lose sensitivity to human values and become trapped in an insatiable ambition for power (Mukhtar, 2021b).

patterns of moral flexibility. Advice, role models, and pressure from the environment can create opportunities for increasingly legitimate moral violations. Therefore, contextual and cultural restrictions within parties need to be strengthened to prevent moral flexibility from degenerating into limitless permissiveness. This is where this research emerges, positioning moral flexibility not simply as a degradation of ethics but as a value negotiation strategy in contemporary Islamic politics, with interconnected conceptual, empirical, and contextual dimensions (Ramdani et al., 2024).

Conceptually, this research challenges the classical view that views political morality as a static entity. Empirically, a comparative study of the Prosperous Justice Party (PKS) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) in West Java reveals differences in patterns of ideological moral flexibility in PKS and cultural moral flexibility in PKB. Contextually, this research links moral flexibility to local dynamics, the relationship between ulama and politicians, and the practice of Islamic identity politics. Thus, moral flexibility is not merely an individual phenomenon, but a reflection of a political ecosystem that normalizes compromise as inevitable, where politics is no longer simply about right and wrong, but about how values are negotiated within the ever-changing vortex of power (Campbell et al., 2024).

4. Conclusion

This research begins with the fundamental question of how the mechanisms of moral disengagement and moral flexibility work to shape the political behavior of religious actors in the context of contemporary Indonesian democracy, particularly in the relationship between normative moral values and pragmatic practices of power. The main findings of the research indicate that moral disengagement is not merely an individual deviation, but rather a socio-cognitive process structured and institutionalized through language, symbols, authority, and religious narratives that allows political actors to normalize unethical actions without experiencing significant internal moral conflict. Moral flexibility, on the other hand, serves as a conceptual bridge that explains why individuals or groups who normatively hold high moral values can still make ethical compromises in complex political situations full of conflicting interests.

Theoretically, this research enriches the study of moral psychology and political sociology by

showing that moral disengagement cannot be understood a-historically and individualistically, but must be read as a relational phenomenon intertwined with power structures, ideologies, and institutional dynamics. The integration of Bandura's theory of moral disengagement and Bartels' concept of moral flexibility produces a new analytical framework that is more sensitive to cultural and religious contexts, while challenging the normative ethical approach that is too rigid and ahistorical in reading the political behavior of religious actors. The practical implications of this research emphasize the importance of strengthening critical moral literacy in the public sphere, particularly in political and religious circles. Ethics education should not stop at internalizing normative values but should also be directed at dismantling the cognitive mechanisms that enable the rationalization of injustice. Furthermore, these findings are relevant for policymakers, educational institutions, and religious organizations in designing leadership models that are more reflective, accountable, and oriented toward moral self-control, rather than merely symbolic legitimacy.

The limitations of this research lie in its predominantly qualitative nature and its text and discourse analysis. Therefore, it does not fully capture the psychological dynamics of actors empirically through experimental approaches or psychometric surveys. Furthermore, the scope of the research is still limited to a specific context, so generalizing the findings requires caution. Therefore, further research is recommended to develop this study through a mixed methods approach, combining discourse analysis with psychological measurements of the levels of moral disengagement and moral flexibility among political actors across ideologies and cultural backgrounds. Future research is also crucial to explore the role of digital media and algorithms in accelerating the normalization of moral disengagement in the public sphere, particularly in the context of religious populism and identity politics.

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