

Local Religious Authority and Peacebuilding: The Role of Religious Leaders in Preventing Electoral Violence in Indonesia and Beyond

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the role of religious leaders in preventing electoral and political violence across different national contexts, and to examine how religious authority contributes to the construction of social peace. The study is grounded in the concepts of moral authority, social legitimacy, and religion as an instrument of peacebuilding within political life. It employs a qualitative approach through literature review and comparative analysis of case studies from Nigeria, Uganda, Indonesia, and Guyana, focusing on the interventions of religious leaders in electoral dynamics. The findings reveal that religious leaders play a significant role in mitigating political violence through peace messaging, social mobilization, and collaboration with state institutions and civil society. However, the study also identifies key challenges, including inconsistent engagement of religious actors and the risk of religious politicization, which may undermine their constructive role. The study recommends the institutional integration of religious leaders into conflict prevention policies and the strengthening of interfaith dialogue as a long-term strategy for cultivating a peaceful political culture. This study contributes to the discourse on religion and politics by positioning religious leaders as strategic actors in peacebuilding and by proposing a collaborative framework between the state and religious actors in preventing political violence.

Keywords: democracy; elections; peacebuilding; political violence; religion; religious leaders

INTRODUCTION

General elections, as a primary instrument in a modern democratic system, are not simply interpreted as a routine five-yearly procedure, but rather as political events fraught with ethical, cultural, and symbolic dimensions intertwined with societal life. In the context of a

democratic state like Indonesia, elections serve as a vehicle for articulating popular sovereignty, where every individual has an equal right to determine the direction of political leadership through legitimate, constitutional mechanisms. However, this ideal of electoral democracy does not always align with practice on the ground. In many cases, elections become an arena of contestation involving not only the contestation of ideas and programs but also the mobilization of identities, symbolic instrumentality, and the potential for conflict that can lead to political violence. This is where the complexity of elections finds its most problematic face, particularly when the public sphere is filled with narratives that blur the line between political aspirations and social manipulation (Aspinall, 2021).

In the contemporary political landscape, the presence of religious figures is a crucial variable that cannot be ignored. They are not simply spiritual figures teaching transcendental values, but also social actors with strong moral legitimacy within society. This legitimacy does not arise from formal structures of power, but from cultural recognition built through long-standing relationships between religious figures and their communities. Therefore, the involvement of religious figures in political processes, particularly elections, is often interpreted as normal, even necessary, to maintain social stability and public morality. However, this strategic position also opens up space for political instrumentalism that can shift the prophetic role of religious figures into merely a tool for mobilizing electoral support (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020b).

The phenomenon of the politicization of religion in elections is not new, but in recent years its intensity has shown a growing trend. Religious narratives are often used to construct sharp social dichotomies, such as those between "those of the same faith" and "those of another," which ultimately has the potential to trigger social fragmentation. In this context, religious leaders are often in a dilemma: on the one hand, they have a moral responsibility to guide the congregation toward rational and ethical choices, but on the other, they are also vulnerable to being dragged into the currents of practical politics fraught with vested interests. When this boundary is blurred, what results is no longer enlightening political education, but rather the reproduction of discourse that can exacerbate horizontal conflict (Hadiz, 2022).

Furthermore, this dynamic becomes even more complex when linked to the increasing potential for political violence during the election process. Political violence is not always present in visible physical forms; it can also manifest as symbolic violence, such as hate speech, disinformation, and the delegitimization of certain groups. In many cases, this violence is fueled by the mobilization of exclusive identities, where religion is used as a legitimizing tool to attack others. In situations like this, the role of religious leaders becomes crucial, as they possess the moral authority to defuse conflict and guide society toward values of peace and tolerance (A. R. Arifianto, 2021).

However, existing studies have tended to focus more on the role of religious leaders in increasing public political participation, while their role in preventing political violence has received relatively little attention. Most research focuses on how religious leaders are used as agents of political mobilization by parties or candidates, without deeply examining how they can function as agents of conflict resolution in the electoral context. This indicates a significant research gap, particularly in understanding the normative and practical roles of religious leaders in maintaining social integrity amidst increasingly competitive political contestation (Buehler, 2020).

On the other hand, the theoretical approach used in the study of religious politics is still dominated by an instrumental perspective, which views religion solely as a tool in political

strategy. This approach tends to ignore the ethical and spiritual dimensions that are at the core of the role of religious figures. Yet, in the context of a religious society like Indonesia, these dimensions have a significant influence on shaping people's political behavior. Therefore, a more holistic approach is needed, one that views religious figures not only as political actors but also as moral agents responsible for maintaining social harmony (Menchik, 2021).

Another identifiable gap is the lack of studies specifically linking the role of religious leaders to efforts to prevent political violence within the framework of deliberative democracy. From this perspective, democracy is understood not only as an electoral mechanism but also as a process of inclusive and rational dialogue (Chambers & Warren, 2025). Religious leaders, with their capacity as moral leaders, have great potential to foster the creation of healthy deliberative spaces, where differing views can be managed constructively without leading to conflict. However, this potential has not been widely explored in the academic literature, leaving a gap that needs to be filled through more in-depth research (Vergani et al., 2022).

Based on this reality, this study seeks to fill this gap by critically examining the role of religious leaders in preventing political violence in the context of elections. This research will examine not only how religious leaders engage in the political process but also how they interpret this role within the framework of their religious values. Thus, this research is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religion and politics, particularly in the context of efforts to maintain social peace amidst the dynamics of electoral democracy.

More specifically, the purpose of this study is to analyze how religious leaders carry out their role as moral agents in preventing political violence, identify the strategies they use to mitigate conflict, and evaluate the effectiveness of this role in a pluralistic society. Furthermore, this study also aims to examine the factors influencing the success or failure of religious leaders in carrying out this role, both internal to the figures themselves and the external dynamics surrounding them.

With an approach that integrates political, sociological, and religious studies perspectives, this research is expected to not only provide academic contributions but also have practical implications in strengthening the role of religious leaders as guardians of social harmony. More broadly, this research is also expected to serve as a reference for policymakers, political practitioners, and civil society in formulating more effective strategies to prevent political violence and strengthen the quality of democracy in Indonesia.

Ultimately, elections are not just about who wins and who loses, but about how the process is conducted while upholding the values of humanity, justice, and peace. It is in this context that the role of religious leaders finds its most profound relevance, not as a tool for legitimizing power, but as guardians of the collective conscience, reminding us that politics, at its core, is about caring for life together within a framework of integrity and dignity for humanity (Latif, 2023).

In the landscape of contemporary political studies, the relationship between religion and power has become a theme that continues to undergo conceptual and empirical elaboration, particularly in the context of countries with high levels of societal religiosity such as Indonesia. Recent literature shows that religion can no longer be positioned solely as a private domain separate from public affairs, but has instead transformed into a social force with significant mobilizing power in the electoral political arena. Within this framework,

religious figures play a strategic role as mediators between normative religious values and political practices taking place at the grassroots level. A study conducted by Amin, Izomiddin, and Anisya (2023) confirms that religious figures are often key actors in increasing public political participation through their charismatic influence, so that their presence in electoral contests cannot be separated from the dynamics of shaping voters' political preferences (M. Amin et al., 2023).

However, the literature also shows that the role of religious figures in politics is not always linear and constructive. In many cases, their involvement has the potential to strengthen social polarization, especially when religion is used as an instrument of legitimacy for identity politics. Mietzner (2020) argues that in increasingly competitive electoral democracies, the politicization of identity, including religion, has become an effective strategy for consolidating mass support (Mietzner & Muhtadi, 2020a). In this context, religious figures are often positioned as symbols of moral authority used to justify certain political choices, blurring the line between *da'wah* and propaganda. This phenomenon demonstrates the ambivalence in the role of religious figures, where they can function as agents of social integration while also acting as catalysts for fragmentation (van der Tol & Gorski, 2022).

Furthermore, Aspinall (2021) highlights that the dynamics of elections in Indonesia are inextricably linked to the practice of clientelism and social network-based mobilization, including religious networks (Aspinall, 2021). Religious figures, with their loyal followings, often serve as key nodes in these networks. This strengthens their position as informal political actors with significant influence on voter behavior. However, the dominance of these networks also opens up space for practices that are not entirely in line with the principles of deliberative democracy, such as social pressure on voters or the spread of exclusionary narratives. In such situations, the potential for political violence, both physical and symbolic, increases.

Studies on political violence itself show that this phenomenon is not only triggered by structural factors such as economic inequality or weak democratic institutions, but also by cultural factors related to collective identity. Arifianto (2021) emphasized that in several cases in Indonesia, political violence has a strong religious dimension, where conflicts are triggered by narratives in the name of religion (Y. A. Arifianto, 2021). In this context, religious figures have an ambivalent position: they can be part of the problem when involved in spreading exclusive narratives, but they can also be part of the solution when acting as agents of peace emphasizing the values of tolerance and moderation.

Similarly, Hadiz (2022), in his analysis of Islamic populism, points out that religious mobilization in politics is often linked to efforts to build exclusive collective solidarity (Hadiz, 2022). This solidarity, while effective in the short term for winning political contests, has the potential to lead to long-term conflict by creating rigid social boundaries between "us" and "them" (Laohabut & Bolleyer, 2026). In this situation, the role of religious leaders is crucial in shifting the narrative from exclusivity to inclusivity, so that religion is no longer a source of conflict but rather a source of social reconciliation.

Meanwhile, Menchik (2021) offers a more normative perspective by emphasizing the concept of "tolerance without liberalism" in the Indonesian context (Menchik, 2021). He argues that tolerance in Indonesia is not always based on liberal principles of individualism, but rather on collective agreements mediated by social actors, including religious leaders. Within this framework, religious leaders play a crucial role in maintaining the balance between individual freedom and social harmony (Taufiqurrachman & Fauzi, 2023). However, this

literature has not specifically examined how this role is operationalized in the context of preventing political violence, leaving room for further exploration.

On the other hand, studies on political participation show that the involvement of religious leaders can have a positive impact on increasing public political awareness. Fadhli and Ubaidullah (2022) found that sermons and lectures delivered by religious leaders can encourage people to be more active in the democratic process, including exercising their right to vote (Fadhli & Ubaidullah, 2022). However, this research focuses more on the quantitative aspects of participation, without examining the quality of that participation in depth, particularly in relation to the potential for conflict or political violence. Thus, there is a need to integrate the perspective of political participation with analyses of social stability.

Furthermore, emerging literature over the past five years has begun to highlight the importance of a religious moderation approach as a strategy for mitigating social conflict. Wahid (2022) emphasized that religious moderation is not only a normative concept but also a social practice that requires the active involvement of religious leaders as agents of change (Wati & al-Ma'mun, 2022). In the context of elections, religious moderation can be realized through narratives that emphasize unity, justice, and respect for diversity. However, the implementation of this concept still faces various challenges, particularly in the face of digital information flows that often exacerbate polarization.

Furthermore, the development of information technology is also a significant factor influencing the dynamic role of religious leaders in politics. Social media has transformed the way religious leaders interact with their followers, while expanding their reach of influence. However, on the other hand, social media has also become a space where disinformation and hate speech can easily spread, often using religious symbols. In this situation, the ability of religious leaders to manage public communication becomes crucial, as they deal not only with local audiences but also with a broader and more complex digital public space (Lim, 2020).

Although various studies have made important contributions to understanding the relationship between religious and political figures, several gaps remain to be filled. First, most research focuses on the role of religious figures as agents of political mobilization, while their role as agents of preventing political violence has not been systematically studied. Second, the approaches used tend to be descriptive, thus failing to fully explain the mechanisms by which religious figures can influence the dynamics of conflict or peace in the context of elections. Third, the limited integration of normative religious perspectives with empirical political analysis means that existing studies fail to fully capture the complexity of the role of religious figures in social reality.

Based on these gaps, this study seeks to develop a more comprehensive analytical framework by integrating political, sociological, and religious studies perspectives. The primary focus of this research is to examine how religious leaders can play an effective role in preventing political violence, through inclusive religious narratives, conflict mediation practices, and involvement in building a peaceful political culture. Thus, this research is expected to not only provide theoretical contributions to the development of religious political studies but also have practical relevance in efforts to strengthen the quality of democracy and maintain social cohesion in Indonesia.

Ultimately, the existing literature suggests that the role of religious figures in politics is a phenomenon that cannot be simplified into a dichotomy of good and evil. It is a complex entity, whose potential is largely determined by the social, political, and cultural context in

which it operates. Therefore, understanding the role of religious figures in preventing political violence requires an approach that is not only analytical but also reflective, taking into account the ethical dimensions that lie at the heart of religious teachings. It is within this context that this research finds its relevance, as an attempt to bridge the gap between the normative ideals of religion and the reality of political practice, which is often fraught with tension and contradiction.

METHOD

The type of research used in this study is qualitative research, an approach that seeks to understand social reality in depth by exploring the meaning, context, and dynamics surrounding the phenomena being studied. This approach does not rely solely on quantitative measurements, but rather emphasizes interpretive efforts to uncover the complexity of social life as it exists in natural conditions or natural settings (Vopěnka & Trlifajová, 2024). Within this framework, reality is understood as something holistic, unfragmented, and constantly influenced by the interaction between various social, cultural, and normative variables. Therefore, qualitative research has a strong descriptive character, with analysis that tends to be inductive, namely building understanding from data to conceptual abstraction, rather than the other way around (Murdiyanto, 2020).

Furthermore, this research adopts a normative approach that focuses on the study of legal and social norms, rules, and principles relevant to the issue under study. This approach places literature as the primary source of data, thus the data collection process is carried out through a systematic and comprehensive library study. The data used in this study is secondary, including laws and regulations, scientific books, journal articles, and various other academic documents relevant to the theme of the role of religious leaders in preventing political violence. Through this literature review, the researchers seek to build a robust analytical framework and identify patterns of thought developing in contemporary academic discourse (Kornelius Benuf dan Muhamad Azhar, 2020).

In practice, data collection techniques involve identifying, classifying, and analyzing various literature sources related to the research object. This process involves not only an inventory but also a source critique to ensure the validity and relevance of the data used (Davison, 2023). Therefore, this research does not simply present a compilation of literature but also attempts to critically synthesize various existing perspectives, thus yielding a deeper and more comprehensive understanding.

The data analysis technique in this study was conducted using a qualitative analysis approach, which includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction was carried out by selecting and focusing information relevant to the research objectives, while data presentation was carried out in a systematic and argumentative narrative form. Furthermore, conclusions were drawn inductively by linking the findings obtained with the theoretical framework used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Through these stages, it is hoped that the research will produce an analysis that is not only descriptive but also has interpretive depth that can explain the phenomenon more fully.

With such a methodological approach, this research is expected to be able to provide a significant academic contribution in understanding the role of religious figures in preventing political violence, while also offering a new, more integrative perspective between the normative and empirical dimensions in socio-religious studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Role

The global environmental crisis, which has reached a "boiling" intensity, demands a deeper and more transformative response than mere technical solutions or regulatory policies. Experts are increasingly recognizing that the roots of this crisis are philosophical and spiritual, namely the human perspective on nature that has been reduced to an exploitative relationship (Ioris, 2022). This is where the ecotheological or Green Theology approach finds its urgency (Adedeji & Lenz, 2024). Ecotheology argues that environmental degradation is a symptom of a crisis of meaning and values, so its recovery must involve deep spiritual and ethical dimensions (Dermawan & Sain, 2025). This approach emphasizes that the relationship between humans and nature is not a mechanistic subject-object relationship, but rather a manifestation of faith and divine responsibility. The universe, from this perspective, has intrinsic value and sacredness as a sign of God's power that must be respected and protected, not exploited arbitrarily (Nashr, 2021). For religious communities, especially Muslims, the ecological crisis is a call to spiritual introspection and a re-evaluation of religious practices that are often confined to individual rituals, with no real impact on the preservation of the universe.

In the Indonesian context, Islamic educational institutions such as UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung assume a strategic dual role in responding to this challenge. As a bastion of Islamic values and a center for national intelligence, PTKI has a unique opportunity to integrate ecotheological insights into all aspects of the tri dharma of higher education. Research by Merciano et al. (2024) shows that the eco-theological approach in Islamic educational institutions has proven capable of forming the character of students holistically, by internalizing the value that protecting the environment is an integral part of worship and the actualization of faith (Merciano et al., 2024). This integration is centered on the reactualization of the central concept of al-Insan al-Khalifah (humans as God's representatives on earth). The concept of caliph is not a title of authority to dominate, but rather a divine trust (amanah) that bears the moral responsibility to maintain, manage, and prosper the earth (imarah al-ardh) based on justice and compassion (Cardoso, 2023). As a caliph, every individual, including the academic community, is responsible for maintaining the balance of the ecosystem (mizan) and preventing all forms of damage (fasad) on the face of the earth, as warned in QS. Ar-Rum: 41.

Furthermore, within the framework of state bureaucracy and institutions, ecotheology can be interpreted as the spiritual dimension of national defense and public service. Within the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, protecting the environment is a concrete manifestation of love for the homeland and the practice of religious teachings. Therefore, State Civil Apparatus (ASN) and students under the auspices of the Ministry of Religious Affairs are required to develop an "environmental spirituality," an ingrained awareness that any act of negligence or damage to the environment is not merely an administrative violation, but more fundamentally, a form of betrayal of the divine mandate they have been entrusted with (Stier et al., 2024). This spirituality will become an intrinsic driving force, transcending mere compliance due to regulatory pressure or incentives.

However, realizing the ideal of a Green Caliph requires more than just general theological discourse. It requires a concrete and implementable operational foundation, sourced from the Islamic legal tradition itself, namely Fiqh al-Bi'ah (Environmental Jurisprudence). To date,

many students' understanding of cleanliness and sustainability is often limited to the chapter on *Thaharah* (purification) in ritual jurisprudence, which focuses on the purity of the body, clothing, and places for *mahdhah* worship. However, Islam offers a much more comprehensive concept, namely *Imarah al-Ardh* (prospering the earth), which encompasses all human interactions with its ecosystem (Rahmawati et al., 2024). To build a complete ecological reasoning among students at UIN Sunan Gunung Djati Bandung, there are at least three main principles of *Fiqh al-Bi'ah* that need to be reconstructed and internalized.

First, the principle of *Hima* (Protected Conservation Zones). Historically, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) established the *Hima* policy, which designated prohibited zones around springs and grasslands in Medina to be protected from overexploitation, in order to maintain biodiversity and resource sustainability (Al-Damkhi, 2021). In the contemporary campus context, this principle can be realized through the "Campus *Hima* Zone" policy. This zone is not simply a passive Green Open Space (RTH), but rather a strictly regulated area that applies active conservation principles (Johnstone et al., 2023). For example, establishing a zero-emission zone in the center of the campus to reduce air and noise pollution, or designating the cafeteria and certain academic areas as a total "Single-Use Plastic Free Zone." The establishment of a campus *Hima* is a strong statement that a religious institution is committed to protecting part of its creation, as well as a living education about the limits of exploitation.

Second, the principle of *Mizan* (Ecological Balance). The Qur'an explicitly states that God created everything with the right proportion and balance (QS. Al-Qamar: 49). This principle of *Mizan* is a cosmic law that must not be violated. The phenomenon of "hidden trash" in college desk drawers is a clear violation of this principle. This action represents a mentality of ignoring the responsibility to maintain balance; by hiding trash, students try to eliminate traces of the "imbalance" they create from view, even though the imbalance remains materially and has an impact (Fauziah & Handoyo, 2025). The concept of the Green Khalifah requires every individual to actively return and maintain the *Mizan* (Maulana Bagus Rahmat et al., 2025). In campus practice, this is translated through a commitment to a zero-waste lifestyle and a circular economy. Any consumption residue, such as food packaging or water bottles, must be managed consciously—recycled, composted, or minimized from the start—so that it does not become a burden that disrupts the campus's natural balance.

Third, the principle of *Maslahah Mursalah* (Public Benefit). Often, pro-environmental campus policies, such as plastic bans or the requirement to bring tumblers, are considered burdensome and restrict personal freedom. This is where the principle of *maslahah mursalah* from *ushul fiqh* plays an important role. *Maslahah mursalah* refers to benefits that are not explicitly mentioned in the text of revelation, but are in line with the universal goals of *sharia* (*maqasid al-shari'ah*), including the goal of *hifdz al-bi'ah* (preserving the environment) (Jamaruddin, 2023). The action of protecting the campus from plastic waste and pollution, therefore, is not merely following a trend, but an urgent effort to realize a greater public benefit: the healthy survival of current and future generations. Students as future leaders must be trained to prioritize this long-term benefit over short-term interests and comfort. The application of this principle opens up space for *ijtihad* for the rectorate to create innovative policies based on ecological benefits, even though there is no strict precedent in the yellow book (Ulum et al., 2025).

The integration of these three principles of Islamic jurisprudence—*Hima*, *Mizan*, and *Maslahah*—with the theological concept of the Caliph creates a robust operational framework

for the Green Caliph. This framework transforms environmental preservation from a mere additional activity into the core business of religious and scientific activities on campus. Students no longer see themselves as passive "residents" of the campus, but as "local caliphs" who are actively responsible for the maintenance and prosperity of the small ecosystem where they study. This paradigm shift is a fundamental prerequisite for achieving a truly sustainable campus, where green policies are not implemented under duress, but are implemented consciously as part of their devotion to God, science, and the future of the earth.

The Role of Religious Figures in Conflict and Violence

The role of religious figures in the vortex of political conflict and violence is a theme that demands a reading that is not merely normative, but also analytical and contextual. From a sociological perspective, religious figures cannot be separated from the nature of humans as social beings who constantly interact with the symbolic environment around them (Adam, 2024). Every action taken by an individual, including religious figures, is essentially the result of a process of interpreting the social reality they face. In other words, social action does not arise in a vacuum, but rather is a reflection of life experiences, social positions, and the construction of meaning formed through repeated interactions (Qi et al., 2024). Within this framework, religious figures act not merely as individuals but as representatives of collective values internalized within them, so that each of their actions and statements carries a broader social weight than that of ordinary individuals.

In the context of religious communities, religious leaders occupy a strategic position as agents of informal social control. Unlike formal institutions that have the legal authority to enforce compliance, religious leaders operate through mechanisms of moral persuasion and symbolic legitimacy (Farber & Zelkowitz, 2026). They lack the power to impose strict legal sanctions, but they do possess the ability to shape collective consciousness through the religious narratives they convey. In many cases, this power is more effective because it relies on community trust and respect, rather than structural coercion (Hadi, 2019). Therefore, the role of religious leaders in preventing or inciting violence depends heavily on how they use this moral authority to frame social reality.

However, this position also carries an ambivalence that cannot be ignored. Religious leaders can be guardians of social harmony when they promote the values of peace, tolerance, and justice, but at the same time, they can also be catalysts for conflict when the narratives they construct are exclusive and confrontational. In the context of political conflict, religion is often not the primary cause, but rather a medium that strengthens group identity. Thus, conflicts that are initially economic or political can escalate into identity conflicts laden with religious content (Vüllers & Krtsch, 2020). In situations like this, the role of religious leaders is crucial, as they have the capacity to guide the community's interpretation of the conflict.

Furthermore, recent literature shows that the involvement of religious figures in conflict and violence is strongly influenced by the social and geographic context in which they operate. Comparative studies show that religious figures living in pluralistic and integrated societies tend to have a more inclusive orientation than those living in homogeneous environments (Sajir, 2023). This is due to the intensity of intergroup interactions that foster an awareness of the importance of tolerance and coexistence (Grasso et al., 2021). Conversely, in homogeneous societies, religious narratives tend to be more exclusive due to a lack of direct experience interacting with other groups. Thus, social environmental factors play a significant role in shaping the role orientation of religious figures.

In addition to environmental factors, the structure of religious organizations also influences the capacity of religious leaders to mobilize the masses (Ikpi & Williams, 2026). Religious leaders who have access to public platforms, such as sermons or congregational lectures, have greater potential to influence collective behavior than those with more limited roles. In this context, religion functions not only as a belief system but also as a social network that can be used for political mobilization. This explains why, in some cases, religious leaders can quickly mobilize masses, both for peaceful purposes and for potentially conflict-inducing actions (Umana et al., 2022).

Amidst this complexity, religious leaders can employ various strategies to prevent political violence. One of the most fundamental is conveying messages of peace that emphasize the importance of free, fair, and non-violent elections. This narrative is conveyed not only through formal forums but also through various communication media that can reach a wider audience. Research shows that inclusive and non-violent religious messages have a significant impact on reducing social tensions, especially when delivered by figures with high credibility (Korlipara & Shah, 2024).

Furthermore, religious leaders can play a role in civic education by providing the public with an understanding of the importance of responsible political participation. In this context, they serve not only as transmitters of religious teachings but also as social educators, helping the public understand their rights and obligations as citizens. The involvement of religious leaders in public debates and election monitoring can also increase the transparency and accountability of the democratic process, thereby reducing the potential for conflict caused by distrust of election results (Asimakopoulos et al., 2025).

Furthermore, initiatives to develop a joint code of ethics involving various stakeholders, including religious leaders, have proven effective in preventing conflict escalation. A collective commitment to the principle of nonviolence can create binding social norms, so that any violation of these norms will be subject to social sanctions from the community. In this context, religious leaders act as guardians of these norms, ensuring that these commitments are not merely symbolic but also implemented in practice (Scott, 2023).

Intra- and interfaith dialogue is also an important strategy for building peace. Through dialogue, religious leaders can create communication spaces that allow for a constructive exchange of views (Cheong et al., 2009). This dialogue not only serves to reduce prejudice but also to build trust between different groups. In the long term, such initiatives can strengthen social cohesion and prevent the emergence of identity-based conflicts.

However, it is important to recognize that religious leaders are not always agents of peace. In some cases, they actually play a role in inciting violence, particularly when they articulate inflammatory narratives or exploit religious sentiments for political gain. Studies of conflicts around the world show that violence often does not occur spontaneously, but rather results from mobilization by elites, including religious leaders, who provide moral legitimacy to these actions (Mccauley, 2014). Therefore, the role of religious leaders in conflict cannot be understood simply but must be seen within the context of the power relations surrounding them.

Furthermore, research shows that economic and political factors are often the primary triggers of conflict, but violence only occurs when these factors are framed within provocative religious narratives. In this context, religious leaders play a role as "interpreters of reality" who can guide how people understand the injustices they experience. When economic or political dissatisfaction is interpreted as a form of oppression of religious identity, the potential for

violence increases (Hoffmann et al., 2025). Therefore, the responsibility of religious leaders lies not only in what they say, but also in how they frame social reality.

Within the framework of this research, understanding the complex role of religious leaders is crucial, as it provides an analytical basis for examining how they can contribute to preventing political violence. By positioning religious leaders as actors with the capacity to shape meaning and influence collective behavior, this research seeks to uncover the mechanisms by which these roles can be optimized to create sustainable peace amidst increasingly complex political dynamics.

The Role of Religious Leaders in Preventing Violence

The role of religious leaders in preventing violence is inextricably linked to religion's strategic position as a source of meaning, values, and collective identity in social life. In many societal contexts, religion is not merely a private belief system but also serves as a public moral foundation that shapes how individuals and groups view conflict, justice, and relationships with others. Therefore, while religion has the potential to be mobilized as a tool of social fragmentation, it also holds great potential as an instrument of cohesion and reconciliation. Within this framework, religious leaders play a crucial role as normative actors capable of transforming theological values into social practices that reject violence and promote peace. Several recent studies have shown that the involvement of religious leaders in peacebuilding processes is relevant not only in religious-based conflicts but also in political, economic, and ethnic conflicts that lack an explicit theological dimension (Svensson, 2021).

Conceptually, the role of religious leaders in preventing violence can be understood through a constructivist approach in social science, which emphasizes that social reality is shaped through the interpretation of meaning. Religious leaders, in this case, function as "meaning producers" with the authority to interpret sacred texts and moral norms, thereby influencing public perceptions of conflict and violence. When violence is framed as morally illegitimate and contrary to religious values, the social legitimacy of violence is weakened. Conversely, if violence is given religious justification, the conflict can worsen. Therefore, the preventive role of religious leaders depends heavily on their ability to construct a peaceful narrative based on religious teachings (H. Amin, 2024).

One of the key strengths of religious leaders in preventing violence lies in the level of trust and credibility they command within the community. In many communities, particularly in developing countries, religious leaders are often more trusted than political actors or state institutions. This is due to their close relationship with the community, their direct involvement in daily life, and the perception that they act based on noble moral values. This trust serves as crucial social capital in violence prevention efforts, as messages of peace delivered by religious leaders are more likely to be accepted and internalized by the community. Research shows that the moral legitimacy of religious leaders can strengthen the acceptance of new norms that reject violence and promote reconciliation (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2020).

Furthermore, religious leaders also possess the advantage of mastering universal values respected by various conflicting groups. Values such as compassion, forgiveness, justice, and solidarity are teachings that are almost always present in religious traditions. When these values are articulated in an inclusive manner, religious leaders can act as bridges connecting diverse groups. In this context, religion serves as a shared moral language that enables cross-identity dialogue. Even in complex conflict situations, reinterpreting sacred texts can be used to deconstruct narratives of violence and replace them with narratives of peace. This

demonstrates that religion is not inherently conflictual, but rather depends largely on how it is interpreted and mobilized by its leaders (Basedau, 2022).

Furthermore, religious leaders' in-depth understanding of the local context is a key factor in the effectiveness of their role. Unlike external actors, who often have limited understanding of local socio-cultural dynamics, religious leaders are typically an integral part of the community itself (Koukounaras Liagkis, 2022). They understand the history of conflict, power relations, and local values that exist within the community. This contextual knowledge enables them to design more sensitive and relevant approaches to preventing violence. In many cases, the success of peace initiatives depends heavily on the ability of local actors to build trust and bridge differences, and this is where religious leaders have a comparative advantage (Fountain, 2023).

Furthermore, religious leaders also possess extensive and structured social networks, at the local, national, and global levels. These networks encompass congregations, religious organizations, educational institutions, and even interfaith forums. Through these networks, messages of peace can be disseminated effectively and widely. Furthermore, these networks enable coordination between actors in responding to potential conflicts quickly and in an organized manner. In a political context, religious leaders' access to power elites also provides opportunities to influence public policy to be more inclusive and responsive to potential conflicts. Thus, religious leaders play a role not only at the grassroots level but also in broader structural arenas (Toft et al., 2021).

The role of religious leaders in preventing violence can also be seen in concrete practices such as conveying messages of peace through sermons, lectures, and other religious media. In many cases, religious pulpits serve as strategic platforms for shaping public opinion and influencing collective behavior. When religious leaders consistently convey messages of anti-violence and emphasize the importance of tolerance, this can shape new social norms that reject violence as a solution to conflict. Furthermore, religious leaders can also engage in civic education, conflict mediation, and facilitating dialogue between conflicting groups. This involvement demonstrates that the role of religious leaders is multidimensional and extends beyond mere ritual functions (Svensson, 2021).

However, it is important to note that the role of religious leaders in preventing violence is not automatic or without challenges. Several factors can influence the effectiveness of this role, including theological orientation, political interests, and the structure of religious organizations. In some cases, religious leaders become part of the problem when they engage in exclusionary identity mobilization or support specific, conflictual political agendas. Therefore, efforts to involve religious leaders in violence prevention must be accompanied by a critical and selective approach, and must pay attention to the internal dynamics within the religious community itself (Appleby, 2020).

In an increasingly complex global context, where conflicts often involve multiple dimensions of identity, the role of religious leaders is becoming increasingly relevant. They serve not only as guardians of moral values but also as agents of social change capable of guiding societies toward sustainable peace. By leveraging trust, shared values, local understanding, and extensive networks, religious leaders have great potential to be at the forefront of preventing violence. However, this potential can only be realized if supported by a strong commitment to universal humanitarian values and the ability to interpret religious teachings inclusively and contextually (Basedau, 2022).

Thus, it can be concluded that the role of religious leaders in preventing violence is a combination of moral authority, social capacity, and interpretive skills. In a world marked by various forms of conflict, the presence of religious leaders capable of articulating a message of peace authentically and contextually is becoming an increasingly urgent need. They not only act as calmers in crisis situations but also as architects of peace, building a more just, inclusive, and harmonious social foundation.

Efforts to Combat Election and Political Violence in Various Countries

Efforts to combat electoral and political violence in various countries demonstrate that religion, often perceived as a potential source of conflict, can actually transform into a strategic instrument for peacebuilding when mobilized constructively by religious leaders (Odak, 2024). In this context, elections, as an arena for political competition fraught with the mobilization of identities, collective emotions, and power struggles, often become a hotspot for violence. However, recent studies have shown that the active involvement of religious leaders in managing these dynamics can significantly reduce conflict escalation and strengthen social cohesion. Religious leaders serve not only as conveyors of moral messages but also as mediators, facilitators of dialogue, and agents of social legitimacy capable of influencing collective societal behavior in tense political situations (Svensson, 2021).

The Nigerian case serves as a crucial example of how religious authorities play a crucial role in preventing election violence (Uroko et al., 2025). The 2015 elections, which took place amid intense political competition and potential conflict, were relatively successful in avoiding a massive escalation of violence, thanks in part to the active intervention of religious leaders. In southeastern Nigeria, religious leaders consistently conveyed messages of peace through sermons, religious media, and community forums. These messages were not only normative but also operational, such as calls for restraint, respect for election results, and resistance to sectarianism. Research shows that the moral legitimacy of religious leaders gives these messages a powerful influence on society, thus suppressing the potential for identity-based violence (Basedau, 2022). In this context, religion serves as an effective mechanism of social control, where religious norms are used to discipline people's political behavior.

In Uganda, the dynamics that have emerged reveal a more complex dimension to the involvement of religious leaders in politics (Gumisiriza, 2022). Unlike Nigeria, which exhibits collective mobilization, in Uganda, the role of religious leaders tends to be more individual and not always coordinated within an interfaith institutional framework. One prominent figure is Bishop Zac Niringiye of the Anglican Church, who has openly used his religious pulpit to criticize the government and push for political reform. He has called for fair elections and a peaceful transition of power, including urging President Yoweri Museveni to resign constitutionally (Cacciatori, 2024). While such boldness remains rare among Ugandan religious leaders, his presence demonstrates that religious leaders can serve as a moral force that counterbalances political power. From the perspective of political theory of religion, this role reflects the prophetic function of religion, namely as a critical voice against injustice and abuses of power (Toft et al., 2021). However, overly political involvement also carries risks, especially if religious leaders lose their perceived neutrality in the public eye.

Indonesia offers a compelling example of how integration between religious authority and local social structures can foster stability in the electoral process. A study of the 2008 elections in Lombok showed that the active role of Tuan Guru, as Islamic religious figures with widespread influence in the community, was a key factor in preventing violence. Tuan Guru

wield authority not only within religious rituals but also within the community's overall social life. They leveraged this position to systematically convey messages of peace through Friday sermons, religious studies, and direct instruction to congregations through mosque loudspeakers. Furthermore, they collaborated with local governments in designing community-based conflict management strategies. This collaboration reflects a synergistic model between state and non-state actors in maintaining political stability. From a sociology of religion perspective, this success demonstrates the importance of religious figures' embeddedness in local social structures, enabling them to act effectively as mediators and conflict managers (Fountain, 2023).

Meanwhile, the case of Guyana demonstrates how an interfaith approach can be an effective strategy in preventing election violence. The Inter-Religious Organization (IRO) successfully mobilized communities from various religious backgrounds to support peaceful elections in 2006 (A. R. Arifianto, 2024). Through public campaigns, peaceful demonstrations, and symbols of peace, such as the use of pins bearing the word "peace" in various languages, the IRO was able to build collective awareness of the importance of maintaining social stability. This approach emphasizes inclusivity and solidarity across identities, which are crucial in a pluralistic society. Within the framework of peace theory, such initiatives reflect a community-based peacebuilding approach, where local actors work together to create social norms that support peace (Kadayifci-Orellana, 2020). The IRO's success also demonstrates that religion, when managed collaboratively, can be a unifying force that transcends identity barriers.

From these various cases, it can be concluded that the effectiveness of religious leaders in preventing election violence depends heavily on several key factors. First, moral legitimacy, which allows them to significantly influence public behavior. Second, communication capacity, whether through sermons, media, or social networks, allows for the widespread and effective dissemination of messages. Third, the ability to build collaborations, both with fellow religious leaders and with state and civil society actors. Fourth, sensitivity to the local context, which allows them to design strategies appropriate to existing social dynamics. These factors are interconnected and form an ecosystem that supports the preventive role of religious leaders in the political context (Appleby, 2020).

Furthermore, the role of religious leaders in preventing election violence must also be understood within an increasingly complex global context, where democracy is often challenged by polarization, populism, and disinformation. In such situations, religious leaders can serve as a counterbalance, emphasizing the importance of ethics in politics. They can remind us that political competition should not compromise human values and social unity. Thus, their role is not merely reactive in responding to conflict, but also proactive in building a peaceful and inclusive political culture (Basedau, 2022).

However, it is important to recognize that the role of religious leaders is not always positive. In some contexts, they can actually exacerbate conflict by engaging in exclusionary identity mobilization or supporting specific political agendas. Therefore, efforts to involve religious leaders in violence prevention must be accompanied by a critical approach based on the principles of inclusivity and justice. Education for religious leaders, capacity building, and the development of interfaith networks are crucial steps to ensure that religion's positive potential can be maximized in supporting peace (Svensson, 2021).

Thus, the experiences of Nigeria, Uganda, Indonesia, and Guyana demonstrate that religious leaders have significant potential as agents of peace in electoral and political contexts.

Through a combination of moral authority, communication skills, and extensive social networks, they can significantly influence political dynamics. However, this potential must be managed wisely and supported by a strong institutional framework to optimally contribute to preventing violence and building peaceful democracies.

CONCLUSION

This research ultimately confirms that the role of religious leaders in preventing political and electoral violence is not merely an accessory to the architecture of democracy, but rather a social force with profound influence on shaping collective societal behavior. The answers to the research questions indicate that the effectiveness of religious leaders lies in their ability to transform theological values into operational public ethics, so that religion does not stop at the normative realm, but is present as a concrete social praxis in reducing conflict. The main findings show that in various contexts such as Nigeria, Uganda, Indonesia, and Guyana, religious leaders are able to function as symbolic mediators who bridge political tensions through their moral authority, while simultaneously filling the gap that is often unable to be reached by formal state institutions. Furthermore, this study reveals that the power of religious figures stems not only from religious legitimacy but also from their cultural closeness to the grassroots. In situations where distrust of political institutions is increasing, religious figures emerge as figures who are trusted, listened to, and followed. This explains why messages of peace delivered through sermons, lectures, or moral appeals have a stronger resonance than formal state campaigns. Thus, these findings demonstrate that religion, in its practical and contextual forms, can function as an effective social control mechanism in preventing the escalation of political violence.

From a theoretical perspective, this research both strengthens and broadens the discourse on the relationship between religion and politics. It challenges the classical assumption that tends to view religion as a source of conflict by demonstrating that religion can actually be a source of conflict resolution if mobilized in an inclusive and moderate manner. Within a peacebuilding framework, these findings enrich perspectives by positioning religious figures as key actors in what can be called the moral infrastructure of peace, a network of values and authority that operates outside formal structures but has a significant impact on social stability. From a political sociological perspective, this research also reaffirms the relevance of informal institutions in supporting democracy, particularly in societies still heavily influenced by traditional and religious authorities. The practical implications of this research are clear and strategic. Efforts to prevent political violence cannot rely solely on security approaches or formal regulations, but must also incorporate the cultural and religious dimensions that exist within society. Therefore, the integration of religious figures into public policy, particularly in political education, conflict mitigation, and democracy strengthening, is a necessity. Collaboration between the state, religious organizations, and civil society must be systematically and sustainably designed, not merely a temporary response before elections. Furthermore, strengthening interfaith dialogue needs to be a strategic agenda to build a peaceful political culture rooted in the collective consciousness of society.

However, this study is not without limitations. The approach used is still qualitative and descriptive, making it unable to precisely measure the effectiveness of religious leaders' interventions in reducing political violence. Furthermore, the study's focus, which emphasizes the positive role of religious leaders, potentially overlooks the ambivalent side of religion,

particularly when it is used as an instrument of conflict legitimacy by certain actors. Another limitation lies in the limited scope of the case study, so generalizations of the findings must be made with caution. Based on this, further research needs to be directed at developing a more comprehensive approach, both through mixed methods and cross-regional comparative studies. Future studies should also be more critical in exploring the conditions under which religious leaders fail or even contribute to conflict, to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the relationship between religion and politics. In the digital era, it is also crucial to examine how the role of religious leaders is transforming in the virtual space, particularly in producing and disseminating religious narratives that can strengthen peace or, conversely, fuel polarization. Thus, future research is expected to provide a more operational contribution to formulating sustainable strategies for preventing political violence.

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