



Religious Identity in Local Political Contestation on Social Media: A Virtual Ethnographic Study of the 2024 Cilegon City Regional Election

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Abstract: In local political contestation, religious identity becomes one of the sources of political meaning and legitimacy expressed through values, symbols, practices, narratives, and socio-religious relations on social media. This study examines the use of social media in building the legitimacy of religious identity, its emergence in responding to public issues, and its manifestation in campaign programs in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada. This study uses a virtual ethnography method. Data were obtained through observations of the official Instagram and TikTok accounts of the three candidate pairs during September 25–November 23, 2024, and on election day, November 27, 2024. Data include posts, videos, narratives, religious symbols, campaign programs, and user comments. Interviews are used as supporting sources to enrich the interpretation of the findings. The analysis uses Manuel Castells' The Power of Identity perspective as the main foundation, with Circuit of Culture and Identity Negotiation Theory as supporting perspectives. The results of the study indicate differences in sources and orientations in the formation of religious legitimacy. Robinsar displays socially oriented personal piety; Helldy Agustian emphasizes ethical piety and closeness to religious scholars; while Isro Mi'raj displays empathetic social concern. In responding to public issues, religious expression occurs contextually and is not limited to symbols, but is present through attitudes, narratives, and responses to socio-political issues. Religious values are also manifested in political programs, particularly in the fields of religious education, Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), madrasas (madrasahs), and social services. This study concludes that religious identity in local political contestation is a dynamic construct formed through the linkage of religious sources with orientation, actions, and responses to public issues. Social media becomes a space for articulation and negotiation where this construction gains meaning and political legitimacy before the public.

Keywords: local politics; regional election; religious identity; social media; virtual ethnography.

1. Introduction

Religion is a social institution that holds a crucial position in societal life because it is not only related to religious beliefs and practices, but also plays a role in shaping values, norms, symbols, and orientations of meaning that serve as guidelines for communal life (Berger, 1967). From a sociological perspective, religion is understood not merely as a personal spiritual experience, but as a social force that shapes interpersonal relationships, creates social order, and provides a normative foundation for collective life (Durkheim, 2001). With this character, religion is constantly present in various domains of life, including the dynamics of the public sphere and political practices.

The presence of religion in the public sphere is then manifested through religious identity as a form of social identity. Religious identity not only indicates an individual's affiliation with a

religion but also represents how individuals and groups construct, present, and assert their position in social interactions. In this process, religious identity becomes the foundation for the formation of orientation, solidarity, and the affirmation of social boundaries between groups. As a social construct, religious identity is dynamic because it is continuously formed, negotiated, and transformed through social interactions and power relations (Hall, 2011).

The transformation of information technology has changed the way social identities are formed, displayed, and exchanged in everyday life. One implication is the strengthening role of social media as a new public space. Social media no longer merely functions as a means of disseminating information, but has also evolved into a social space where religious identities are expressed, negotiated, and contested through the interactions of various social actors (Hall, 2007). The participatory and interactive nature of social media distinguishes it from conventional mass media, which tends to be one-way (Castells, 2010). These characteristics shift the roles of various actors from mere recipients of information to those who participate in producing symbols, exchanging meanings, and building social relations. In this process, social media has evolved into a social space where identities are formed, expressed, and negotiated through interactions between social actors (du Gay & Negus, 1994).

These changes also have important implications for political practice. While previously political activity primarily took place through conventional mass media and face-to-face interactions, social media presents a more open, dialogic, and participatory pattern of interaction. In this context, political actors not only utilize social media to build images and construct narratives, but also to establish legitimacy through various symbols and representations of identity. With these developments, social media has evolved into a political arena where identities, symbols, and various interests are constructed and openly contested, including religious identity, which has become a crucial part of the dynamics of local political contestation (*Manuel Castells, Communication Power*, n.d.).

In Indonesia, the relationship between religion and politics plays a crucial role in the dynamics of democracy and the practice of power. Religious identity is often used as a source of legitimacy, a symbol of social closeness, and a means of constructing political identity. The development of social media has further expanded the articulation of this identity through the more intensive production, dissemination, and exchange of religious symbols, narratives, and expressions (Castells, 2009). This situation demonstrates that religion is not only a part of social and cultural life but also functions as a symbolic resource that plays a role in shaping political orientation, both at the national and local levels. At the local political level, the relationship between religion, politics, and social media is manifested in regional head elections, where various political interests, communication strategies, and identity articulation practices converge to gain public support. In this context, social media not only expands the reach of candidates' political communication but also becomes a space for the formation and dissemination of political narratives tailored to voter characteristics (Chadwick, 2017).

This phenomenon was evident in the 2024 Cilegon City Regional Election. Through social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, candidates not only conveyed their visions, missions, and campaign programs but also articulated symbols, narratives, and expressions related to religious identity. In this process, religious identity served as a symbolic resource for building political legitimacy, strengthening the candidate's image, and creating symbolic closeness with the community. Initial observations indicate that religious identity was present in the campaigns of all candidate pairs, albeit in varying forms, intensities, and strategies. Various posts demonstrated candidates' involvement in religious activities, interactions with clerics and religious figures, the use of religious symbols, and the delivery of political messages linked to Islamic values. Furthermore, issues of regional development, public welfare, education, and public services were often communicated through narratives that intersected with the community's religious orientation. These initial findings indicate that religious identity not only appears as an expression

of personal belief but is also strategically constructed as a symbolic resource to build public trust, gain political legitimacy, and strengthen candidates' electoral appeal on social media.

The selection of Cilegon City as the research location relates to the socio-religious character of its people, which is relevant to the research focus. As one of the industrial cities in Banten Province, Cilegon has a population composition that is heavily dominated by adherents of Islam. Data from the Population and Civil Registration Service (Disdukcapil) of Cilegon City, April 2026, published by the Ministry of Religious Affairs Office of Cilegon City, recorded that 474,898 of the 485,768 residents are Muslim, or approximately 97.8 percent. The population is recorded as Christian 7,059 people, Catholic 1,903 people, Buddhist 1,660 people, Hindu 233 people, and Confucian 15 people. This composition demonstrates the strong position of Islam in the demographic structure of Cilegon City, while also indicating that the social life of its people takes place in an environment that remains religiously diverse.

These socio-religious conditions provide an important context for research on religious identity in local politics. The predominance of the Muslim population does not in itself indicate the level of religiosity of the community, but rather demonstrates that religion is a prominent demographic element in the social life of Cilegon City. In a context of increasingly connected social life through social media, the formation and delivery of religious meaning also occurs through more open and interactive communication spaces. Social media provides a space for political actors and the public to convey messages, display symbols, respond to issues, and interpret various circulating representations. It is within this context that Cilegon City is relevant to study to understand how religious identity is present, displayed, and acquires meaning in local political contestation through social media.

This relevance also relates to Cilegon's socio-religious character, which is characterized by the existence of Islamic boarding school traditions, the authority of religious scholars, and the social relationships between religious figures and local political actors. These elements demonstrate that religion exists not only as a realm of personal belief but also intertwined with the social and political life of society. This character provides an important context for understanding how religious sources are used in identity formation, placed within socio-political relations, and acquired meaning through interactions on social media. Previous studies generally focused more on the influence of religious identity on political choices rather than explaining the process of its formation, representation, and negotiation through social media. Religious identity, political legitimacy, and social media are also often studied as separate aspects, even though in contemporary political practice, all three are intertwined in the formation of political meaning and position. This limitation is increasingly apparent in local political studies, which focus more on voting behavior, the configuration of political power, and electoral dynamics. Meanwhile, the process of constructing religious identity through social media in regional head election contests has not been explained in depth.

The focus of this research, therefore, goes beyond the presence of religious symbols and expressions in campaigns, but rather on how these identities are constructed and gain meaning in political contestation through social media. Religious identities can be present through symbols, language, relationships with religious figures, social issues, and campaign programs. However, the existence of these forms does not in itself explain the positions and functions constructed through their use. What needs to be explained is how religious sources are used to construct legitimacy, how these identities are articulated in response to social, political, and public policy issues, and how they are manifested through campaign programs communicated to the public. Therefore, the research focuses not only on the forms of identity that emerge, but also on the processes of their construction, use, and interpretation within the relationships between candidates, the local political context, and interactions on social media.

Based on these issues, this study focuses on the religious identities of candidates in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada contest through social media. The research focuses on three interrelated aspects: the use of social media in legitimizing religious identity, the emergence of religious

identity in responding to social, political, and public policy issues, and its manifestation in campaign programs circulated through social media. Manuel Castells' perspective is positioned as the primary theoretical foundation for understanding identity as a construction of meaning related to power relations, while other theoretical perspectives are used selectively according to the needs of the analysis. With this focus, this study positions religious identity not as an attribute that is inherently attached to candidates, but as a social construct that acquires form, function, and meaning in local political contestation through social media.

2. Research Methods

This research is based on a constructivist paradigm that views religious identity as a social reality formed through communication, interaction, and meaning-making within a socio-political context. The religious identities of the Cilegon mayoral candidates are not understood as fixed characteristics, but rather as constructions formed, presented, and interpreted through political communication on social media during the 2024 Cilegon City Election. Therefore, the research does not focus on assessing the authenticity or truth of the candidates' religious identities, but on the process of formation and meaning-making of these identities in political communication. In this paradigm, digital data is understood contextually by considering the relationship between the candidate's message, the situation in which it appears, and the surrounding socio-political conditions. Meaning of the construction of religious identity is obtained through interpretation of the candidates' communication practices on Instagram and TikTok. Therefore, the meaning of the research is constructed through the interaction between the data, the socio-political context, and the researcher's perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

A constructivist perspective is applied through a contextual reading of digital data. Photos, videos, captions, religious symbols, political narratives, and user interactions on Instagram and TikTok are understood as communication practices that contain specific meanings. The analysis not only considers the candidates' messages but also how religious identities are displayed, packaged, and linked to socio-political situations. The research focuses on three aspects: the use of social media to build the legitimacy of religious identities, the emergence of these identities in response to social, political, and public policy issues, and their application in digital campaign programs. Researchers are the primary instrument for selecting, connecting, and interpreting data, thus requiring reflexivity to ensure the accuracy and accountability of the interpretation process (Hine, 2000).

The constructivist paradigm serves as the basis for this research in understanding religious identity through digital political communication practices related to the dynamics of the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada. Based on this, the research uses a qualitative approach to deeply explore the process of formation, presentation, and interpretation of candidates' religious identities. Identity is not understood through the frequency of symbols alone, but through the context, narratives, practices, and accompanying meanings. Candidate activities on Instagram and TikTok, such as visual posts, captions, religious symbols, religious activities, relationships with religious figures, responses to public issues, and campaign materials, are analyzed as a series of digital practices. All data are placed within the local socio-political context. Furthermore, virtual ethnography is used to understand the digital space as part of social life where religious identities are constructed, displayed, and interpreted during political contestation (Creswell, 2018).

This study uses virtual ethnography to understand the process of constructing and representing the religious identities of the Cilegon mayoral candidates through their activities on Instagram and TikTok during the 2024 regional elections. This method not only examines the content of posts but also considers the social, political, and religious contexts underlying their emergence. Christine Hine's framework is applied through the principles of embedded, embodied, and everyday, as well as the concept of following connections. These principles are used to observe the relationship of digital content to events and candidate activities, the visual and narrative forms of religious identity, and the development of representations over time. The search also follows the relationship between accounts, content, and user responses. The primary data include photos, videos, captions, religious

symbols, campaign materials, comments, and other digital activities. Interviews are used to support interpretation, while official documents, news reports, and scientific publications serve to strengthen the research context (Hine, 2020).

The unit of analysis in this study focuses on the religious identities of the Cilegon Mayoral and Deputy Mayoral candidates as formed, negotiated, and represented through social media activities during the 2024 Cilegon City Regional Election. The analysis is directed at three main aspects, namely the use of social media as a means of building and gaining legitimacy for the candidates' religious identities, the emergence of these identities in response to social, political, and public policy issues, and their manifestation through campaign ideas and programs disseminated in the digital space. Therefore, the research not only identifies content that is explicitly religious, but also examines how religious identities are formed and given meaning in digital political practices (Hine, 2020).

3. Research Result

Configuration, Religious Politics and Social Media

Cilegon City is a key urban area in Banten Province, possessing distinctive social, economic, political, and religious characteristics. Industrialization, particularly following the growth of the national steel industry and its surrounding industrial areas, has shaped Cilegon's image as an industrial city, as well as a center for trade and services. The presence of PT Krakatau Steel, a national strategic industry, has also driven migration and population mobility from various regions. This has led to a continuous shift in the social structure of Cilegon's society, driven by increasing economic activity, urbanization, and interactions between community groups.

Based on data from the Cilegon City Population and Civil Registration Office as of April 30, 2026, the population of Cilegon City was recorded at 472,944. This population increase occurred within the context of Cilegon's development as an industrial area with relatively high levels of population mobility and economic activity. Despite changes due to industrialization and urbanization, the religious dimension remains a significant part of community life. This is evident in the existence of various religious institutions, community religious activities, and the use of religious symbols and expressions in public spaces. Thus, urban modernization in Cilegon has not necessarily eliminated the influence of religion, but rather created a dynamic relationship between industrial development, social change, and the continuity of religious life.

These socio-religious conditions provide an important context for understanding how religious identities are constructed, exchanged, and legitimized in local political life. The strong position of religion in Cilegon is not only related to the large Muslim population but also supported by the existence of various Islamic institutions. Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), *madrasahs* (*madrasas*), mosques, religious study groups (*masjid taklim*), and religious organizations are part of the social structure that functions as spaces for education, the transmission of values, the formation of religious authority, and the strengthening of the community's collective identity. Islamic boarding schools, for example, not only carry out religious education but also hold a position as social institutions that can contribute to the formation of societal views. In certain contexts, Islamic boarding schools can become spaces for opinion formation, the strengthening of moral values, and the reproduction of social relations that influence local political dynamics. This position makes religious identity a form of symbolic capital with strategic value for political actors. Regional head candidates can interact with religious networks to gain social recognition, build closeness with the community, and strengthen their political image.

The strengthening of the position of religious authorities is also evident in the institutional development of the Indonesian Ulema Council (MUI) in Cilegon City. Local government support for the MUI, including the provision of permanent office facilities, demonstrates recognition of the role of religious authorities in the region's socio-political structure. Relations between *ulama* (Islamic scholars) and the government are also maintained through various *ulama-umara* (Islamic leaders) gathering forums and government involvement in religious activities and celebrations. These relationships demonstrate that religious authorities have a significant presence in public life

and are part of local socio-political networks. Under these conditions, religious legitimacy can serve as a source of social authority considered by political actors. Candidates in electoral contests can approach religious figures and communities to gain support, build trust, and strengthen their representation as figures close to societal values. The development of social media further expands this space, as relationships between candidates, religious figures, communities, and the public can be displayed and circulated digitally.

The structure of social authority in Cilegon is not solely based on religious scholars. In Banten's social history, there are figures of jawara (local leaders) who are closely linked to the traditions of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), community leadership, and local culture. The relationship between ulama and jawara forms a unique configuration of authority. Unlike other regions, which may be more centered on kiai figures, the people of Cilegon recognize a combination of sources of authority derived from religious authority, social leadership, and cultural traditions. Pencak silat schools and the art of debus, for example, not only serve as a medium for cultural preservation but also serve as social spaces that produce figures with the ability to build networks and mobilize the community. Furthermore, the existence of traditions such as Panjang Mulud, pilgrimages to the graves of ulama, and the memorial service of religious figures demonstrates that the religious life of the Cilegon people has strong social and historical roots. These traditions are not merely ritual activities but also play a role in maintaining collective memory, strengthening social solidarity, and connecting the present generation with the community's history. Therefore, the religious identity of the Cilegon people is not merely symbolic but is manifested through ongoing social practices.

The historical roots of this identity can be traced, among other things, to the Geger Cilegon incident of 1888, known as a form of resistance by the Bantenese people against Dutch East Indies colonialism and closely linked to the leadership of Haji Wasyid. This event remains present in the community's memory today through remembrance activities, haul (haul), and various historical commemorations. Thus, Geger Cilegon is not only understood as a past event, but also as a collective memory that continues to be reproduced and contributes to the formation of the identity of the Cilegon community. This historical continuity is increasingly visible in the development of Islamic education in the Cilegon region. KH Syam'un, who was the grandson of Ki Wasyid, founded the Al-Khairiyah Islamic School in the early 20th century. This institution later developed into one of the Islamic educational institutions with significant influence in Cilegon and Banten. The historical relationship between Ki Wasyid's struggle, KH Syam'un's leadership, and the development of Al-Khairiyah demonstrates the continuity between the memory of the struggle, the authority of the ulama, and the institutionalization of Islamic education. This entire context is an important foundation for understanding how religious identity acquires social and political meaning in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada contest (Badri, Muslihah, & Shobri, 2024).

The historical continuity of religious life in Cilegon City serves as an important context for this research, demonstrating that religious legitimacy did not emerge suddenly during political contestation. Religious influence has developed through a long historical process intertwined with the existence of Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), ulama (Islamic scholars), Islamic educational institutions, and various religious traditions within the community. These networks have shaped how society understands leadership, authority, moral legitimacy, and the relationship between religion and public life. Therefore, candidates' religious identities cannot be understood simply as the use of religious symbols or narratives for campaign purposes, but rather as representations connected to the social structure and historical experiences of the community.

On the other hand, the social character of Cilegon City has also undergone changes as a consequence of industrial growth. The mobility of labor from various regions has led to local communities interacting with groups with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, such as Sundanese, Javanese, Batak, and Chinese. The confluence of these diverse groups has created an increasingly pluralistic society. Thus, Cilegon has a dual character: on the one hand, it maintains strong religious traditions, while on the other, it has developed into a space for increasingly

heterogeneous social and cultural encounters. This social diversity is reflected in the development of cultural organizations and various community associations. Initially, these groups served as spaces for preserving culture, strengthening solidarity, and fostering social relations among members. However, in the dynamics of local politics, some organizations have also entered the electoral space by declaring support for specific candidates. In the 2024 Cilegon City Regional Election, for example, the Batak Muslim Consultative Body and the Cilegon Sundanese Community Association (Pagarsuci) expressed political support for specific candidate pairs. This phenomenon shows that the formation of local political support does not only take place through party structures, but also through interconnected networks of religion, culture, and ethnic identity.

Changes in Cilegon's political configuration have been clearly visible since the 2020 regional elections. The election was contested by four candidate pairs: Helldy Agustian–Sanuji Pentamarta, Ratu Ati Marliati–Sokhidin, Ali Mujahidin–Firman Mutakin, and Iye Iman Rohiman–Awab. The competition showcased diverse support bases, including political parties, local elites, and social groups. The Helldy Agustian–Sanuji Pentamarta pair ultimately won the election with 75,449 votes, ending the political dominance of the Tubagus Aat Syafaat family that had lasted for almost two decades. These changes demonstrate that party strength is not the sole determining factor in victory. A candidate's ability to gain trust, build social legitimacy, and present representation that aligns with the aspirations of the community is also crucial.

The configuration of political power changed again in the 2024 Legislative Elections. The composition of the Cilegon City Regional People's Representative Council (DPRD) showed that no single party secured a majority. Golkar secured eight seats, Gerindra seven, PAN six, PPP five, PKS and NasDem four each, Demokrat three, while PDI Perjuangan, PKB, and Gelora each held one seat. This distribution indicates a fragmentation of political power, making coalitions a strategic necessity in the 2024 Pilkada. In this situation, party support remains crucial as electoral capital, but it is not always sufficient to ensure victory. Candidates need to build additional sources of legitimacy derived from social relationships and community experience. This situation is especially relevant in Cilegon society, which has a strong religious tradition. Religious identity can be a source of legitimacy because it is linked to moral values, social authority, and historically established community trust. Therefore, the 2024 Cilegon Pilkada can be understood not simply as competition between parties and candidates, but also as an arena for the articulation of various sources of legitimacy, including religious identity. Social media then provides a wider space for candidates to display their identities, build relationships with voters, and gain public recognition.

The 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada was contested by three candidate pairs: Robinsar–Fajar Hadi Prabowo, Helldy Agustian–Alawi Mahmud, and Isro Mi'raj–Nurrotul Uyun. Based on the official determination of the Cilegon City General Elections Commission, the Robinsar–Fajar Hadi Prabowo pair received 123,196 votes or 50.56 percent and became the pair with the highest vote share. The pair surpassed Helldy Agustian–Alawi Mahmud with 68,371 votes and Isro Mi'raj–Nurrotul Uyun with 52,086 votes. These results are interesting because they differ from a number of electability surveys prior to the election, which still placed the incumbent pair in a superior position. These differences indicate that voter preferences can change during the campaign process and are influenced by various social, political, economic, cultural factors, as well as candidate communication.

In this context, the religious identity displayed by candidates cannot be viewed as a fixed attribute. Each candidate has a different background, social network, political experience, and sources of legitimacy. These differences influence how each candidate constructs and articulates their religious identity. Religious identity can emerge through narratives, symbols, relationships with religious figures, involvement in religious activities, and political programs linked to religious values. The transformation of communication technology has altered patterns of political communication at the local level. In the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada, social media was used by

candidates and their supporters to convey information, build image, introduce programs, and foster closeness with the community. Social media no longer functions solely as a campaign publication medium, but has evolved into a social space where candidates and the community interact, exchange ideas, and shape and negotiate political identities.

This context relates to the increasing use of digital technology by the people of Cilegon. As an industrial city with high social and economic mobility, Cilegon residents are increasingly connected to digital communication devices. Data from the Cilegon City Statistics Agency (BPS) based on the March 2025 Susenas (National Survey) shows that in 2024, 94.52 percent of the population aged five years and over used a mobile phone or wireless communication device. This high level of usage indicates that digital devices have become an essential part of people's daily lives, including in obtaining, disseminating, and responding to information. This situation makes social media a strategic space in local political contests. Candidates can convey messages directly without relying entirely on conventional media. At the same time, the public is not only a recipient of messages, but can also provide comments, share content, offer support, and express criticism. This interaction makes political communication more dynamic and allows for the continuous production and negotiation of candidate identities (Cilegon, 2025).

In this study, this condition is crucial because social media provides a space where candidates' religious identities can be observed more concretely. Photos of religious activities, the use of religious attributes, narratives referring to Islamic values, interactions with religious scholars or communities, and the delivery of religiously nuanced programs are all part of the representational practices that can be analyzed. However, the meaning of each representation is not determined solely by its visual appearance or accompanying text. Content needs to be placed within the context of time, events, actors, social networks, and the political dynamics that underlie it (Stiawati & Noerisma, 2024). Thus, social media in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada can be understood as a digital space that brings together political interests, social identities, religious values, and community interactions. This space allows candidates' religious identities to be displayed, elicited responses, negotiated, and even contested by various actors. Therefore, observing candidates' Instagram and TikTok activities is crucial for understanding how religious identities are constructed in digital political practices and how these identities are used as part of the process of gaining legitimacy in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada contest.

This situation emphasizes that local political contestation does not only take place within formal political institutions but also develops in the digital space as a place for the exchange of symbols, narratives, and social identities. Through social media, candidates convey their programs while simultaneously building an image and displaying values that are expected to gain public recognition. Instagram and TikTok have become important spaces for observing the representation of religious identity through visuals, narratives, social activities, relationships with religious figures, communities, and religiously nuanced programs. Thus, social media is understood as a social space where religious identity is constructed, interpreted, and negotiated in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada contest (Bourdieu, 1986). The 2024 Pilkada is contested by three candidate pairs with different social, political, and religious backgrounds. These differences are understood as resources that can be activated to become capital for political legitimacy through digital communication. Using Bourdieu's concept of capital and Castells' typology of identity, candidate profiles are analyzed not only biographically, but also based on the configuration of social, cultural, political, and symbolic resources and how these resources are articulated into religious identities in social media campaigns (Castells, 2020).

The Robinsar-Fajar pair demonstrates a blend of local social capital and globally oriented cultural capital. Robinsar has experience in sports and religious organizations through his leadership of the Cilegon City Football Association (PSSI) and the Al-Amin Mosque Council (DKM), which expanded his social network in the community. Meanwhile, Fajar's educational and organizational experience in Australia provides a broader cultural dimension. This combination tends to form a project identity, namely an identity built through new leadership ideas. In contrast,

Helldy-Alawi, as incumbents, relies more on government legitimacy, allowing religious identity to reinforce existing legitimacy. Meanwhile, Isro-Uyun prioritizes religious capital and networks as the primary source of political representation. These three configurations demonstrate that capital does not automatically produce a particular identity but is instead activated and interpreted through political strategies and social media representation.

Contesting Religious Identity on Social Media

Virtual ethnographic observations show that during the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada campaign, all three candidate pairs utilized social media not only to convey political programs and activities but also to construct and display religious identities. Instagram and TikTok provided spaces for candidates to present religious symbols, practices, relationships, and messages, which were then linked to their leadership image. Thus, social media functioned as an arena for the production of meaning and a means to legitimize religious identities in the public eye. Observations of digital activity from September 25 to November 23, 2024, revealed distinct patterns among the three candidate pairs. These differences were evident in the sources of religious identity highlighted, the forms of representation, and the way religious elements were linked to the candidates' political image. Similarities in Instagram and TikTok use did not result in identical legitimacy strategies. Each candidate selected sources of religious meaning that were deemed appropriate to their desired leadership positions and image.

From Manuel Castells' perspective, identity is the result of a process of meaning-making through the selection and organization of specific identity sources. Religious symbols, religious practices, relationships with religious figures or communities, and moral narratives do not exist in isolation but are woven into a specific representation of the candidate. Therefore, analysis is not sufficient to simply identify the presence of religious elements in content; it is also necessary to examine how these elements are selected, packaged, and linked to leadership character. Legitimacy constructed through social media is also not entirely within the candidate's control. Posts offer meaning to the audience, while acceptance of that meaning is formed through a process of user interpretation and response. Therefore, legitimacy is understood as a process pursued through representation, not as an automatic result of the use of religious symbols. Representations can be accepted, negotiated, or even rejected by the audience (Castells, 2010).

Research findings indicate that Robinsar-Fajar tended to articulate religious values through personal piety, while Helldy-Alawi emphasized closeness to religious spaces and networks. Meanwhile, Isro-Uyun linked religious values to social concern, education, and public service. These differences demonstrate that religious identity was used selectively in accordance with the construction of each pair's political image. In Robinsar-Fajar, religious legitimacy was primarily constructed through representations of personal religiosity. Religious symbols, worship activities, prayer gestures, and religious messages were used to convey the impression of the candidate's closeness to Islamic values. Thus, religious identity moved from the personal to the public sphere and became part of a political image recognizable to the public. This pattern demonstrates that personal piety serves as a source of symbolic legitimacy. Meanwhile, Helldy-Alawi tended to link religious identity to religious environments and actors. Attendance at mosques, Islamic boarding schools, religious activities, and relationships with religious figures provided the basis for legitimacy.

Analytically, Robinsar's religious identity is activated as a source of legitimacy in the local political arena through the association between personal religious expression, moral values, spirituality, and leadership imagery. Religious symbols, prayer gestures, calls to religious practices, and the use of spiritual language serve as tools for constructing a candidate's representation that aligns with Islamic values. Thus, legitimacy does not arise solely from the use of religious attributes, but through the process of connecting these symbols with notions of morality, devotion, and concern for society. In Castells' perspective, identity is the result of a process of selecting and organizing specific sources of meaning within a social and political context. The Power of Identity: In Robinsar's

case, these sources of religious meaning are constructed through a combination of visual appearance, religious language, and spiritual expression. Social media then becomes a space for the production and circulation of meaning, enabling these representations to be present to the public. However, candidate representation does not automatically generate legitimacy. The meaning of religious symbols remains dependent on audience interpretation, including the possibility of acceptance, negotiation, and rejection.

The reflection of Dewi, a Quran teacher, suggests that attributes such as the *peci* (traditional Javanese *peci*) and *koko* (traditional Javanese shirt) can be associated with Islamic devotion and values. However, the views of one informant cannot be generalized to represent the entire Cilegon community. These findings only demonstrate that religious symbols can acquire specific social meanings when interpreted by the audience. Therefore, the legitimacy of religious identity in this study is more appropriately understood as a process pursued by candidates through representation, rather than as an automatic outcome. Unlike Robinsar, who emphasized personal piety, Helldy Agustian constructed his representation of religious identity primarily through close ties with his environment, community, and religious authorities. Observations of Helldy's Instagram account during the campaign period revealed his involvement in various religious activities with the community and religious scholars. One example is a post on September 29, 2024, documenting his attendance at the commemoration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday with the people of East Sumampir. In this context, religious activities are presented not only as rituals but also as a space for friendship and social interaction between the candidate and the community.

This pattern demonstrates a fundamental difference from Robinsar's strategy. While Robinsar linked religiosity to personal qualities through symbols and spiritual expressions, Helldy constructed her identity more through socio-religious relationships. Her attendance at mosques, religious activities, Islamic boarding schools, and meetings with religious figures created associations between the candidate, the religious community, and moral authority. Social media played a crucial role in visualizing these relationships, making them recognizable to the public. User responses to Helldy's posts also provide insight into the meaning-making process. Likes and comments demonstrate audience engagement, while numerous comments containing prayers and support indicate that some users interpreted the religious activities positively. However, these responses cannot be used to assert that the entire community accepts or supports Helldy's identity. Digital interaction data only reflects the meanings given by the responding users.

A more explicit representation is seen in a post on November 18, 2024, when Helldy featured a prayer activity with religious scholars from Cilegon City. Narratives of blessings, friendship, and brotherhood were placed alongside the idea of a collaborative, progressive, and dignified Cilegon. This construction demonstrates that religious activity is linked to the public interest and the idea of leadership. Thus, the prayer activity is not merely a religious activity but acquires a socio-political dimension through the candidate's framing of it in digital communications. User comments linking the prayer to hopes for Helldy's leadership demonstrate the expansion of the meaning of religious activity into the political realm. This means that the candidate produces messages framed around blessings and brotherhood, but the audience can add additional meanings in the form of hope, support, and political orientation. This process demonstrates that the meaning of political communication on social media is not entirely within the candidate's control.

From a cultural circuit perspective, this process can be understood through the relationship between production, representation, consumption, and meaning-making. Helldy selects specific religious activities to record and publish. At the representation stage, she is placed alongside the community and religious scholars in a single visual space. The accompanying narrative then guides interpretation through terms of blessing, friendship, brotherhood, and community interests. Once consumed by the audience, the message can be accepted, developed, or negotiated through user comments and interactions (Du Gay, 2015). Thus, Helldy's strategy can be understood as a pattern of legitimacy through closeness to religious authorities and communities. Religious identity is not primarily constructed through claims of personal piety, but rather through the visibility of social

relations with the community and religious figures. This closeness serves as a symbolic resource that can strengthen the candidate's moral and social image. However, Helldy's presence with religious scholars cannot automatically be interpreted as evidence of political support from the ulama because the research data does not show any explicit statements of support. This finding is more accurately understood as the construction of symbolic closeness to religious authorities.

Ultimately, social media becomes a space that brings together the production of candidate identity and the audience's interpretation process. Helldy presents herself through religious activities, relationships with religious scholars, and interactions with the community, while the audience assigns meaning to this representation based on their respective experiences and social frameworks. Therefore, the legitimacy of religious identity is a relational process formed through the relationship between candidate representation, message circulation, and audience interpretation, not solely the result of the candidate's communication strategy. Visually, Isro's post does not depict him in a formal position as a candidate delivering a political program, but rather depicts a casual interaction with Islamic students (*santri*). This visual choice, coupled with the caption "NOSTALGIA," creates a sense of personal closeness to the religious environment. Religious identity is not conveyed through direct claims of piety, but through the candidate's presence in a social space imbued with religious meaning. Audience responses expand on this meaning. A total of 647 likes and several comments such as "God willing, I will win, Mr. Mayor. Amen" and "It's Time for Santri to Become Mayor" demonstrate that Isro's closeness to Islamic students is also understood as a representation of political leadership.

A similar pattern is evident in the Santri Day post. Through informal interactions with students and the short caption "Santri Day," Isro implicitly constructs a religious identity. Unlike Robinsar, who more explicitly uses the language of prayer, *salawat* (prayer), and *almsgiving*, Isro displays religiosity through social closeness and concern for the community. Thus, Isro's religious identity is formed through the relationship between content production and audience interpretation. Referring to Castells, identity can become a source of meaning and political legitimacy when connected to social relations and shared values. In this context, Isro's legitimacy develops through public attribution of his closeness to the *santri* community and his orientation toward social service (du Gay & Negus, 1994). Meanwhile, Robinsar displays a religious identity more through personal piety and spiritual values linked to social action. A post about clean water assistance, for example, uses the phrase "*Alhamdulillah*" (*Alhamdulillah*) to frame concern for the community's basic needs. However, comments questioning political motives indicate that the meaning of the post is not entirely controlled by the candidate. Audiences can accept, reinforce, or negotiate these representations. Thus, social media serves as an interactive arena where religious identities are produced, interpreted, and debated. Robinsar builds legitimacy through personal piety, Helldy Agustian through close ties with authorities and religious communities, and Isro through translating religious moral values into social concern and public service. These differences emphasize that religious identities in local politics are dynamic and gain legitimacy through processes of articulation and social recognition.

Religious identity is formed through a reciprocal relationship between the messages produced by candidates and the responses of social media users. Thus, social media not only serves as a means of campaign dissemination but also becomes a social space where religious identities are produced, circulated, received, interpreted, and negotiated by the public. The identities constructed by candidates can gain additional meaning when audiences connect them to concrete issues, such as access to madrasah education and the high cost of religious-based education. Public perception suggests that programs related to religion and religious groups can be perceived as a manifestation of a candidate's commitment, but at the same time, they can also be understood as strategies to gain political support. Therefore, the existence of religious programs does not automatically confer legitimacy. Trust in a candidate's religious identity is still influenced by the extent to which the program addresses real community needs. The free school program, for example, serves as a meeting point between a candidate's religious image and demands for government performance.

The manifestation of Isro Miraj's religious identity is more clearly visible through the Rp25 million annual aid program for Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), which was announced on the occasion of Santri Day 2024 with the narrative "Continuing the Struggle, Embracing the Future." Unlike the free school program that includes madrasahs in the educational agenda, this aid is specifically directed at Islamic boarding schools. This difference shows that Isro's religious identity is realized through several channels, both through inclusive education policies and direct support for religious institutions. In the context of the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada, attention to Islamic boarding schools has political significance because they are a vital part of the community's socio-religious structure. This aid program can be read not only as an educational agenda but also as an effort to build political relations with the religious community. Through this program, Isro projects its religious identity into a political agenda aimed at strengthening religious institutions. However, this study only demonstrates the program's existence as a political proposition, not proving the implementation or impact of its policies on Islamic boarding schools.

Audience responses then demonstrate a process of attribution to the candidate's identity. The mention of "santri leader," for example, indicates that some social media users associated the Islamic boarding school assistance program and the momentum of Santri Day with the image of Isro's leadership. Thus, the audience plays a role not only as message recipients but also contributes to the production of identity meaning through their comments, assessments, and interpretations. These attributions should be understood in a limited sense as the expressions of users interacting with specific posts and cannot be generalized as the views of all Islamic boarding school (santri) or the Cilegon community. The perspectives of religious institution managers also enrich our understanding of this process. Programs targeting Islamic boarding schools, madrasahs, mosques, and Koran teachers can be seen as a form of responsibility for religious life if implemented consistently and sustainably. Attention to religious institutions is not sufficient just to be demonstrated during the campaign period; it needs to be demonstrated through continued commitment after the contestation ends. These views are used as reflections to broaden the research interpretation, not as a measure to determine the truth or falsity of the candidate's representation.

Some audiences acknowledged them through attributions as "leaders of Islamic boarding school students," while religious figures emphasized the importance of continuity between narratives, programs, and leadership practices. This demonstrates that the legitimacy of religious identity is not formed solely through symbols or programs, but through the relationship between digital representations, social experiences, and community expectations for sustainable political action. These findings demonstrate that the contestation of religious identity in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada is relational. Candidate-produced programs acquire meaning through interpretation when circulated on social media. Public support, attributions, expectations, and evaluations demonstrate that religious identity develops through the intersection of candidate representations, social experiences, and audience expectations. In the context of Isro Miraj, religious identity operates as a project identity that translates the values of trust, care, and devotion into agendas related to socio-religious needs, such as healthcare, madrasah education, and attention to Islamic boarding schools (pesantren).

The construction of Isro's religious identity is driven more by the articulation of values and their translation into program offerings than by the explicit use of religious symbols. Social media serves as an ethnographic space that allows for direct observation of these representations, responses, and meanings. The legitimacy of religious identity ultimately does not stop at how candidates present themselves, but is continuously shaped through public assessments of the program's benefits, consistency of commitment, and likelihood of implementation. A cross-section of cases, Robinsar, Helldy Agustian, and Isro Miraj demonstrate that campaign programs are an important arena for the formation of religious identity in concrete political forms. Robinsar tends to link religious identity with social services and public welfare, Helldy Agustian with strengthening relations with religious institutions linked to public policy, while Isro Miraj translates the values of trust and concern into health services, madrasah education, and support for Islamic boarding schools.

These differences demonstrate that religious identity is not a single category, but rather a construct formed through each candidate's choice of issues, target groups, and leadership orientation. What is being contested in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada is not merely the image of the most religious candidate, but also the legitimacy of a leadership model deemed capable of addressing the needs of the community. Religion, in this context, serves as a source of meaning and a normative framework for constructing claims about caring, trustworthy, responsive, and service-oriented leadership. Thus, the manifestation of religious identity through campaign programs occurs through a process of value translation. Religious values are translated into a political agenda, then circulated through social media and entered the realm of public interpretation. Subsequent public responses can strengthen, expand, question, or even criticize the meanings constructed by the candidates. Therefore, the legitimacy of religious identity cannot be viewed as an automatic consequence of religious symbols or programs, but rather as the result of a social process that brings together religious values, political orientations, campaign programs, digital representations, and audience interpretations.

These findings reinforce the understanding that social media in local political contestation is not merely a communication instrument, but rather an arena where political identities are produced and negotiated. In this context, religious identities gain political power when they are translated into programs relevant to community needs, communicated consistently, and recognized through social interaction. Therefore, the manifestation of religious identity in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada can be understood as a dynamic process connecting religious values with political programs and public legitimacy through social media.

Conceptual Model of Programmatic Manifestation of Religious Identity

Studies on religious identity in politics have generally explained how religion functions as a source of legitimacy through the use of religious symbols, moral narratives, affiliation with religious institutions, and political actors' closeness to religious communities. This perspective makes an important contribution to understanding the relationship between religion and politics, but still leaves conceptual room to explain how religious identity is translated into concrete political orientations and gains legitimacy through interactions in the public sphere, particularly on social media. Research findings on Robinsar, Helldy Agustian, and Isro Miraj in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada show a relatively consistent pattern. Although the three candidates employed different strategies, issues, and programs, there are mechanisms that demonstrate similarities: the use of religious cultural sources as a basis for identity, the translation of religious values into political orientation, articulation through campaign programs, representation through social media, and interpretation by audiences. These findings indicate that religious identity in political contestation does not merely appear in the form of religious symbols and narratives, but also takes on programmatic forms related to the leadership orientation and political offerings of the candidates.

A cross-case analysis of these findings reveals a conceptual relationship between religious cultural sources, value translation, manifestation in campaign programs, social media representation, audience negotiation of meaning, and the formation of political legitimacy. This relationship forms the basis for the formulation of the Conceptual Model of Programmatic Manifestation of Religious Identity (MPIK) as a research proposal to explain the process of religious identity manifestation in social media-based local political contestation. The MPIK model consists of six interrelated dimensions: religious cultural sources, religious value translation, programmatic manifestation, representation through social media, audience negotiation of meaning, and political legitimacy. These six dimensions are not positioned as completely linear stages, but rather as a series of interconnected processes between political actors, religious values, political programs, social media, and society.

These six dimensions are not individually claimed to be entirely new concepts. Religious cultural sources, value translation, political programs, social media representation, audience meaning, and political legitimacy have been discussed in various previous studies. The novelty of

MPIK lies in the conceptual relationship between these dimensions in explaining the programmatic manifestation of religious identity. Research findings indicate that religious cultural sources do not directly generate political legitimacy. These sources undergo a process of translation into leadership orientations and campaign programs, are represented through social media, and then enter a process of meaning and negotiation by the audience. This series of relationships positions religious identity as a social process that moves from value sources to programmatic articulation, digital representation, and the formation of legitimacy in the public sphere.

The MPIK model stems from Manuel Castells's thinking on Project Identity, namely, an identity constructed through the utilization of identity sources to shape the orientation of social change. In the context of this research, empirical findings reveal a more specific character when this process occurs in local political contestations based on social media. Religious cultural sources do not stop at the formation of identity or orientation of change, but are translated into campaign programs, represented through social media, and enter the public sphere of meaning. MPIK expands the reading of Project Identity by positioning programmatic translation and negotiation of meaning as mechanisms connecting religious identity with the formation of political legitimacy. MPIK is not intended as a new theory, but as a conceptual operationalization of Project Identity in the context of local political contestations in the era of social media. The contribution of this model lies in understanding religious identity not only as a symbolic representation or source of moral legitimacy, but as a value translation mechanism that connects religious cultural sources with leadership orientation, campaign programs, political communication, and the formation of public legitimacy.

From this perspective, religious identity is understood through the process of articulating values and translating them into political actions that can be observed, communicated, and assessed in the digital public sphere. The strength of religious identity in this context is not solely determined by the intensity of the use of religious symbols or narratives, but also by the ability of political actors to translate religious values into relevant programs, articulate them consistently, and gain social recognition and assessment. Campaign programs are one of the primary spaces where religious values take concrete political form and confront societal meanings. Therefore, the relationship between religious identity and political legitimacy is understood as a relational process, not an automatic consequence of the use of religious symbols. Based on these findings, the Conceptual Model of Programmatic Manifestation of Religious Identity (MPIK) is a proposed research idea formulated from conceptual patterns discovered through cross-case analysis of Robinsar, Helldy Agustian, and Isro Miraj. This model positions religious identity as a process that connects religious cultural sources, value translation, programmatic manifestation, social media representation, negotiation of audience meaning, and political legitimacy.

Within this framework, social media functions not only as a channel for political communication, but also as a social arena where identities are produced, circulated, interpreted, debated, and recognized. Ultimately, MPIK asserts that the manifestation of religious identity in local political contestation occurs through a process of value articulation that moves from religious cultural sources to political orientations and programs, then takes form in social media representations and is tested through audience interpretation. The legitimacy of religious identity is therefore understood as the result of a gradual and relational social process between candidates, political programs, social media, and society. Within these boundaries, MPIK offers a conceptual framework for understanding the dynamics of religious identity in social media-based local political contestation by positioning the programmatic dimension as a link between the sources of religious values and the formation of political legitimacy.

4. Conclusion

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that religious identity in the local political contestation of the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada is a contextual and dynamic construction within the social media space. This identity does not exist as a fixed attribute, but is formed through an

articulation process that connects religious sources with leadership legitimacy, responses to public issues, and campaign program orientation. The meaning of religious identity is also not entirely determined by the candidate, but rather is formed through the interaction between political representation, social media, and public interpretation. This construction is visible through three main domains: legitimacy, articulation of social, political, and public policy issues, and programmatic manifestations. In the realm of legitimacy, Robinsar displays a personal-spiritual dimension, Helldy Agustian emphasizes closeness to religious scholars and religious communities, while Isro Miraj prioritizes social concern and public service. These differences indicate that religious legitimacy is constructed through the association of religious activities, social relations, moral values, and leadership image. In the realm of articulation of public issues, religious identity functions as a moral framework in responding to various societal issues. Religious values are not always displayed through explicit symbols, but can be seen in the concern, responsibility, and service orientation communicated by candidates. Meanwhile, in the programmatic realm, religious values are translated into campaign agendas related to education, Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*), *madrasas* (Islamic schools), *madrasa* teachers, and religious activities. Thus, religious identity does not stop at symbols and images, but takes concrete form through political offerings relevant to community needs. These three realms are interconnected. Social media becomes an arena for the production, circulation, interpretation, and negotiation of identity, allowing religious legitimacy to be formed through the relationship between candidates, political representatives, programs, and audiences. Therefore, religious identity in the 2024 Cilegon City Pilkada can be understood as a dynamic, relational, and programmatic political construct.

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