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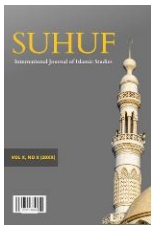

Religious Identity Politics and the Challenges of Democracy in Indonesia: A Study of Banjar People's Fanaticism toward Ulama

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ABSTRACT

Background: The growing use of religion in political contestation in Indonesia highlights the rise of religious identity politics, particularly in highly religious communities such as the Banjar people, where strong reverence toward ulama influences political behaviour and democratic dynamics. **Objective**: This study aims to analyze the construction of religious identity politics, the role of ulama's charismatic authority, and its implications for the sustainability of democracy in Indonesia. **Methodology**: This research employs a qualitative design through a systematic literature review, supported by conceptual, thematic, and normative analysis. The study integrates theories of identity politics, Barth's boundary-making, and Weber's charismatic authority to interpret socio-political phenomena. **Results**: The findings indicate that the strong legitimacy and influence of ulama in Banjar society facilitate identity-based political mobilization. While this can increase political participation and solidarity, it also contributes to polarisation, intolerance, and the decline of rational public discourse. **Conclusion**: Religious identity politics, when driven by charismatic authority, presents both opportunities and challenges for democracy, potentially strengthening cohesion while risking democratic quality.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary discourse on the relationship between religion and politics is generally grounded in the secularist paradigm, which limits the spiritual dimension in public spaces as a prerequisite for ensuring state neutrality and maintaining citizens' pluralism [1]. In many state contexts, politics is constructed as a secular domain that should not be influenced by religious teachings [2]. In this position, Indonesia is a nation-state, not a religious state. Nevertheless, this country has very strong religious values as part of its national identity [3]. Indonesia has characteristics with the spirit of

spirituality as an important foundation, as seen in the state ideology, namely Pancasila. The religious element lies in the first order, which serves as the foundation for the next four precepts. For most Indonesian people, belief in religion is a must-have; religion and people's lives are interrelated for all problems, including religious issues [4]. According to a report, *GoodStats Data* [5], the number of religious believers in Indonesia is dominated by Islam, with a total of 245,775,401 people, or 87.2% of the Indonesian population. Islam, as the majority religion embraced by people in Indonesia, when viewed from the historical window, of course, many things cause people to adhere to this religion. The long history of Indonesian independence shows that Islam's religious foundation has made a significant contribution to the Indonesian nation. This public belief in religion is even used for political purposes, by making religious leaders (ulama) tools in propaganda [6].

Norwegian anthropologist Frederick Barth stated that religious identity results from a complex process of symbolic boundaries constructed through the mythological benefits of a historical calculation for the suppositional interests of the political elite. In the next stage, religious identity politics is used instrumentally, aiming to manipulate and mobilize society by strengthening religious attributes as a means to gain power [7].

To further examine the relationship between religious leaders and political authority, the concept of charismatic authority developed by Max Weber provides an essential analytical lens. Weber posits that charismatic authority derives from collective recognition of a leader's extraordinary qualities, transcending traditional or legal-rational forms of legitimacy. In highly religious societies, ulama (Islamic scholars) may acquire strong charismatic legitimacy, enabling their political preferences or endorsements to shape followers' political orientations. In this context, religion should not be normatively reduced to a "political commodity," but rather understood as a form of symbolic capital that can be strategically mobilized within political competition.

Religion is generally portrayed as a magnet that can be a binding force for individuals or a system of referenced values within the broader system of action, influencing the direction and actions that determine the attitudes of religious people [8]. The scientific problem arises when these theoretical insights are situated within the Indonesian democratic context, particularly in regions characterized by strong religious cultures, such as the Banjar people in South Kalimantan. The Banjar people are widely recognized for their deep reverence toward ulama as central moral and spiritual authorities. However, the extent to which this religious authority becomes an instrument of identity politics in local democratic contests remains insufficiently examined. Does the strengthening of religious identity politics enhance democratic participation and representation, or does it potentially narrow public deliberation and weaken pluralistic engagement? In this case, religion is used as a political commodity to benefit the elite as a political force [9].

Based on these concerns, this study formulates the following research questions: (1) How is religious identity politics constructed and operationalized within the socio-cultural context of the Banjar people? (2) How does the charismatic authority of ulama interact with processes of political instrumentalization at the local level? and (3) What are the implications of these dynamics for the quality and sustainability of democracy in Indonesia, particularly in terms of participation, pluralism, and public rationality?

Although previous studies, such as those conducted by Saputro [10], Anam [11], Idham & Pranowo [12], Ruslan & Hakiki [13], and Samosir & Novitasari [14], have explored identity politics and its impact on democracy, significant conceptual and empirical gaps remain. First, much of the existing literature focuses on national-level electoral events or specific political moments, without systematically linking them to localized cultural contexts. Second, analyses of religious identity politics often emphasize normative concerns such as polarisation or democratic backsliding without grounding their arguments in explicit theoretical frameworks of authority, identity formation, and instrumentalism. Third, the intersection between local religious culture, particularly the phenomenon of strong devotion or “fanaticism” toward ulama in Banjar people and political mobilization has not been thoroughly analyzed in an integrated manner.

This research seeks to address these gaps by systematically integrating three analytical frameworks: identity politics theory (to explain the construction and mobilization of religious

identity), Barth's boundary-making approach (to analyze the formation of symbolic religious boundaries), and Weber's theory of charismatic authority (to examine the legitimacy and influence of ulama). By combining these perspectives, this study moves beyond descriptive accounts of religiosity or demographic dominance. Instead, it analyses the interaction between cultural structures, symbolic authority, and political interests within local democratic processes.

The original contribution of this study lies in its analytical integration of local cultural dynamics, religious authority, and identity politics within the broader framework of democratic sustainability. Conceptually, it proposes an integrated model that bridges the cultural and structural dimensions to explain religious identity politics. Empirically, it provides a contextualized understanding of how democracy functions in a highly religious society characterized by strong charismatic authority structures. In doing so, this article contributes not only to the scholarship on identity politics in Indonesia but also to broader debates on the resilience and challenges of democracy in plural yet deeply religious societies.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in a systematic literature review combined with conceptual and thematic analysis [15]. Unlike a general descriptive literature study, this research is structured by explicit procedures for data selection, categorisationcategorization, and analytical interpretation to ensure methodological rigour and coherence. The previous reference to ex post facto research has been omitted because such a design is typically associated with quantitative causal analysis and is not methodologically compatible with a qualitative library-based inquiry. Instead, this study adopts a normative-analytical and socio-political interpretative approach to examine the relationship between religious identity politics and democratic challenges through the specific case of the Banjar people's fanaticism toward ulama.

The data used in this research consist exclusively of secondary sources selected based on clearly defined inclusion criteria. The materials analyzed include peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books and monographs, legal documents, official statistical reports, and a limited number of contextual news reports. Academic journal articles were selected if they discussed identity politics, religious authority, charismatic leadership, democracy in Indonesia, or socio-religious dynamics within the Banjar people. Books and monographs were included when they provided theoretical foundations, particularly regarding political sociology and the Weberian theory of authority. Legal documents such as the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, Law Number 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections, and Regulation of the General Elections Commission Number 33 of 2018 were used as normative references to evaluate democratic principles. Official demographic data from the Ministry of Religious Affairs was utilized to support contextual demographic claims. News articles were included only when published by recognized media institutions, directly related to electoral politics in South Kalimantan, and verifiable; these sources were used illustratively rather than as primary analytical data. In total, thirty-five primary academic references published between 2014 and 2025 were systematically analyzed to ensure relevance to the post-Reformasi democratic context.

The analytical process was conducted through three interconnected stages [16]. First, a conceptual analysis was applied to clarify key concepts, including religious identity politics, fanaticism, charismatic authority, and democratic principles. Particular attention was given to Max Weber's theory of charismatic authority to explain the emotional and spiritual bond between ulama and the Banjar people and its implications for political mobilization. Second, thematic analysis was employed to categorize and synthesize the literature into four major analytical themes: the development of religious identity politics in Indonesia, the socio-historical formation of Banjar religiosity, the political role of ulama and habaib, and the democratic risks arising from identity-based mobilization, including polarisation and intolerance. Through thematic coding and synthesis, patterns were identified linking charismatic religious authority to electoral political behaviour. Third, a normative democratic evaluation was conducted using constitutional and electoral legal frameworks

as benchmarks to assess whether identity-based political mobilization aligns with democratic principles such as fairness, equality, freedom, and electoral integrity.

Methodological coherence was maintained by consistently linking theoretical arguments with empirical illustrations and by clearly distinguishing between normative legal evaluation and sociological interpretation [17]. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing academic literature, constitutional provisions, electoral regulations, and demographic data to avoid overreliance on any single source. This study does not employ fieldwork or interviews; therefore, its conclusions are interpretative and conceptual rather than ethnographic. The scope of the research is limited to discursive and structural analysis of religious identity politics within the Banjar socio-cultural context and its implications for democratic consolidation in Indonesia.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Development of Religious Identity Politics in Indonesia

Every religion must teach goodness, well-being and peace for its adherents. However, the presence of political interests gives rise to a term called "identity politics," or activities that use religion as a weapon in political competition [18]. Identity politics is an inseparable thing in democracy in Indonesia. The presence of globalization undeniably also affects the development of identity politics at the national and local levels, considering that now, due to globalization and modernization, there is a transformation in the social and cultural fields, so that it can change religious behaviour in society, especially in urban communities whose religious identity is dramatically shaken. Therefore, it is not surprising that the religious aspect is used as a political term for several interested groups.

The problem of identity politics in the name of religion is even more worrying and also quite strong, even since the 2014 General Election (Election), which at that time the incumbent president or incumbent based on Article 7 of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia (1945 Constitution), “the President and vice president hold office for five (5) years, and can be re-elected in the same position, only for one term” is no longer eligible to run for a third term. So, from the two camps of presidential and vice presidential candidates, they tried to win each other’s candidates. Instead, it became a bad new historical record for Indonesian politics.

In the context of Indonesian democracy, at least four election periods have used identity politics, which has become a new issue. First, it happened in the 2014 election. Second, it happened in the Jakarta Governor Election (Pilgub). Third, it happened in the 2019 election [12]. Fourth, it will happen in the 2024 election. This has an impact on the psychological trauma of the community due to the rampant, excessive black campaign by bringing religious issues by supporters of the candidate pair by using social media to bring down their political opponents. To make the public enthusiastic about the ideas, visions, and missions of the candidate pairs is sidelined [14].

Moch. Nurhasim, a political researcher at the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, stated that in the 2019 election, one of the vice presidential candidates for presidential candidate Joko Widodo, namely K.H. Ma’ruf Amin, a well-known scholar, became a tangible manifestation of the religious identity politics that emerged. According to him, this happened intending to attract sympathy and political support from the Muslim community, considering that in Indonesia, citizens of the majority of the population embrace Islam [7].

The politics of ethnic, racial, and inter-group identity, especially in the name of religion (religious sentiment), are full of content polluting the public space in the 2014, 2019, and 2024 elections or three times in a row. A camp that fights for a democratic nationalist ideology is opposed to a camp that fights for Islamic values. So, the camp that fights for Islamic values is afraid to change the state ideology (Democratic Nationalists/Pancasila) into a religious ideology. The issue of religious identity in Indonesian politics should have ended long after the Pancasila debate, as an ideology from 1945 to 1957.

Not to forget, houses of worship such as mosques do not escape being indirectly ‘stages’ for elites to reap the votes of the congregation. With the indecisiveness of the mosque administrators, they freely

make houses of worship as 'campaign places' with the bringing of material that smells of religious identity politics. The mosque, which should be the main place of worship and free from politics, finally gave rise to the politicization of the mosque, which led to negative sentiments and division of the people [19].

The practice of religious identity politics is associated with Weber's leadership theory, which provides three types of leadership, namely: charismatic, traditional, and legal/rational. In the case of identity politics, the ulama is seen as a figure who has a charismatic level in a society that has a high level of religiosity. Charismatic authority in the relationship between the leader and the followers relies on the obedience or inspiration of a person in a certain case, which refers to the quality. In his theory, Waber also stated that this type of charisma is extra-legal, or ignores formal structures and rules, and is based on inner determination and inner restraint (things related to the mind). Thus, this authority can be said to have the privilege of identity or charisma that it possesses and can be independent of objective judgments [20].

In response to various problems related to identity politics, the government provides rules prohibiting the submission of campaign materials that smell of ethnicity, religion, race, and intergroup (SARA) bias in Article 280, paragraph (1), of Law No. 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections. The General Election Commission (KPU) also provides regulations related to this matter in PKPU No. 33 of 2018 concerning General Elections in the form of prohibition of insulting, inciting, and pitting a person, religion, tribe, race, group, candidate and/or election participant, individual or community.

3.2 Banjar People's Fanaticism Towards Ulama: Its Relevance to Religious Identity Politics

Scholars are the heirs of the prophets, or *al-ulama waratsat al-anbiya*, which means that, in this case, the heirs are the knowledge and personality possessed by the prophets. In general, ulama serve as preachers or educators for the benefit of the people. However, it is also possible that clerics join the management of religious organizations and politicians, without leaving the da'wah and educational activities. Looking at the history of the arrival of Islam in South Kalimantan, precisely in the 18th century, a great scholar from South Kalimantan who was famous in the archipelago, Sheikh Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari (1710-1812), played a major role in history, in the fields of religion, education, economics, and even politics [21].

In this era, Islam began to spread rapidly in South Kalimantan, and to facilitate his preaching, Sheikh Muhammad Arsyad al-Banjari wrote books on *fiqh*, monotheism, Sufism, and other subjects that are still popular today. The development has an impact on the population of South Kalimantan, which is predominantly Muslim, according to a report by the Ministry of Religious Affairs [22], which shows that 97.02% of South Kalimantan's population, or 4,108,232 people, embrace Islam. These developments also give rise to political-socio-cultural influences on the Banjar people, such as a culture of extreme respect or fanaticism towards scholars or religious leaders in South Kalimantan.

Fanaticism is an extreme level of admiration or support for an ideology, belief, group, or individual [23]. Bigotry often results in an inability to acknowledge or respect others' views, leading to social conflict or even violent acts [24]. Historically, fanaticism has emerged in various contexts, such as in the 16th century, religious movements, such as the Spanish Inquisition, reflected fanaticism in the form of religious persecution of those deemed to violate Roman Catholic dogma. In the following centuries, political fanaticism emerged in various forms, such as revolutions and radical movements that fought for specific goals without compromise [25].

Fanaticism has a link to religious identity politics, which refers to a level of extremism and strong emotional involvement in supporting or promoting a political agenda that focuses on a particular identity. The relationship between fanaticism and identity politics has several dimensions, including political polarisation, disapproval of criticism, imbalance of priorities, extremism, and political manipulation. The presence of religious symbols is often interpreted as a political identity that can enhance a person's electability, as it is seen as having touched a person's emotions, thereby

increasing acceptance in society [14]. One type of symbol that is often used is the use of the title “habaib”, or a title owned by the descendants of Rasulullah PBUH [26].

As an area with a majority-Muslim population, South Kalimantan certainly has many scholars, which also affects its political system; there are also scholars who work as politicians there. Religion is an important element in various aspects of the lives of the people of Banjar, who are famous for their religiosity [27].

Evidence of the strong identity politics in Banjar can be seen from several facts that occurred on the ground. For example, if we look at the members of the Regional Representative Council of the Republic of Indonesia (DPD-RI) representing South Kalimantan for the 2024-2029 period, two of the four members have a “habaib" identity, namely Habib Hamid Abdullah, S.H., M.H., who also occupied the senator's seat from the 2009-2014 period. And there is Habib Zakaria Bahasyim [28]. More than that, a political phenomenon with the identity of “habaib” is also found in a member of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Indonesia (DPR-RI), namely Habib Aboe Bakar Alhabsyi, S.E., who is a member of the Prosperous Justice Party faction [29].

It is not surprising that Habaib has a role and political affiliation at the local and national levels [30]. If we look back, the hegemony of the Banjar Sultanate at the time of its establishment had imagined Islam as the identity of Banjar through the role of sultans and ulama [31]. Although it is considered good for scholars to enter the world of politics to promote justice and truth within the community [32], the use of religious symbols to gain votes remains prohibited. The rise of religious identity politics is also inseparable from the high political costs, resulting in various gaps [33]. So inevitably, the development or tendency of religious identity politics, like what happened in Banjar, becomes complex.

Since the leadership of Sultan Adam during the Banjar Sultanate, the leaders and scholars have had a closeness [34]. So that the ulama become a magnet for leaders in society, it is no longer surprising that religion is used as a weapon and a deterrent in the world of politics. The Banjar people's high level of religiosity certainly shapes their emotional bond with the ulama. The existence of cases in identity politics has various impacts, both positive and negative, on aspects such as social, cultural, and religious life, as well as on the future of democracy in Indonesia.

The phenomenon of the Banjar people's strong respect, and even fanaticism, towards the ulama can be explained by Max Weber’s theory of charismatic authority. Weber explained that charisma is a form of authority that relies on followers' recognition and trust in a leader's extraordinary qualities. This authority does not come from the rule of law or formal position, but from the collective beliefs of the community, and will be weakened if such recognition is lost [35]. The emphasis on charisma as a distinct type of authority, distinct from the legal-rational and traditional, is also an important basis in Weber’s more “primary” reading. Thus, the legitimacy of the ulama among the Banjar people does not only come from scientific capacity, but also from the social recognition that continues to be produced by the people.

In the context of modern democracy, charisma can also serve as a form of symbolic representation. A figure is considered to represent a group insofar as the group feels that he or she is represented by that person, not merely because of formal procedures [36]. In Banjar society, ulama, especially habaib, are not only positioned as religious figures but also as representatives of Banjar’s Islamic identity. Therefore, political support for religious figures often rests on the proximity of identity and moral legitimacy, not just on policy programs.

Weber also attributes the emergence of charismatic authority to situations of social or moral uncertainty, when society seeks a figure who can provide certainty about value [35]. In the Banjar society that has undergone a strong historical Islamization process [37], ulama have long been a source of social and even political legitimacy. Islamic identity then becomes part of the social construction of “becoming a Banjar” [38].

From the perspective of identity politics, identity is not just a personal attribute but a source of solidarity and political mobilization. However, identity politics can also reinforce group boundaries

and reduce the space for dialogue if not managed inclusively [39]. The development of contemporary identity politics shows that political support is increasingly built through emotional and symbolic closeness rather than substantive policy debates [40]. In this context, charismatic religious figures have significant political appeal.

The relationship between charisma and democracy is ambivalent. On the one hand, charisma can be an alternative form of representation when society feels that formal institutions are less responsive [36]. On the other hand, legitimacy that relies too much on charismatic figures can personalise power, shifting political evaluation from policy rationality to personal loyalty. Thus, charismatic authority can strengthen collective solidarity, but at the same time narrow the space for criticism and opposition [41].

3.3 The Impact of Religious Identity Politics on the Future of Democracy in Indonesia

Since the reform period, essential democratic practices have begun to be carried out in Indonesia. The election of the president and regional heads is carried out directly; freedom of expression and freedom of the press are also guaranteed by the constitution. The decentralization decentralizationced by the existence of Law Number 23 of 2014 concerning Regional Government, which divides political authority to regulate the government into two, namely the central and regional governments. At the same time, however, the decentralisation decentralizationl governments actually leads to the politicisation of identity apoliticization against groups living within the regional base, and the change in local political figures becomes rulers at the local level [42].

With the emergence of such polarisation, it will result in divisions between one and the other, such as creating new groups, as happened during the Jakarta Governor election in 2017. According to Mahfud MD, identity politics can be done in the context of choosing leaders. However, this should not be the main thing, and on the condition that the spirit of unity does not cause division or be used to bring down others and demonise other parties. According to him, podemonize identity is a primordial identity that is inherent in everyone, just as religious identity.

During the 2024 election, identity politics will become a central issue that is widely discussed because identity politics based on the similarity of ethnic, racial, religious, and cultural identities is the main cause of political problems, especially related to the use of tensions between superior and inferior groups or between the generally controlled and the minority. In the current political era, the strengthening of politics can potentially threaten the nation's nationalism and the pluralism of our people; besides, of course, in the context of elections, it can threaten the application of democratic principles.

The dichotomy or division of conflicting groups that occurs is due to a lack of maturity in politics. The tendency to not have the same vision as a certain group is actually considered as enemies rather than rivals in the political world, so that fundamentally, identity issues based on ethnicity, race, culture, and even religion are raised. Although many political figures and elites argue that “politics is dynamic," issues with “identity” nuances are increasingly noticeable in politics. In fact, not a few people take advantage of this momentum, even though it is very clear in Article 28D of the 1945 Constitution that every citizen has the right to equal opportunities in government.

The heat of the temperature during the 2024 election has shaped many incidents that have occurred, including the spread of ideological viruses that carry violence and anti-humanity by utilizing a wide variety of internet-based putilizingsuch as Facebook, X, Instagram, WhatsApp, and others, as well as the momentum of elections that use religion in political events has the potential to poison citizens using tricks as well as poisoning religion itself. This is due to the lack of ethics in politics, even contrary to the teachings of religion itself, which becomes a fertile ground for the growth of the seeds of intolerance and radicalism [43].

The impact of identity politics on Indonesia’s future can be complex and varied. Future politics refers to the use or emphasis on characteristics sutilizationicity, culture, social groups, and even certain religions as a basis for rallying political support or influencing policy. The impact depends on how Indonesian leaders and society manage and direct this identity politics. In the world of politics, even more so when the election of leaders, whether regional heads, people's representative

councils, or presidents, should ideally be carried out based on the principle of elections as stated in Law No. 7 of 2017 concerning General Elections declare that the election is held based on the principles of direct, public, free, confidential, honest, and fair. Without having to look at identity in terms of ethnicity, race, culture, and religion, so as not to have a negative impact that results in division.

4. Conclusion

The fanaticism of the Banjar people towards the ulama has more or less influenced the continuity of religious identity politics in South Kalimantan, as the theory put forward by Weber about the type of charismatic leadership, the relationship between leadership and followers is to rely on matters related to spirituality. This is reflected in the various cases that occurred in South Kalimantan. As an area that has a population with a Muslim majority of 97%, the identity that is often used in politics, namely the title habaib or title owned by the descendants of Rasulullah PBUH, is a privilege of identity or charisma. Nevertheless, the existence of the phenomenon of identity politics is inseparable from the impact on the future sustainability of democracy in Indonesia, which leads to positive and negative things when viewed from various aspects.

To avoid divisions in democracy as well as culture and religion due to the practice of religious identity politics, democracy in Indonesia is well managed by the relevant leaders and the society itself, and elections should ideally be held based on the election principles contained in the Election Law and related rules, and should not ignore ethics in politics.

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